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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 14 September 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—
Violence against Women and Girls

1. **John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): What steps she is taking to support grassroots women's rights organisations which are working to tackle violence against women and girls in developing countries. [906314]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): It is an honour to stand here today as the International Development Secretary. I believe passionately in my Department's mission to end extreme poverty. Violence against women and girls is a global scandal that the Department for International Development is working to end. We invest in hundreds of organisations to improve the lives of millions of women and girls globally. I pay tribute to the leadership of my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) on the issue. I am determined to continue our work on this agenda.

John Pugh: Only 1% of gender-specific funds are spent on women's rights organisations. Does the Secretary of State not think she could do more, and will she align with ActionAid, whose campaign "Fearless" has really taken off?

Priti Patel: I pay tribute to those involved in championing that campaign. There are more than 40 existing mechanisms through which funding is channelled to women's rights organisations. I believe—rightly so—that we channel our funding in the right way to support the right objectives and outcomes for women and girls around the world.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend to her place. Women refugees often suffer violence on their journeys to safety, and the practice of registering only the head of the family in asylum processes often leaves their needs neglected. Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that at the UN summit on refugees next week the voice of women refugees will get a proper hearing?

Priti Patel: I thank my right hon. Friend for her very important and significant question. She is right to point out that there is a conference at the UN General Assembly next week specifically on refugees, on which our Prime Minister and President Obama will be leading. Those

are the very issues and challenges that will be reflected in the summit, and Britain will lead the way in standing up for the rights of women refugees and doing the responsible thing for them.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): During the summer holidays many girls are taken from the UK to developing countries, where they are subjected to the brutality of female genital mutilation. What is the Secretary of State doing to prevent those girls from being taken out of the country in that way?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady rightly highlights the abhorrent practice of FGM and that vulnerable girls are abused in that way. I am working with colleagues across Government on a strategy to ensure not just that we do more but that we end that practice and, importantly, bring the perpetrators of that abhorrent crime to justice.

12. [906325] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): An Independent Commission for Aid Impact report says that support for women's rights organisations remains "a...neglected area in DfID's programming"

and recommends strengthening grassroots women's rights organisations as a route to scaling up prevention of violence. Given the Government's commitment under sustainable development goal 5 on women's rights and girls' empowerment, what steps will the Secretary of State take in her new role on the ICAI's advice?

Priti Patel: As I said in my opening remarks, I pay tribute to the work of my predecessor, who has led the way on women's rights and rights for girls. The hon. Lady is right to point to the SDGs. DFID is doing a great deal. We recognise the critical role of women's rights and the organisations that we partner and work with. We will continue to do exactly that.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. What programmes does her Department provide to counter the use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war and subjugation?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady raises the abuse and the abhorrent crimes that take place against women and girls in conflict and conflict zones. We work with a whole range of organisations, and civil society also plays a part in achieving the right outcomes. We work with Governments around the world and through our multilateral relationships through the United Nations not only to work with countries and organisations to try to stop that practice but to deal with the perpetrators of those appalling crimes.

Syria: Aid

2. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What aid her Department is providing to civilians in (a) Aleppo and (b) other besieged areas in Syria. [906315]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): My Department has funded the United Nations and non-governmental organisations to provide food, water, healthcare and nutritional supplies to Aleppo. We have allocated £561 million to support vulnerable people inside Syria, including in Aleppo and other besieged areas, where access is possible.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Secretary of State for that response but, despite the ceasefire this week, we are hearing from the UN special envoys that the Syrian regime is continuing to restrict aid to eastern Aleppo. We have also heard reports that two barrels of chlorine gas were dropped by helicopter on civilian neighbourhoods, injuring many people including children. What will the Secretary of State do to facilitate access for humanitarian aid?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The Syria crisis is appalling in every single aspect we see and experience. The point about aid is significant because we have had significant access problems. The ceasefire has just come into being and, obviously, we are working with the UN and our partners to look at getting much needed aid and supplies into the besieged areas, which have not seen aid for a considerable time. All colleagues in the House recognise this, but it is worth pointing out again that this is an appalling crisis and conflict. On the perpetrator—Assad—we are working on the wider conflict resolution, but our priority is to ensure that we can get humanitarian supplies in.

11. [906324] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give the House an update on the progress that has been made on raising funds to support humanitarian aid in Syria since the London Syria conference earlier this year?

Priti Patel: The UK led the way with the Syria conference. We have pledged more than £2.3 billion in response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria and the region. We have the UN General Assembly next week, where we will again make the case for the donors to do more to raise more money, and for greater partnership working, to alleviate many of the hardships that we see in the crisis in Syria.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): All hon. Members hope that the ceasefire will mean safer passage for the convoys to reach the besieged cities. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence on potential airdrops, if deemed necessary, to ensure that support gets to those who need it so desperately?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady recognises and reflects upon the severity of the situation. I am working with colleagues in both Departments she mentioned. Obviously, the ceasefire has only just come into being. We are looking at all avenues to get humanitarian and support in, and at how we can help the affected populations. Delivering aid by road by our trusted partners ensures that it gets to the most vulnerable. Airdrops come with a greater risk but, as I have said, with the ceasefire coming into fruition at the beginning of the week, we are looking at all avenues for aid delivery.

10. [906323] **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): What discussions is the Secretary of State having with our partners and allies on this matter, especially in connection with action to provide good support for children and families in Syria?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. I am speaking to all our partners—global donors, global partners and other Governments—importantly

recognising that humanitarian aid is essential, as is protecting and safeguarding vulnerable people. That is part of our ongoing work with multilateral organisations, and an ongoing area of our work in the Government.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place. To be clear, about 300,000 people are believed to be in east Aleppo; civilians are trapped inside the city's eastern neighbourhoods and are experiencing bombing; and children have been left crippled and dead. This is a humanitarian crisis and we need to work together to ensure there is help where help is needed. Many questions have been asked today. I thank the House, because we are standing together, but will the Secretary of State elaborate on what mechanisms are in place at this point in time and what mechanisms she will explore?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome and look forward to working with her on many such global challenges and crises. She is right to highlight the extent of humanitarian suffering in Aleppo we are comprehending. I was in Brussels on Monday meeting my development counterparts, and I speak on a near-daily basis to my opposite numbers around the world. The focus for us is the humanitarian crisis, and on getting aid into the besieged areas, and to the people who desperately need aid but who have not been receiving it. I will continue the work we are undertaking and continue to update the House.

Nepal Earthquake: Aid

3. **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): What support her Department has provided to victims of the earthquake in Dolakha, Nepal of May 2015. [906316]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): On behalf of the Department, I express our great condolences on the impact of the earthquake. Some 700,000 people lost their homes and 9,000 people were killed. Specifically in relation to Dolakha, we have provided a great deal of support, including housing grants for 40,000 houses, and cooking equipment, blankets and tarpaulins for 7,000 people.

Yasmin Qureshi: I warmly welcome the Minister to his place. A Must for Dolakha is a charity based in Farnworth in my constituency. Mr Heslop, who represents the charity, visited the region recently and found that a number of people did not have any food or shelter. There was a feeling that aid had not reached a number of people in need. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the charity to discuss how we can best help the people affected in those areas?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and to her constituent for the work he does. We need to understand the scale of this catastrophe. DFID is spending £100 million this year. Even so, with 700,000 people having lost their homes, the situation is extremely challenging. The response in Dolakha is led by USAID and the World Bank. I am very happy to sit down with the hon. Lady and her constituent to discuss our forthcoming work on roads, police stations and health clinics in Dolakha itself.

Aid Budget

4. **Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that its funding goes to legitimate causes. [906317]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (James Wharton): DFID is engaged in tackling some of the great global challenges of our time. The Department has in place rigorous systems and processes to ensure that the money we spend gets to those for whom it is intended.

Scott Mann: Does the Minister agree that UK taxpayers need to be considered at every single step of the way when it comes to our aid spending?

James Wharton: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right. He may have seen the words of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in the *Daily Mail* only today setting out her vision for the future direction of the Department's spending. We need rigorous accountability. We need proper business cases. We need a clear sense of what we want to achieve. That is exactly what this ministerial team will bring and what this Government will deliver.

9. [906322] **Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is on track to save 22 million lives by the end of 2016. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the UK will pledge the £1.2 billion called for at the Replenishment conference? How will she ensure that Britain's contribution will retain its value in light of the pound's post-Brexit fall against the dollar?

James Wharton: The UK has been a key contributor to the global health fund, which has made a real difference. I met only yesterday the chairs of the all-party groups on HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria to discuss the contribution the UK intends to make. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be making an announcement in Montreal in the coming days to set out just what the UK will be doing.

14. [906327] **Mr Dominic Raab** (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's refreshing approach. May I urge her and her ministerial colleagues to revise the criteria for bilateral aid, so that countries refusing point-blank to accept foreign national offenders deported from the UK do not receive millions of pounds of taxpayers' money?

James Wharton: As always, my hon. Friend has an eye for value for money in the interests of the British taxpayer. We are, of course, looking at what DFID does. DFID delivers a huge amount of difference: it changes lives and helps people across the globe. We want to ensure that every penny we spend is spent wisely. The comments he makes are very important, as part of that debate and discussion.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): There are grave concerns about the Palestinian Authority continuing to pay reward payments to convicted terrorists and the possible misappropriation of international aid from the

UK to the Palestinian Authority. Will the Minister look carefully at that once again in the light of the grave concerns that are being expressed?

James Wharton: It is vital that the money that UK taxpayers spend on aid is spent on the right things and the right priorities. Where concerns are raised, they will of course be looked into in detail. If there are issues found to be arising, they will be addressed and tackled. The UK also believes in its commitment to helping the poorest in the world. Every penny spent on the purposes for which it is intended is a penny well spent. Any penny that goes missing is a life that may go unsaved.

Aid Budget: Value for Money

5. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure value for money in its aid budget. [906318]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): My predecessors in Government have made huge progress in improving British aid by creating an independent aid watchdog, introducing much tougher value-for-money controls and making DFID's spending even more transparent.

Edward Argar: Can my right hon. Friend reassure me that in seeking value for money she will also ensure that British companies and organisations are able to tender competitively for all DFID contracts at home and abroad, and are not in any way disadvantaged when bidding against overseas companies?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He will know of, and be familiar with, the regulations on procurement, but I want to assure him and the House that British firms and British small and medium-sized enterprises win a significant proportion of our work. In the last financial year, 74% of our supplier spend was with UK firms.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has clearly been very busy briefing *The Mail on Sunday*, along with her anti-aid special adviser. She mentioned transparency, so can she explain why funding for South Sudan, an area of great interest not only to our security forces but to our development needs, is to receive a cut in its budget next year from her Department? Will she continue to fund crucial humanitarian causes such as that one?

Priti Patel: I hope, Mr Speaker, that the hon. Gentleman heard my words earlier about the tremendous work of our Department when it comes to humanitarian aid, support and saving lives. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we will continue to champion those individuals whose lives need saving where support is required in many countries around the world. That includes a lot of the institutional reform and the support that we bring.

Mr Speaker: I always hear the Secretary of State's words. I have been hearing them for at least 20 years.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box and assure her that I, too, enjoyed reading the *Daily Mail*

this morning. As part of getting proper value, would it not make sense to reward those organisations that are working for peace within the middle east rather than to have money going to those who seek to encourage terrorism?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend raises important points. As I have said a number of times today, DFID is focused on value for money, but, as he has rightly pointed out, we will work with organisations in the right way to make sure that we are delivering the right outcomes that meet our Government priorities—both peace and stability, as well as humanitarian causes.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I, too, would like to welcome the Secretary of State and her Ministers to their places, but in doing I wish to remind her of her predecessor's commitment to transparency and scrutiny of the development budget to ensure value for money. Why, then, with the replenishment of the global health fund, which should be one of the biggest multilateral commitments, just days away, have we not seen the publication of the multilateral and bilateral reviews?

Priti Patel: If I may repeat again, we are very focused, and my predecessors quite rightly worked hard and assiduously on value for money and greater transparency. I want to go even further by making the entire global aid system more transparent, more focused on results and more accountable to those we are trying to help. The hon. Gentleman rightly points to the global fund replenishment. A conference is taking place this weekend, and I will be making an announcement over the course of it. I shall also be making sure with that replenishment that we push the agenda of greater transparency and value for money.

Aid Budget: Government Departments

6. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What proportion of the 0.7% of GDP allocated to international aid is planned to be spent by other Government Departments in 2016-2017. [906319]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): We will honour our commitment to the 0.7%. Based on the spending review settlement of 2015, other Government Departments will spend 14% of UK official development assistance in this financial year, including 4% spent through cross-government departmental funds such as the Conflict Stability and Security Fund and the prosperity fund.

Christian Matheson: Did the international aid transparency initiative not establish that the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office are “poor” and “very poor” at dispensing aid? Should not all of the 0.7% therefore be distributed through DFID?

Priti Patel: We have a cross-government strategy on how to spend ODA money on Government priorities. We want to address the challenges across the world—there are obviously many global threats—which is why the MOD and other Government Departments have oversight and spend in this area. I am leading, but I work with my colleagues across Government to ensure that the money is spent in the right way on those strategic priorities.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the new Secretary of State and her Ministers to their new roles. As a member of the International Development Committee, I look forward to seeing them in that Committee. Can she reassure me that the non-DFID ODA will continue to see the same amount of scrutiny as the DFID ODA?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right. We have the watchdog, the Independent Commission for Aid Impact. As the lead Government Department, leading on overspend, we ensure that the money going across Government Departments through this cross-government strategy is spent on the right priorities. It will be spent in the right way.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I welcome both the Government and the Opposition spokespersons to their posts. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, contrary to what the Defence Secretary told the “Today” programme, it does matter what budget conflict and security spending comes from? Will she guarantee that the Ministry of Defence will not raid the DFID budget, which should be spent on helping the poorest people around the world?

Priti Patel: As the world is changing, so must our approach to aid. That is why we have a cross-Government strategy to ensure that official development assistance meets Government priorities while also recognising and tackling the global challenges that we face. DFID will continue to be a leader when it comes to accountability and transparency, and that will, of course, apply to my colleagues throughout the Government as well.

Mr Speaker: Order. These are extremely important matters affecting some of the most vulnerable people on the face of the planet. They really do deserve—*[Interruption.]* Order. They really do deserve a more attentive audience. It would show some respect to very vulnerable people if we listened to the questions and to Ministers' answers.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): It was reported in *The Guardian* today that the Secretary of State has plans for a drastic overhaul in the direction of foreign aid, which will be based on “core Tory values”. Can she explain to us what the overhaul will look like, and how it will affect the most vulnerable?

Priti Patel: As I have already said today, my Department will be a champion of British taxpayers when it comes to the rightful spending of UK aid. My predecessors worked assiduously to ensure that aid was spent in the right way, and I will continue to build on that.

As for Conservative values, I am speaking very clearly about economic development, prosperity, jobs and empowerment in many of the poorest parts of the world. That is what my Department and I will focus on as we work on the transparency agenda, while also ensuring that those in the poorest countries can look to the future more positively and with more prosperity.

Topical Questions

T1. [906329] **Mr Gareth Thomas** (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): Since my appointment I have visited India, where I called for the delivery of an ambitious UK-India partnership. I have also visited Lebanon and Jordan, where I saw at first hand how UK-funded programmes are delivering education and humanitarian support to the residents of the Zaatari refugee camp. I look forward to working with all our partners throughout the world where British leadership and experience are valued.

Mr Thomas: Given that a 20% increase in funding for the global fund from Britain is perfectly affordable in the context of Britain's rising aid budget, and given that such an increase would trigger further sizeable increases in contributions from the United States and from Gates, why can the Secretary of State not tell the House now whether she will meet that 20% request?

Priti Patel: I have already said that I will be doing that, along with my colleagues. I spoke to my Canadian counterpart yesterday about our replenishment of the global fund, and other support. The global fund does amazing work in meeting global objectives. I shall make an announcement about our replenishment this weekend, at the Replenishment conference.

T2. [906330] **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): The sustainable development goals that were agreed in 2015 are crucial to ending poverty, fighting inequality and injustice, and tackling climate change by 2030. What is the Secretary of State doing to implement those goals in the United Kingdom?

Priti Patel: I only just heard my hon. Friend's question, but I picked up his reference to global goals, which represent a comprehensive plan when it comes to fighting poverty and meeting our strategic objectives. I assure him that my Department is focusing on delivering on those goals, and on meeting our manifesto pledges on aid.

T3. [906331] **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Secretary of State's predecessor kindly agreed to meet the Scottish Minister for International Development and Europe, Alasdair Allan. Will the new Secretary of State commit herself to an early meeting with him, and to positive engagement with devolved Administrations?

Priti Patel: Again, I only just heard the question, but I think it was based on the need for positive dialogue with colleagues in the Scottish National party. If it was, absolutely: that is exactly what I shall be doing.

T4. [906332] **Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend's Department made of the humanitarian situation in Venezuela?

Priti Patel: Of course, international assessments of Venezuela note that it is suffering a deep economic crisis and not just with inflation, but also because there is a health emergency there—a shortage of medicines and a humanitarian crisis. Strangely enough, Venezuela's economic and political policy models have of course been championed by the Labour party, and we can now see what those policies have led to, with the economic catastrophe in Venezuela.

T5. [906333] **John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State's predecessor said to me that the outcome of the bilateral and multilateral aid review would be published in the early summer. It is lovely weather today, but hardly early summer; when will it be published?

Priti Patel: I look forward to publishing both of the reviews, and since they were draft reviews when I came into the Department, I am looking at them to make sure they meet not just the Government's priorities, but also DFID's new priorities. I look forward to publishing them later this year.

T6. [906334] **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): I recently visited Uganda and was proud to see British taxpayers' money being used to vaccinate children against all sorts of diseases, but rubella is one area where we are failing to help. Please will my right hon. Friend look at ways in which we could use international development aid to vaccinate children against this hideous condition?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The UK is the largest donor to GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, which protects children from rubella through measles and rubella vaccinations, and of course GAVI has been set up very much to do exactly what my hon. Friend says. We have the UK aid match scheme, and Sense International has received over £200,000 for this very purpose in Uganda and Kenya in particular. I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend about his findings from his visit.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Yesterday, the all-party group on Syria—[*Interruption.*]—met so that we could, with friends from Syria, remember our colleague Jo Cox—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I really do think that this question in respect of the seriousness of the situation in Syria, and in deference to our late colleague Jo Cox, should be heard in silence.

Alison McGovern: Yesterday, the all-party group on Syria met so that we could, with our friends from Syria, remember our colleague Jo Cox. May I ask the Secretary of State, further to answers she gave a moment ago with regard to besieged areas, what discussions she has had with colleagues in the region about making sure that sufficient resources are stockpiled in nearby areas so that as soon as that humanitarian window opens we can make sure those areas get the help they need?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right once again to highlight the appalling crisis and the conflict we see in Syria right now. Further to the points I made earlier, with the new cessation of hostilities coming into force we are of course focused on all avenues of access to get humanitarian aid and support into many parts of Syria that have not seen aid or any humanitarian support for a considerable time. With regard to the discussions I have been having, I have been speaking to colleagues in the region and colleagues across government, and I have also been speaking to our international partners about how we can get that aid through to these critical locations.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, colleagues.

PRIME MINISTER

Q1. [906339] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 14 September.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Let me start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the former Member of Parliament for Witney, David Cameron. He has been a tremendous public servant both for his Witney constituency and the country as a whole, and under his leadership we saw the economy being stabilised, more people in work than ever before, and people on low incomes being taken out of paying tax altogether, and this Government will build on that legacy by extending opportunity to all parts of the country.

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

Deidre Brock: Last week, the Prime Minister could not tell us whether she was in favour of staying in the single market. As an Edinburgh MP, may I tell her how important the financial sector is to Scotland's economy? Will she tell us whether she agrees with her Foreign Secretary that passporting for financial services is guaranteed to continue after the UK leaves the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to give the hon. Lady a different answer from the one I gave the House on many occasions last week, which is that this Government will be working to ensure the right deal for the United Kingdom in trade in goods and services. That includes listening to the concerns that the Scottish Government and the Governments in Northern Ireland and Wales might wish to raise with us. We will be fully engaged with the devolved Administrations. As I said last week, the best thing for the financial sector in Edinburgh and for the economy of Scotland is to be part of the United Kingdom.

Q2. [906340] **Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the figures that show that unemployment in my constituency has halved since 2010 and, crucially, that youth unemployment has fallen by 12% in the last year alone? Will she promote the value of technical skills and of science and engineering in her push for all children to have a good education that enables them to go as far as their talents and hard work will take them?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in welcoming the very good employment figures that we have seen today. As he has said, unemployment in his constituency has halved since 2010. That is because we have had an economic plan and built a strong economy. He is absolutely right to say that as we look to provide opportunities for young people, we must ensure that we consider those for whom technical skills and a vocational education are the right route, because what we want is an education that is right for every child so that they can get as far as their talents will take them.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me, my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) and Jane

Kennedy, the police and crime commissioner for Merseyside, in paying tribute to the police constable who was stabbed several times yesterday in the line of duty while trying to arrest a rape suspect in Huyton. We all wish him well and a speedy recovery. I also wish the former Prime Minister well on his departure from this House and in his future life. I hope that the by-election in Witney will concentrate on the issues of education and on his views on selection in education.

I want to congratulate the Prime Minister. She has brought about unity between Ofsted and the teaching unions. She has united former Education Secretaries on both sides of the House. She has truly brought about a new era of unity in education thinking. I wonder if it is possible for her this morning, within the quiet confines of this House, to name any education experts who back her proposals on new grammar schools and more selection.

The Prime Minister: First, may I join the right hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the police constable who was stabbed in Knowsley? One of the events that I used to look forward to going to every year as Home Secretary was the Police Bravery Awards, because at that event we saw police officers who never knew, when they started their shift, what was going to happen to them. They run towards danger when other people would run away from it, and we owe them a great tribute and our gratitude.

I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of education, because it enables me to point out that over the past six years we have seen 1.4 million more children in good or outstanding schools. That is because of the changes that this Government introduced: free schools and academies, head teachers being put in charge of schools, and more choice for parents. I note that the right hon. Gentleman has opposed all those changes. What I want to see is more good school places and a diversity of provision of education in this country so that we really see opportunity for all and young people going as far as their talents will take them.

Jeremy Corbyn: I asked the Prime Minister whether she could name any experts who could help her with this policy. Sadly, she was not able to, so may I quote one expert at her? His name is John and he is a teacher. He wrote to me:

"The education system and teachers have made great strides forward to improve the quality and delivery of the curriculum. Why not fund all schools properly and let us do our job."

The evidence of the effects of selection is this: in Kent, which has a grammar school system, 27% of pupils on free school meals get five good GCSEs compared with 45% in London. We are all for spreading good practice, but why does the Prime Minister want to expand a system that can only let children down?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman needs to stop casting his mind back to the 1950s. We will ensure that we are able to provide good school places for the 1.25 million children in schools that are failing or inadequate or that need improvement. Those children and their parents know that they are not getting the education that is right for them and the opportunities that they need.

Let us consider the impact of grammar schools. If we look at the attainment of disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children, we see that the attainment gap in grammar schools is virtually zero, which it is not in other schools. It is an opportunity for young people to go where their talents will take them. The right hon. Gentleman believes in equality of outcome; I believe in equality of opportunity. He believes in levelling down; we believe in levelling up.

Jeremy Corbyn: Equality of opportunity is not segregating children at the age of 11. Let me quote the Institute for Fiscal Studies:

“those in selective areas who don’t get into grammar schools do worse than they would in a comprehensive system.”

The Secretary of State for Education suggested on Monday that new grammar schools may be required to set up feeder primary schools in poorer areas. Will the children in those feeder primaries get automatic places at grammar school or will they be subject to selection?

The Prime Minister: We are setting up a more diverse education system that provides more opportunities. The right hon. Gentleman appears to be defending the situation we have at the moment, where there is selection in our school system, but it is selection by house price. We want to ensure that children have the ability to go where their talents take them. I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman that he went to a grammar school and I went to a grammar school, and it is what got us to where we are today—but my side might be rather happier about that than his.

Jeremy Corbyn: The two things that the Prime Minister and I have in common are that we can both remember the 1950s and can both remember going to a grammar school. My point is this: every child should have the best possible education. We do not need to and never should divide children at the age of 11—a life-changing division where the majority end up losing out.

I notice that the Prime Minister did not answer my question about feeder primary schools. The Secretary of State for Education said on Monday that the Government

“have not engaged much in the reform of grammars”—[*Official Report*, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 614.]

but that they would now start the process. Will the Prime Minister confirm whether existing grammars, such as those in Kent and Buckinghamshire, will now be instructed to widen their admissions policies?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right that what we are looking at and consulting on is a diversity of provision in education. We want to make sure that all grammar schools actually do the job that we believe is important—providing opportunities for a wide range of pupils—and there are many examples across the country of different ways in which that is done through selective education. He talks about a good education for every child, and that is exactly what our policy is about. There are 1.25 million children today who are in schools that are not good or outstanding. There are parents today who fear that their children are not getting the good education that enables them to get on in life. I believe in the education that is right for every

child. It is the Labour party that has stifled opportunity and stifled ambition in this country. Members of the Labour party will take the advantages of a good education for themselves and pull up the ladder behind them for other people.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am sorry that the Prime Minister was unable to help anyone in Kent or Buckinghamshire in the answer to my question—presumably, she will have to return to it. This is not about pulling up ladders; it is about providing a ladder for every child. Let me quote to her what a critic of grammar schools said:

“There is a kind of hopelessness about the demand to ‘bring back’ grammars, an assumption that this country will only ever be able to offer a decent education to a select few.”

He goes on to say:

“I want the Conservative Party to rise above that attitude”.

Those are not my words, but those of the former right hon. Member for Witney. Is he not correct that what we need is investment in all of our schools and a good school for every child, not this selection at the age of 11?

The Prime Minister: What we need is a good school for every child, and that is precisely what we will be delivering with the policy that we have announced. With that policy, we will see: universities expanding their support for schools; more faith schools being set up; and independent schools increasing their support for schools in the state sector. A diversity of provision of education is what we need to ensure good school places for every child. That good school place is important so that young people can take opportunities and get into the workplace.

I notice that this is the right hon. Gentleman’s fifth question and he has not yet welcomed the employment figures today, which show more people in work than ever before; and wages rising above inflation. That is more people with a pay packet and more money in those pay packets. What would Labour offer? It would offer more taxation and misery for working families. It is only the Conservative party that knows you can build an economy that works for everyone only when everyone has an opportunity for work.

Jeremy Corbyn: Of course I welcome anyone who has managed to get a job; I welcome those people who have managed to get jobs, and keep themselves and their families together. The problem is that there are now almost a million of them on zero-hours contracts who do not know what they are going to be paid from one week to the other.

In order to help the Prime Minister with the expertise on the reform of secondary schools, may I quote to her what Michael Wilshaw, the chief inspector of schools, has said? He said quite simply this:

“The notion that the poor stand to benefit from the return of grammar schools strikes me as quite palpable tosh and nonsense”.

Is not all this proof that the Conservative party’s Green Paper addresses none of the actual crises facing our schools system: a real-terms cut in the schools budget; half a million pupils in supersize schools; a crisis in teacher recruitment and retention; a rising number of unqualified teachers in classrooms; and vital teaching assistants losing their jobs? Is this not a Government

heading backwards, to a failed segregation for the few and second-class schooling for the many? Can we not do better than this?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has got some of his facts wrong—plain and simple. We have more teachers in our schools today than in 2010. We have more teachers joining the profession than leaving it. We have fewer pupils in supersize classes than there have been previously. I simply say this to him: he has opposed every measure that we have introduced to improve the quality of education in this country. He has opposed measures that increase parental choice, measures that increase the freedom of head teachers to run their schools, and the opportunity for people to set up free schools. Those are all changes that are leading to improvements in our education system, and we will build on them with our new policies.

I recognise that this may very well be the last time that the right hon. Gentleman has an opportunity to face me across the Dispatch Box—certainly if his MPs have anything to do with it. I accept that he and I do not agree on everything—well, we probably do not agree on anything—but I must say that he has made his mark. Let us think of some of the things he has introduced. He wants coal mines without mining them, submarines without sailing them, and he wants to be Labour leader without leading them. One thing we know is that whoever is Labour leader after the leadership election, it will be the country that loses.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just point out to the House that progress today at this Question Time session has been absurdly slow? I ask the House on behalf of our constituents to show some respect for those colleagues who want to question the Prime Minister, and I am determined to get down the list. I call Craig Williams.

Q3. [906341] **Craig Williams** (Cardiff North) (Con): Students from Cardiff schools and UK schools attended the recording of the British holocaust survivors giving their testimony for future generations. It was a deeply moving experience for them and a stark reminder to us to fight racism, anti-Semitism and hatred in all forms. As part of this vital education effort, of which I know my right hon. Friend is a great supporter, is the establishment of a national memorial to the holocaust. Will she update us now on the next stage?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right that we need to ensure that we never forget the horrors of the holocaust and the lessons that must be learned from that. It is right that we have agreed to this national memorial next to Parliament on Victoria Gardens, which is an important place for it to be. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will today launch an international competition for the design of that memorial. The design may include a learning centre, which will ensure that there will be opportunities for young people and others truly to learn the lessons from the holocaust and to learn about the appalling atrocities that took place.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Last week, the Prime Minister was unwilling or unable to give any assurances about remaining in the single European market. Today, she has been unwilling or unable to give any assurances to the financial sector about protecting the passporting of financial services. Meanwhile, millions of people from across the United Kingdom depend on freedom of movement across the EU for business and for pleasure. They face the prospect of having to apply and possibly pay for visas. Is the Prime Minister in favour of protecting visa-free travel—yes, or no?

The Prime Minister: There was a very clear message from the British people at the time of the referendum vote on 23 June that they wanted to see an end to free movement as it operated and control of the movement of people from the European Union into the UK, and that is what we will deliver.

Angus Robertson: The Prime Minister and the UK Government are totally unwilling to tell us the true cost of Brexit and what their negotiating position will be. In contrast, there is a different tune from the European Union. The new EU negotiator, Guy Verhofstadt, has said:

“It’s wrong that Scotland might be taken out of the EU when it voted to stay.”

Does she agree with Mr Verhofstadt and the Scottish Government who want to protect Scotland’s place in Europe?

The Prime Minister: It is all very well for the right hon. Gentleman to ask that question, but only two years ago he did not want to protect Scotland’s place in the European Union, because he wanted Scotland to leave the UK. On all of those questions, whether it is on the referendum for leaving the European Union, the referendum on independence in Scotland, or those in this House, he seems to think that if he asks the question all the time, he will get a different answer. Well, it will not work for me and it will not work for the Scottish people.

Q4. [906342] **Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Freedom of speech is a fundamental British value, which is undermined by so-called safe spaces in our universities, where a sense of righteous entitlement among a minority of students means that their wish not to be offended shuts down debate. As students around the country return to their places of learning at the start of this new academic year, does my right hon. Friend agree that university is precisely the place for lively debate, and that fear of being offended must not trump freedom of speech?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We want our universities not just to be places of learning, but to be places where there can be open debate which is challenged and people can get involved in that. I think everybody is finding this concept of safe spaces quite extraordinary. We want to see that innovation of thought taking place in our universities; that is how we develop as a country, as a society and as an economy, and I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend.

Q5. [906343] **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): Nine-year-old Mohammed is one of thousands of child refugees alone in Syria. His parents fled the country

believing he was dead and have resettled in my constituency. In March, Mohammed was identified as being alive, but has since been kidnapped, badly beaten and left for dead, before being found again. He now lives in fear of daily attacks or sexual violence and assault. Will the Prime Minister agree to meet me urgently to review the steps the Government could take to reunite Mohammed with his devastated family and provide him with the support required to overcome his ordeal?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, I am not as aware of the details of the individual case as the hon. Gentleman is. The Home Secretary has heard him, and if he would like to write to her with the details, I am sure this case will be looked at. Of course, there are rules that do enable family reunion to take place, and we as a country have committed to take a number of children who are particularly vulnerable—potentially vulnerable—to sexual violence from the region around Syria to ensure that we can resettle them in the UK and take them out of that fear that they are experiencing. But my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will look at the case if he cares to write to her.

Q8. [906346] **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assurance can my right hon. Friend give that, whatever criteria come to guide our immigration system, it will be fairer than the present system—it will no longer discriminate against peoples from outside the EU, as the present system does?

The Prime Minister: As I mentioned earlier in response to a question, one aspect of the vote on 23 June was that people want us to control movement from the European Union into the UK, and, of course, we are already able to control movement from outside the European Union into the United Kingdom. The details of the system we will introduce for EU citizens are currently being worked on, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we will have the ability to control movement from the EU and movement from outside the EU, and therefore bring that greater degree of fairness that I think people were looking for.

Q6. [906344] **Mr David Winnick** (Walsall North) (Lab): How can the Prime Minister try to justify reducing the House of Commons to 600 Members, while the House of Lords now has 820 Members and, certainly by 2020, will have even more? Is this her idea of democracy in the 21st century?

The Prime Minister: Of course, the House of Commons voted for that reduction in the number of Members of Parliament—I think people wanted to see that. I would gently remind him that, when he refers to the House of Lords and changes in the House of Lords, it is actually this Government who have introduced the retirement procedures for the House of Lords that have seen a reduction in the number of Members of the House of Lords.

Q9. [906347] **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The NHS “Five Year Forward View” states that, in future, we will see more care delivered locally. Does the Prime Minister think that, in line with that, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough clinical commissioning

group ought to consider the importance of local care when assessing the future of the Princess of Wales minor injuries unit in Ely?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right: the five-year plan does include that proposal for more local input in care at a local level. It is absolutely right that in looking at, for example, the future of minor injuries units, local people are considered and local concerns taken into account. I understand that there is due to be a meeting in Ely later this month to consider this. I hope that she and her constituents will be able to make their views known at that meeting.

Q7. [906345] **Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Tomorrow I will be helping to launch a programme at the engineering company ADI Group in my constituency to boost the interest of 14 to 16-year-olds in engineering skills. No doubt the Prime Minister would like to join me in congratulating ADI Group, but will she take it from me that her words of congratulation would mean rather more if they were not accompanied by cuts of between 30% and 50% in apprenticeships funding—a programme that the Institute of the Motor Industry has described as a “car crash”?

The Prime Minister: I am of course happy to commend the company that the hon. Gentleman has referred to. Of course, the west midlands is an important driver in terms of engineering skills in this country. But I simply do not recognise the situation that he has set out in relation to apprenticeships. We have seen 2 million apprenticeships created over the last six years, and we are committed as a Government to seeing more apprenticeships being created. That is giving young people, like the young people I met when I went to Jaguar Land Rover, opportunities to learn a skill to get into a job, to get into the workplace, and to get on where their talents will take them.

Q10. [906348] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the life chances of many children, particularly those in our poorest areas, are limited through living in chaotic and unstable households? Will she kindly look at the report recently produced by the all-party parliamentary group on children’s centres, which recommends family hubs in local communities and other solutions to this issue, with a view to considering this further?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing in the all-party parliamentary group. The stable family background that young people are brought up in is obviously important, and she has been a champion for families and for family life. I have set up a policy group led by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). I will ask him to look very carefully at the report that has come out of the all-party parliamentary group to see what we can take from it.

Q11. [906349] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): On Monday, the parliamentary advisory group on carbon capture and storage published a report about the potential of CCS to create thousands of jobs, save the country billions of pounds, and play a major role in meeting the UK’s emission reduction targets. CCS is critical to

Teesside, so will the Prime Minister tell the House when the Government will publish their long-awaited new strategy?

The Prime Minister: The issues of climate change, reducing emissions, and our energy policy are very important to this Government. We have a fine record in this area, and we will be continuing with that. The issue of carbon capture and storage has been looked at carefully in the past. One of the key issues is the cost. We will continue to invest in the development of CCS. We are investing over £130 million to develop the technology, through innovation support, with the aim of reducing its costs, and so we will continue to look at the role that it can play.

Q13. [906351] **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): As a governor at Nevill Road Infant School in Bramhall, I know that schools have to make the best use of their resources. I was therefore shocked to learn that schools in the north-west are charged £27 million for their water. Does the Prime Minister agree that schools are important community hubs? Will the Government make representations to Ofwat to change the banding guidance so that schools are considered to be community assets rather than classified in the same way as big business?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend and others in this House who play a role as school governors—a very important role. She is right that schools need to think carefully about how they are using their resources. The approach taken by water companies does vary. However, we are looking at the guidance to water companies in relation to how they can deal with schools and whether they could be looking at using more concessionary rates for schools.

Q12. [906350] **Tom Elliott** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): The Prime Minister may be aware of last week's BBC "Spotlight" programme on serious allegations of corruption and fraud around the National Asset Management Agency's sale of properties in Northern Ireland. Will she confirm which agencies will be investigating them, whether the National Crime Agency will be involved, and whether a report will be published in due course?

The Prime Minister: On the specific issue raised by the hon. Gentleman, I will come back to him on the details. As he knows, the National Crime Agency operates in Northern Ireland on a slightly different basis from that on which it operates elsewhere across the United Kingdom. Where issues are being looked into, it will be necessary to ensure that the appropriate skills and capabilities are brought to bear. If I may, I will write to him with a detailed answer to his question.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Prime Minister give her full and enthusiastic support to President Anastasiades and Mustafa Akinci as they reach a crucial stage of their negotiations, which we hope will deliver a negotiated settlement for a free and united Cyprus?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my right hon. Friend in doing that. It is important. I think that everybody across this House will wish those talks well and hope that they will have a successful conclusion.

Q14. [906352] **Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): It has been two years since the Prime Minister set up the child abuse inquiry, which is now on to its fourth chair, and last week the outgoing chair said that it had become inherently unmanageable. Given that the Prime Minister appointed Dame Lowell Goddard to her position, will she insist that she come before this House to explain herself? Surely child abuse survivors deserve an explanation.

The Prime Minister: On the process point, it is not for the Prime Minister to insist who attends before a Committee of this House. I understand that Dame Lowell Goddard has been invited to attend the Committee. I think that the hon. Lady and I share, as do many hon. Members across this House, a desire to see the issues of these appalling crimes of child abuse being properly looked into. That is important. Dame Lowell Goddard has set up the inquiry and the truth project. Many aspects of it are already in place and operating, and I am very pleased that Alexis Jay has taken on the role of chairman of the inquiry. She chaired the Rotherham work, and I think that she will do this work extremely well and we will have answers to questions that so many have been asking for so long.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Child sexual exploitation is an issue that affects many communities. Does the Prime Minister agree that shining a light on the events of the past is the best way to learn lessons for the future, and will she agree to an independent review of child sexual exploitation in Telford?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has just shown the cross-party concern that there is on the issue of child abuse and child sexual exploitation. It is absolutely right, as she says, that we are able to look into the abuses and crimes of the past. We will need to learn important lessons from that as to why institutions that were supposed to protect children failed to do so. It is for the authorities in Telford to look specifically at how they wish to address those issues in Telford, but I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has heard my hon. Friend's comments and that she will want to take that up with her.

Q15. [906353] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following the successful Hillsborough independent panel, will the Prime Minister consider setting up a similar review of the biggest treatment disaster in the history of the NHS, namely the contaminated blood scandal? Victims are still waiting for answers and justice 35 years on.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady obviously raises a very important point in relation to contaminated blood. I will take it away and consider it. Obviously, she will know the reasons and background that led to the Hillsborough independent panel, but I recognise people's concerns about contaminated blood and will consider the point that she has made.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware of coverage regarding a report to be published by Dame Louise Casey, the Government's integration tsar. The report will speak of British laws, culture, values and traditions, such as Christmas, being threatened by political correctness

from council officials. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to send a loud and clear message that the best way to secure a harmonious society is not only for mainstream Britain to respect minority traditions, such as Diwali, Vaisakhi and Eid, but for council officials to appreciate that minority communities should respect the views and traditions of mainstream Britain, which means that Christmas is not “Winterval” and that Christmas trees are not “festive” trees?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will not comment on or pre-empt the findings of Louise Casey’s review, which is an important piece of work. I will simply join my hon. Friend by saying that what we want to see in our society is tolerance and understanding. We want minority communities to be able to recognise and stand up for their traditions, but we also want to be able to stand up for our traditions generally, and that includes Christmas.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Will the Prime Minister look carefully at the calls from the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland for new questions to be added to the next census so that we can better meet the needs of our serving personnel in the armed forces, our veterans and their families? In relation to Northern Ireland, where such a massive contribution is made to the armed forces through recruitment and service, will she look carefully at the distribution of funding under the armed forces covenant so that there is equitable funding across all regions and countries of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: Of course, I am pleased that it was this Government who introduced the military covenant, and who have recognised the importance of that bond and that link with those who are serving in our armed forces and with veterans of our armed forces. I have not seen the specific request from the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland, but that will certainly be looked at by the Cabinet Office when considering the next census.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that the co-operation between Russia and the United States in respect of Aleppo sets a very

important precedent, and that it is in the British national interest to redevelop our links with Russia? We may then be able to solve many more problems in that region.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that the agreement that has been reached between Russia and the United States about Syria is an important agreement, and I think everybody in this House will want to see that being put into practice and working on the ground. There have been a number of occasions when we have seen what appear to be steps forward, and sadly it has not been possible to implement them, but I hope that it will be different this time. It would mark an important step. We should have no doubt about the relationship that we should have with Russia. It is not a business as usual relationship. I made that very clear when I was responding to the report on the murder of Litvinenko, and we should continue with that position.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): May I join my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister and Jane Kennedy, the police and crime commissioner on Merseyside, in commending the tremendous bravery of the police officers involved in the stabbing incident in my constituency yesterday, who nevertheless apprehended the suspect? Will the Prime Minister acknowledge that, often in very dangerous circumstances, the police are being asked to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Gentleman in recognising once again the work of the individual police constable—[*Interruption.*] I apologise—the three police constables who apprehended the suspect while being under attack. As I said earlier, our police officers bravely go where others would not go in order to protect the public. They do so much in the line of duty and, for some, when they are off duty as well. They are prepared to go and face danger in order to protect us.

On the issue of resources, I remind the right hon. Gentleman that we have protected police budgets over the period of the comprehensive spending review settlement, in the face of a proposal from his Front Benchers that we should cut them by 5% to 10%.

Speaker's Statement

12.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. I had hoped to be able to announce today the timetable for the elections to vacant Chairs of Select Committees. It is my understanding—I may, of course, be wrong—that discussions on these matters in the usual channels have concluded, but the Government have still to table the various motions required. I very much hope that they will be tabled very soon. It may be helpful to Members to know that if the House agrees to those motions, it is my fervent hope and expectation that the elections for Chairs may take place on Wednesday 19 October.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Not now. I will come to the hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* It may be on that matter, but there is something else that I want to say first. It is always good to keep the hon. Gentleman in reserve; it builds up a sense of eager anticipation in the House.

Michael Carpenter, Speaker's counsel, retires from the House service at the end of September. Michael was seconded to the House of Commons from the Treasury Solicitor's Department in October 2000 as counsel for European legislation, and he subsequently became an employee of the House. Michael became Speaker's counsel in October 2008. He has served this House and, if I may say so, colleagues, he has served me, magnificently. I shall always be grateful to him, and the House should be thankful for his sense of duty, for his immense ability and for his stoicism and fortitude under pressure. I am sure that the House would wish to send its best wishes to Michael and to his family following his retirement. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]*

I am pleased to announce that, following fair and open competition, Saira Salimi will take on the role of Speaker's counsel in October. Saira is currently the deputy official solicitor to the Church Commissioners, a role that she has held for the last five years. Before that, Saira was a member of the office of the parliamentary counsel for eight years, and she comes to us with a detailed knowledge of the legislative process. I am sure that the House will want to wish Saira well in her new and important role. *[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]*

Mr Bone *rose*—

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

Mr Speaker: I will take points of order now, before we come to the urgent question. I saw the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) first, and I am slightly anxious that he will burst if he does not have his opportunity ere long.

Mr Bone: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for allowing a point of order at this stage. On the issue that you raised—I thank you for bringing it to the attention of the House—obviously the two Whips Offices will be working very hard to ensure that this House has the opportunity to set up Select Committees to scrutinise the Government. But as they

are having some sort of trouble, is there any possibility that we can do something in this House to ensure that it happens before we go into recess? It would be really useful if we could have the election on the day that you specified, because that is my birthday.

Mr Speaker: It seemed to me, I must say to the House, that there was very good reason to make expeditious progress on this matter in any case. I am sure that there was absolutely no hint of underlying sarcasm in the hon. Gentleman's observation when he expressed the confident expectation that the Whips on both sides would want to make progress in the establishment of the new Committee and in the election of the vacant Chairs of all the Committees, because of course they will want the Government to be subject to proper and thorough scrutiny. There is very good reason to proceed expeditiously anyway, but the fact that 19 October is also the hon. Gentleman's birthday provides an added incentive.

The hon. Gentleman asks what can be done. The short answer, as I think he knows, is that I am doing what I can, not very subtly, to indicate that the usual channels really ought to progress this matter sooner rather than later. So far as I am concerned, that means by tomorrow. I hope we are clear.

Stephen Doughty: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for allowing me to raise this point at this stage. I add my best wishes to Michael, and to Saira as she takes up her new role.

With the changes to the Select Committees, the old Business, Innovation and Skills Committee will probably change to a new Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, the BIS Committee is one of the constituent Committees of the Committees on Arms Export Controls. Is it your view that the new Committee will take over the role of the old BIS Committee as one of the constituent Committees, and that it would not be correct, as has been suggested in some quarters, for a new International Trade Committee to take over sole responsibility for scrutinising our arms exports controls?

Mr Speaker: It has to be said that the hon. Gentleman is an ingenious fellow, and he has regularly demonstrated his ingenuity since his election to the House. I do not blame him for seeking to shoehorn in his current preoccupation when we are discussing the timetable for elections to the vacant Chairs of Committees. However, the proper answer for me to give him is that it is not a matter for the Chair. It will be a matter for the Committee concerned to decide. If the hon. Gentleman were afflicted with a sudden bout of self-doubt or reticence, causing him to be reluctant or unable to express his view on this matter, I would be concerned, but he will not be, and therefore I am not.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I notice that the Leader of the House is in his place. Would it be in order, for the benefit of the House, for him to rise at the Dispatch Box and put the House out of its misery on the Government's plan for the dates of the election of Select Committee Chairs?

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House is not under any such obligation. It has to be said that normally—I speak with some authority on this matter, as I have known him for 30 years, and we have been next-door constituency neighbours for the best part of 20 years—he is the most accommodating of colleagues.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I have a feeling that the right hon. Gentleman is about to prove the point.

Mr Lidington: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. If it will help the House, let me say that, as you rightly said, agreement was reached through the usual channels earlier this week about the reconstitution of Select Committees following the changes to Departments. It was clearly right for us to seek full cross-party endorsement for the changes, and that has now been obtained. I have therefore given instructions for the necessary resolutions and changes to Standing Orders to be drafted immediately, and we shall certainly table them as rapidly as we can get them to the House authorities.

Mr Speaker: I think that is very encouraging. I do not want to embarrass the right hon. Gentleman, but may I just say that he is in some danger, if he is not careful, of being held aloft by Members from all parts of the House? We will leave the matter there for now. I thank the Leader of the House for what he has said, which is encouraging.

Tax Credits: Concentrix

12.53 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on Concentrix's activities in relation to tax credit investigations made on behalf of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I want to be very clear: the Government recognise the importance of tax credits to individuals and families. We all recognise that it is important for this support to reach the people who really need it. That is why HMRC works hard to check that it is making the correct payments, and to tackle any fraudulent claims. We must acknowledge that error and fraud exist in the system, and should be addressed to ensure taxpayers' money is spent correctly. As part of this work, HMRC engaged Synnex-Concentrix Ltd in 2014 to help check people's eligibility. As a result, almost £300 million of incorrect payments have been avoided.

I want to reassure the House on two key points. First, Concentrix has been paid only for making the right decisions; it has not received payment for taking someone's money away wrongly. Secondly, Concentrix has not been allowed to engage in fishing expeditions or to pick on vulnerable claimants at random. Where there has been evidence to suggest a claim might not be correct, Concentrix has written to claimants to seek further information and confirm their eligibility. I realise—I know this as a constituency Member myself—that it can be stressful for someone to receive such a letter, but it is right that we investigate the full picture, with contributions from claimants themselves, to ensure we make the right payments. That is why both Concentrix and HMRC, where it does the same work, always send a letter and give claimants 30 days to provide information before taking any further action. It is important that people do indeed respond, and that they get in touch if they are struggling to respond to any of the questions.

Despite the best efforts of the staff manning the phones, Concentrix, with the high volume of calls in recent weeks, has not been providing the high levels of customer service that the public expect and which are required in its contract. HMRC has therefore given notice that this contract will not be renewed beyond its end date in May 2017. HMRC is also no longer passing new cases to Concentrix, but is instead working with it as a matter of urgency to improve the service it provides to claimants and to resolve outstanding cases. I can confirm to the House that 150 HMRC staff have been redeployed with immediate effect to help it to resolve any issues people are having with their claims as quickly as possible.

I realise that colleagues on both sides of the House are concerned to get difficult cases resolved and to assist vulnerable constituents appropriately. In addition to the extra resources I have mentioned, I have arranged a drop-in for Members in Room B, 1 Parliament Street between 9.30 and 11 am tomorrow, at which HMRC officials will be available to offer guidance to colleagues, should that be helpful.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have been contacted, as she has been, by distressed and

[Rebecca Long Bailey]

anxious constituents—often hard-working individuals who have had their tax credits cut unfairly, in many cases pushing them into extreme hardship. Although Labour Members certainly welcome the fact that HMRC has finally taken action by announcing that the Concentrix contract will not be renewed, it is most regrettable that the Government undertook such action only when events were dramatically exposed by the media and, indeed, by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field).

It remains the case that Synnex-Concentrix will be carrying out these services for another eight months. There is therefore a risk that, without radical amendments to the contract itself, service failures will continue. Of most concern is the fact that the payment model arguably creates a conflict of interest, as has been noted by the Social Security Advisory Committee. Will the Minister therefore confirm what arrangements she will make urgently to revise the contract to preserve justice for the claimants?

As the Minister stated, I understand that HMRC will redeploy 150 staff so that claimants can get through to advisers and resolve their claims. Will she confirm how the Government will monitor that? Will the Government now commit to an official investigation into Concentrix's conduct since it was awarded the contract in 2014, so that we can determine how this situation was allowed to arise? Finally, has she given any consideration to the real prospect of bringing this service back in-house?

Jane Ellison: I will try to answer those questions, but it is worth commenting that this Government, and indeed their predecessors, inherited a very complicated system. In the long term, the right answer is to replace tax credits, as is our intention, because we were bequeathed an unnecessarily complex system. However, we must make the system work while it is in operation, and that is now the focus of our activities.

On HMRC's decision about the contract, I want to reassure the House that monitoring has taken place regularly throughout the contract. Indeed, HMRC has worked closely with Concentrix. It is the case that, as has been documented, performance has not been good in recent weeks. That has clearly been noted, and we are now taking action on it.

On the contract going forward, as I mentioned in my response to the urgent question, Concentrix will focus on resolving outstanding claims, not opening new ones. In other words, it will deal with those already open in an orderly and appropriate manner. HMRC is putting in additional resource. In particular, I have asked it to focus on the difficult cases—there have been some high-profile examples in recent days—to ensure that we resolve them as quickly as possible so that all our vulnerable constituents are helped and supported.

That is the key focus as we go forward. There is no need to go into inquiries and so on. We have a contract that is monitored on a regular basis. It will not be renewed when it comes to an end in May next year. The focus for all of us in the coming days and weeks—and for me and for HMRC in particular—is on making sure that the outstanding cases are resolved, especially those of the most vulnerable, and that people have the money to which they are correctly entitled.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have cases of women who have had their tax credits stopped because, they have been told, they are living with a man of whom they have never heard or, indeed, with the tenant of the property prior to them occupying it. Their benefits have been withdrawn. I am not sure that I need advice tomorrow morning in 1 Parliament Street—when, incidentally, the House is sitting. We need to know how quickly those cases can be reviewed.

Jane Ellison: I quite understand my right hon. Friend's point. The drop-in is there as a facility should Members wish to use it, but it is not an alternative to the HMRC lines already in place. We encourage anyone affected to call the HMRC number on the letters they have received. We are putting significant additional resources into those helplines, with immediate effect, to make sure we can resolve the situation. I am reassured—although obviously I will be talking to HMRC consistently about this—that as soon as the facts of a case are resolved we can get money into people's accounts in a short number of days.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I am delighted that the Concentrix contract is not to be renewed. It will come as some comfort, at least, to those who have been affected by its activity. That contract was designed to save £1 billion in fraud and overpayment. The Minister tells us some £300 million has been saved. How much of those so-called savings was as a result of false accusations by Concentrix against tax credit recipients? If somewhere between 120 and perhaps many thousands of people were affected, why was the contract not cancelled sooner? The cost of the contract was reputed to be some £75 million. How much do the Government intend to claw back to directly compensate those affected? The Minister tells us, and I am pleased to hear, that HMRC civil servants have been drafted in to clean up the mess, but how much will that cost the taxpayer in additional pay, and will the Government be seeking payment from Concentrix to fund that remedial action?

Jane Ellison: I am not able to respond immediately from the Dispatch Box to one or two of the points raised by the hon. Gentleman. My clear priority and that of HMRC at the moment is to make sure that we resolve the outstanding cases, and in particular the difficult cases for vulnerable constituents. We will then turn our mind to some of the other points that he made. We are not renewing the contract, but we intend to continue to bear down on error and fraud. That is important, as there is a lot in the system, but we have had a great deal of success in recent years in reducing it—the amount of fraud in the system has halved from £800 million to £400 million. We need to continue to bear down on that, because money that is fraudulently obtained is money that is not available to taxpayers. It remains vital that we address that matter. But for the moment, my primary consideration is resolving the difficult cases to make sure that we look after our most vulnerable citizens.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I am a big fan of supporting those people who are trying very hard to get on in life and who depend on tax credits. One of my concerns is that over the next eight months those people will still be dealt with by Concentrix and will still

have that fear of being falsely accused and prosecuted, almost, as they go forward. What reassurance can the Minister give that those people will be looked after, and will HMRC carry on with the contract in the future or will it issue it for new tender?

Jane Ellison: I have laid out the arrangements we are putting in place. The contract ends next spring. In the meantime, HMRC will support Concentrix on the outstanding cases—in particular, looking at more complex cases and supporting back-office functions while Concentrix staff focus on resolving already open cases. It is important to have a bit of perspective. Concentrix has assisted the Government and, indeed, the taxpayer in correctly identifying a lot of claims as either erroneous or fraudulent. It is important to keep the matter in perspective, but HMRC has made clear its operational intention not to continue the contract beyond the spring.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Minister and HMRC for reacting so quickly to issues and concerns raised in the House, but several questions remain. What estimate has been made of the current backlog needing to be dealt with by Concentrix and HMRC? How should those people currently being dealt with contact Concentrix—through the current helpline or by contacting HMRC directly? Why were these appalling failures not acted on before they were revealed in parliamentary questions, if HMRC was monitoring the contract so closely? Will HMRC bring the contract back in-house in May next year? Will the Minister today commit to a review of all payment-by-results contracts, which are completely inappropriate in our welfare system?

Jane Ellison: I am aware that the hon. Lady has been very active on this—she has asked a number of parliamentary questions and has shown considerable interest in the issue. It is important to note, and the performance figures support this, that it is only really in recent weeks that performance has not been acceptable. It is not that this has been an acute problem for a considerable length of time. However, performance has not been acceptable in recent weeks.

People should contact the number on the letters they have received. I am aware that there have been problems getting through on the phone in recent weeks, and have tested it out for myself. We are putting in additional resources to allow Concentrix to focus on answering the phones and dealing with outstanding cases while additional HMRC staff resolve some of the back-office issues and some of the complexities, so that people can focus on the immediate issue.

Some more mandatory considerations are coming in, but we think there are around 2,500 cases in the system still to be dealt with at the moment. We expect more to come in because it is that time of year, after people who have not supplied additional information as they were requested to have seen their tax credits stopped. We feel that, with that additional resource, we can resolve that quickly, and that is my focus.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Now that the position is that Concentrix is not going to deal with any new claims or cases, will my hon. Friend clarify for the House who, from HMRC or wherever, will deal with

claims of errors, fraud and other problems, so that we send a strong signal to people that that will not be acceptable and that we want to see genuine claimants compensated for losing money that they need?

Jane Ellison: I reassure my hon. Friend that it has always been the case that both Concentrix and HMRC were pursuing matters of error and fraud; it was not the case that only Concentrix was doing so. HMRC will continue to pursue error and fraud cases. In recent years the Government have put additional resource into supporting HMRC's work on general tax avoidance and evasion, and compliance.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and draw the House's attention to how different that response was from those of the previous Government; I do not believe that we would have had today's statement had there not been a leadership change, so I thank her for that. Will she pass on my thanks to her colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), for the immediate action she took on the report I submitted on Hermes, whose unlawful use of self-employment HMRC has been asked to investigate?

I have two questions. The worry about this contractor is that to some people it appears to be cutting benefits first and asking questions afterwards, and there is no mechanism for a hotline for MPs to try to sort such issues out. Although I very much welcome her bringing the contract back in-house, it is the only contract that has ever been put in place that has allowed a private company to make decisions about people's benefit levels, so might she review that?

Mr Speaker: It is quite cheeky of the right hon. Gentleman to ask two questions and to declare so openly his intention to do so, although it is perhaps not quite as cheeky as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who asked five questions without making any such explicit declaration at all.

Jane Ellison: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments on the priority given to resolving problems of this nature. It is worth reiterating that, through the contract, we have secured more than £280 million of identified savings in terms of error and fraud. There continues to be considerable fraud, particularly with regard to whether people live singularly in a household. It is important to recognise that the contract has brought important benefits to the taxpayer.

I recognise the right hon. Gentleman's challenge on the nature of the contract. Such contracts have their place, but they must work appropriately. The contract must work to do the thing it set out to do, but it must at all times work for taxpayers and, above all, for the vulnerable. I will reflect on his wider point if I may, but I give him reassurance on that general point.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): All hon. Members will have received a deluge recently of harrowing cases of people who have had calls from and interaction with Concentrix. They were unsure at first whether the company existed and whether they had received a scam letter, which we see far too often. There has been a poor

[Craig Mackinlay]

delay in opening post, and getting through on the telephone has been next to impossible. That service level is unacceptable in the public sector. Will the Minister confirm that her very strong announcement today, which is welcome, shows that the Government are committed to helping the vulnerable immediately and accurately?

Jane Ellison: I hope we have shown that. We have important contracts across the Government with people to provide services, but clearly they need to be provided to an acceptable standard. The decision is not to renew the contract. In taking that decision, HMRC has clearly taken into account operational performance. The focus for all of us—Ministers, HMRC and individual Members acting in their constituency capacities—is to ensure that our most vulnerable constituents are supported as soon as possible to ensure that the money to which they are correctly entitled hits their bank accounts and they do not have the stress of wondering where the money will come from.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): All of us as constituency Members of Parliament can relay stories of how the service contract has worked and been deplorable, but on the jobs that will be lost—some of them are in Belfast—will the Minister tell us what contact she has had with the Northern Ireland Executive, or what contact HMRC has had with the relevant devolved Administrations or regions, about the effect on jobs? What will be done to give support to those who will lose their jobs?

Jane Ellison: It is important to note that the decision has been taken by HMRC not to renew the contract. To that extent, the decision for a private company such as Concentrix on what it does beyond that point is clearly a matter for the company. If the right hon. Gentleman has concerns of that nature, colleagues in the territorial office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be happy to talk to him in the normal way. It is important to stress that this is not a decision to end a contract here and now, but a decision not to renew it in the spring.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I welcome the steps the Government have taken to protect the vulnerable in this situation. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that the lessons learned in this case will apply not only to the contract when it is retendered in May, but across Government contracts more widely?

Jane Ellison: I hope I can give that reassurance for the future. To date, it has always been the case that, when the Government contract a supplier to provide a service, it should be provided to the right standard, and that contracts are monitored and we ensure that service levels are acceptable to Members and their constituents.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Despite what the Minister has said, I have constituents who have had their tax credits cut off with no prior notification, and who have spent up to 70 minutes on the phone trying to get through, which is a huge drain on their resources. Will she tell us whether the contract included penalties for Concentrix if it did not provide an acceptable service

level or answer calls within a set time? If not, who will take the responsibility for negotiating such a flawed contract?

Jane Ellison: Waiting 70 minutes to have a call answered is clearly not acceptable. I can imagine the distress that would cause somebody trying to get through. If you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, and if the hon. Lady will let me, I will write to her about the points she made about the contract—I do not have that detail to hand, and I need to assess what we can say given commercial confidentiality. If I can give her the answers she seeks, I will do so, but I will write to her if that is acceptable.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The National Audit Office found that the Concentrix contract delivered savings of £500,000 in 2014-15 compared with the original estimate of £285 million. It was expected to deliver at best half the original savings planned in the contract. As we have heard, and as we have learned from our constituency postbags, there were a large number of errors in the process. What more can the Government do to improve the tendering process in future, particularly at HMRC, and to improve the managerial capability at HMRC, so that we do not have such mistakes in future?

Jane Ellison: This is a payment-by-results contract. As I said in my response to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) at the outset, Concentrix will not be paid when it has not acted appropriately and when it has not got a result. It is important that we get these things right and I take my hon. Friend's point. I reassure him that HMRC, and indeed Ministers, will always seek to get the right contracts. Clearly, when there are lessons to be learned, we must reflect on them and ensure that they are reflected in future arrangements.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Last week in evidence to the Institute for Government, the former Work and Pensions Secretary, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), admitted that outsourcing to the private sector was not a panacea. Surely after the Concentrix contract fiasco it is time for full review of outsourcing to private companies in the welfare system. Is it not time to look at whether outsourcing is appropriate at all or, if it is to continue, at what better civil service oversight provision is needed to ensure that this sort of thing never happens again?

Jane Ellison: I again urge hon. Members to keep a degree of perspective. Many contracts deliver what we want. It is worth noting that the Concentrix contract delivered more than £280 million in savings to the taxpayer, which represents a sensible return on that investment. I have said what I have said about service levels—they must be acceptable and to the standard we have contracted for—and there are circumstances in which the use of private companies offers a cost-effective way to get something that the Government might not otherwise have, which could mean flexible capacity or the capacity to do something for an uncertain period. Sometimes, the flexibility that such contracts offer makes it easier than doing something in-house. I take the hon. Gentleman's points and will reflect on them but I do not draw the same general conclusion as he does.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement and concur with the excellent point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). The Minister will know that genuine errors are made by constituents and HMRC. Going by one's casework and constituency surgeries, it seems that sometimes full compassion is not shown by HMRC when looking at the circumstances when a genuine error is made. Can we ensure that that is done in those difficult circumstances for those who are most vulnerable and in need?

Jane Ellison: I have had the same experience as my hon. Friend. Only last week in a constituency surgery, I sat with a constituent who had a complex case and who was in a very difficult situation. Obviously, we can take up cases on behalf of constituents, but when constituents ring HMRC, it is important that they explain their circumstances. HMRC will make every effort to resolve the situation quickly. It is very aware of the need to get people sorted out and get money into their bank account, as appropriate, quickly, but I will re-emphasise that—as the House can imagine, I have discussed the issue in recent days. The interest in this urgent question and the points being made on both sides of the House will be seen and heard where they need to be.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): A significant number of my constituents have been left financially disadvantaged as a result of the antics and processes at Concentrix. Can the Minister assure the House that, while the priority is to resolve those cases urgently, she will look seriously into fining the company and using those resources to compensate my constituents for the financial distress they have suffered?

Jane Ellison: To reiterate what I said earlier, I will ask HMRC to advise me on the nature of the contractual arrangements. Again, it might be better if I wrote to the hon. Gentleman on that.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As a constituency MP who has dealt with a number of cases, I am pleased to note the action the Government have taken. That said, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee I have also sat through numerous reports on the quality of service HMRC provides, which is at times hardly of gold standard. What reassurance does the Minister have that, with HMRC picking up some of this work, we will not see a drop-off in the standard of services elsewhere and in future arrangements?

Jane Ellison: I do not believe that that will be the case. HMRC has been dealing with cases at the same time as Concentrix throughout the period of the contract. I have been assured that the 150 additional staff deployed with immediate effect will be focused on this. I have no reason to believe that any other services will suffer. My hon. Friend's point is well made and will be re-emphasised to HMRC.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to hear that the Concentrix contract is ending but, as the Minister said, it will still be dealing with ongoing casework. Will she personally intervene to help a constituent of mine who was plunged into £1,300 of debt through

the incompetence of Concentrix? It failed to process the annual review and refused to acknowledge any of my correspondence. Will she take up this case?

Jane Ellison: Of course. If any Member wishes to write to me, I will ask HMRC to look at it as a matter of priority. The hon. Lady may not be around tomorrow morning, but there is an opportunity, if she or any other Member wants to bring a complex case, to go to the drop-in where HMRC officials will be available. If she would like to write to me, I will of course look at the case.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I first raised this issue last January. It has taken about eight months to get to this situation. The issue, which had been going on for weeks, related to a family who did not have any income over the Christmas period. Why does it take a BBC programme to bring Ministers to the Dispatch Box? On Monday, a member of my staff was given the run-around by HMRC and Concentrix because nobody would take responsibility. My constituents have spent hours on this. To involve the private sector in such a sensitive and humane issue does not work.

Jane Ellison: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman had that difficult experience. I cannot agree with his general point about there being no role for the private sector in this regard. I refer again to the amount of money that has been saved for the taxpayer. There is a lot of error and fraud in the system, and it is important that we bear down on that. We do not want money to go to people for whom it is not appropriate, in particular in relation to the nature of people's households. Much of the fraud does rest in that area. As he highlights, this is a particularly difficult and sensitive area to investigate, but we need to continue to investigate it because the amount of fraud in the area of tax credits is considerable.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): We can all share the stories of our constituents' anguish and the frustration for our offices in dealing with this debacle, but we should remember that HMRC is itself not an innocent agent. It designed the contract. It put customer hostility and suspicion into the contract, and into the standards of performance and practice. It was, of course, HMRC that provided the names targeted by Concentrix. This has happened against a backdrop of the Government persistently running down the capacity and character of HMRC. Will some of those bigger policy misguidances also be looked at, as well as the enjoyment we are all having today in scapegoating Concentrix itself?

Jane Ellison: I return to the answer I gave a moment ago. We need to continue to bear down on fraud in the system. There is a considerable amount of error and fraud. I am afraid it would be naive to think that all of this is error. There is fraud in the system and there is a lot of error, which the original design of tax credits makes easier. We need to continue to bear down on fraud, but clearly we need to do that in a way that does not make it difficult to assist the most vulnerable.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Minister has mentioned fraud a number of times. There is obviously fraud in the system, but I really do not see that as an excuse for errors and failures that affect our constituents.

[Sue Hayman]

My constituent Sarah Hodgson has three young children and is struggling to put food on the table. There is no excuse for incompetent contractors. I am glad the Minister talks about the redeployment of HMRC staff to support people. The HMRC office in my constituency, which employs over 200 people, is due for closure. Our nearest regional office is more than two hours' drive away and the phone system is clearly not working: it is not helping people with their inquiries. Will she please review the closure of our local offices, so that people can keep the support and the face-to-face contact they need in these situations?

Jane Ellison: I am sorry to hear about the case the hon. Lady mentions on behalf of her constituent. She raises a wider issue about the modernisation project that HMRC is going through. Perhaps it would be more appropriate if she wrote to me. Although the process of modernisation means that some regional offices are closing, it is important because it is fundamentally about delivering a better and more modernised service in the future for all our constituents.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I trust there will be some compensation paid by the company for the ineptness in the way the contract has been handled and the extra costs that have been incurred. A lot of people today have talked about how wonderful it is that this is being brought in-house, but it was not so long ago that this House condemned HMRC for not answering more than half of the telephone calls made by constituents about tax matters. What steps has the Minister taken to ensure that, now that new cases will be brought in-house, there will not be the same problems with HMRC as there were with Concentrix?

Jane Ellison: It is documented that at times in the past HMRC has had problems with answering its phones, but I think that of late some of the information in the public domain is rather out of date. Indeed, performance in answering phones is considerably better and has reached a very good standard in recent weeks. It is important to retain some balance. It is worth noting that Concentrix has amended about 103,000 claims following the checks it has made. I reiterate that this has been an important exercise, but clearly it needs to be done in the right way.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I welcome the news from the Minister that Concentrix will not have its contract renewed, but in the meantime I have ongoing concerns on behalf of my constituents. There has been a lot of talk about what is unacceptable, with a focus on fraud. What we are talking about here today are errors that have been made and have caused tremendous suffering. We are not talking about occasional exceptional errors; we are talking about a widespread number of errors that are causing exceptional misery for some families. Let me just share with the House the story of one of my constituents, a single mother of four, whose tax credits were stopped in error. As a result, her claim has been closed down, her children can no longer access free school dinners, she cannot get free milk tokens for her baby, and, more importantly, she has been told that her claim cannot be reopened for 44 days. Will the Minister

assure me that she will intervene, as a matter of urgency, to make sure that this mother can continue to feed her children?

Jane Ellison: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady's constituent has had such a difficult time. Obviously, without knowing the details of the case it is very difficult to comment across the Dispatch Box. I urge her to use the resource I have referred to throughout this urgent question to take up the case. I hope it can be resolved in that way as soon as possible. I have emphasised—HMRC is very aware of this—that speed is of the essence where people have had their tax credits erroneously stopped. She is right that there is error in the system. I reiterate the point that this is a too-complex system, which is exactly why the Government are looking to make major long-term reforms. Even the honest taxpayer can easily fall into error with a system that was so complex in its design from the start.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As we sit here, families up and down the country have been required to rely on charity and food banks. To make ends meet, as a result of what can be described only as frankly ridiculous decisions made by Concentrix, our constituents find themselves in a position not of their own making. To this end and given that so many are living a day-to-day existence, will the Minister confirm just how quickly people can expect to be paid the sums to which they are rightfully entitled?

Jane Ellison: It is really important that we get the facts of the case correct and quickly. At the point that that is done—it might be during the course of just one phone call—I am assured that money should be placed into people's accounts in a matter of no more than four working days. That is what I expect to see. It is a matter of days and it certainly should not be weeks. We need to establish the facts in each instance. It is worth saying again—for the sake of the House having some sense of perspective on this issue—that last year only 1.6% of customers asked for a review of the decision, following a check. Given that a large number of people are being checked, that is quite a large number, but it would be wrong to think that this was a huge proportion of the cases in question. It is important to get things right and, as I say, we look to pay people within days—as soon as the facts of the case have been established.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister says that HMRC is supporting Concentrix in performing its contract up until it ends next year. What is the cost to the public purse of that support, and is it recoverable from Concentrix?

Jane Ellison: It has always been the case, as we would expect, that managers within HMRC have worked with Concentrix throughout. I do not anticipate that enormous additional costs will be involved. There has always been a relationship between the two because there is some overlap in the work being done. I would expect that to continue as we work towards the end of the contract.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Minister is currently engaged in crisis management, but unless she sees the bigger picture, crisis management itself is not going to be good enough. In her opening

statement, she said that Concentrix was not allowed to phish, but it clearly has been phishing. One of my constituents got a phishing letter not only saying that they were going to stop the tax credits, but demanding £10,000 in back payments. It is quite clear that investigation is needed—and soon. Any such investigation needs to look not only at the contract terms, the audit process and Concentrix's behaviour, but at what is the true resource requirement for dealing with the tax credits issues. Unless the Minister can confirm such an investigation and review, we will be back here in a couple of years' time.

Jane Ellison: HMRC has data analytics and operational experience to deliver the kind of savings we are looking for in reducing error and fraud. Practical measures such as simplifying the tax credit system, better monitoring of changes of income through real-time information and improved detection of fraud will obviously go forward. They are all important parts of making sure that we improve performance. It is worth noting again that hundreds of millions of pounds to the taxpayer have been saved by reducing error and fraud. We want to make it harder for people to make errors in the future.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): As long as I have represented them, people in the Wirral have been treated with disrespect and indignity by HMRC. This is only the worst of a long series of cases. Let me ask the Minister one simple question: when did she first meet Concentrix to raise our concerns with them?

Jane Ellison: I have been a Minister in this Department since mid-July. I have not met Concentrix because I have not been the Minister for that long. Clearly, however, my predecessor colleagues have done so. I have been working with HMRC on regular monitoring. Given the interest from colleagues of all parties in recent weeks, I have been getting daily updates from HMRC on terms of performance. In the relatively short time I have been in my post, particularly in view of the summer recess, I have not had a chance to meet Concentrix. On the hon. Lady's general point, I am sure that HMRC will be disappointed to hear it, but I am also sure that it will want to reflect on her words.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): One issue reported by my constituents is the requirement to send all the documentation by registered post, which costs over £13—money that they can ill afford when they are living on the breadline. During the eight months in which Concentrix will continue to have this contract, will the Minister look urgently at alternative methods of providing documentation?

Jane Ellison: I will certainly ask that question, but I cannot give any assurance that it will be possible to alter the situation during the time that the contract has left to run. The hon. Lady highlights an important point about where we go in the future with these sorts of systems. It further highlights the fact that the more we can make these things digital and make it easier for people to get right, the more likely we are to avoid these sorts of unhappy situations.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Financial Secretary should know that I tabled five questions on this issue on Monday, and that I am well alive to the issues that many colleagues have raised this afternoon. With 1,800 people employed by Concentrix in Belfast and with Concentrix redeveloping one location in the city, will the Financial Secretary reflect on how appalling it was that members of staff—many of them my constituents—found out about this news last night only by a tweet from the BBC rather than through any communication from Concentrix or indeed any statement to this House?

Jane Ellison: As I have said a number of times, the contract is not going to be renewed; it has not been terminated. To that extent, consideration of whether any contract is renewed will take place in the normal course of events. The hon. Gentleman provides me with an opportunity to place on record my thanks to the many Concentrix staff who are working hard at their jobs and trying to resolve problems. At the same time as we shine a light on areas where performance is unacceptable, it is really important to take the chance to reflect on the fact that many people are working hard to do their jobs as well as possible to provide a good level of service. Indeed, many people are succeeding in that regard.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I know the Minister says that she sees no need for an inquiry, but I and many colleagues in the Chamber today—and certainly many of our constituents—very much disagree with that position. My question is: how can we learn the lessons to ensure that the practices employed by Concentrix never come to light again if we do not look into the practices carried out by Concentrix through some form of investigation or inquiry?

Jane Ellison: In the normal course of events, we would always look to how things should be arranged in the future after reflecting on what we can learn from things that have already happened. That would happen through a normal process of review and consideration. We shall have to agree to differ on the issue of whether an inquiry is needed.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I have been contacted by many distressed women in my Neath constituency about how awful Concentrix really is. Some Concentrix advisers have suggested to mums, who are desperately trying to renew their tax credits, to get payday loans to feed their children while their claims are being processed. A group has been formed, called "Concentrix Mums", whose more than 5,000 members can share their horror stories. Let me provide just a couple.

Mr Speaker: No. I think one will suffice.

Christina Rees: One it is, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I fear the hon. Lady has caught what might be called "the Burnley condition".

Christina Rees: I hope not. Does it involve shoehorning? One mum had not eaten for three days so that she could feed her children. This is sickening; it should be stopped and it should have been stopped a long time ago.

[Christina Rees]

Jane Ellison: I am aware of the Facebook group that the hon. Lady mentions, and I am also aware of some of the cases that have been documented there. To end where I began, that is exactly why we are deploying additional resources to make sure that we can deal with the most difficult cases for the most vulnerable people as quickly as possible. That will be my focus and that of HMRC in the coming days.

Point of Order

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During International Development questions this morning, the Secretary of State said that she would make an announcement on future funding of the global fund at some point next week. It is true that the global fund replenishment conference will take place next week and therefore represents a hard deadline, but given the scale of taxpayers' funding that is at stake—up to £1.2 billion, hopefully—should not we in the House of Commons, representative as we are of the British taxpayer's interests, be informed before any briefings are made to the media or to other countries?

Mr Speaker: It is a matter for Ministers. Announcements can be made during recess periods, and frequently are, but if the Government know what they intend to announce, I would hope that they would be sensitive to the prior claim of Members of this House to be informed first, rather than the information being disseminated through the media or to some other less deserving source. I hope that that deals with the issue for now; I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising it.

These matters usually end up having to be announced to the House anyway. We had a case of that some days ago, when, frankly, it would have been better for an earlier statement to be made to the House on grammar schools. It was not made as early as it should have been, but when it was eventually delivered to the House, I did ensure that everyone questioned the relevant Minister, and a considerable allocation was therefore required. It is always better, really, if the Government anticipate these things in the first place, rather than waiting until later than is necessary.

BILLS PRESENTED

SMALL CHARITABLE DONATIONS AND CHILDCARE PAYMENTS

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by Secretary Karen Bradley, Mr David Gauke, Jane Ellison, Simon Kirby, Caroline Dinenage and Mr Rob Wilson, presented a Bill to make provision about the payment schemes established by the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 and the Childcare Payments Act 2014.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 68) with explanatory notes (Bill 68-EN).

HEALTH SERVICES COMMISSIONING (EQUALITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rehman Chishti presented a Bill to make provision to reduce inequalities in the health care received by people with mental illness and learning disabilities; to require commissioners of health services to make an annual report to the Secretary of State on the equality of service provision to, and the health outcomes for, such people and of their qualitative experience of health care services; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 December, and to be printed (Bill 67).

AIR QUALITY (DIESEL EMISSIONS IN URBAN CENTRES)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Mrs Margaret Ritchie, Rob Marris, Alex Cunningham, Thangam Debbonaire and Tulip Siddiq, presented a Bill to make provision about urban air quality targets relating to diesel emissions; to require vehicle emissions targets and testing to reflect on-road driving conditions; to make the removal or disablement of pollution-reducing devices in vehicles a criminal offence; to provide powers for local authorities to establish low diesel emissions zones and pedestrian-only areas and to restrict the use of roads in urban centres by diesel vehicles; to promote the development of trams, buses and taxis powered by electricity or hydrogen in urban centres for the purpose of improving air quality; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 November, and to be printed (Bill 69).

SUGAR IN FOOD AND DRINKS (TARGETS, LABELLING AND ADVERTISING)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Graham Jones, Alex Cunningham, Julie Cooper, Louise Haigh, Mark Durkan, Tommy Sheppard, Sir David Amess, Dr Philippa Whitford and Dr Julian Lewis, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to set targets for sugar content in food and drinks; to provide that added sugar content on food and drink labelling be represented in terms of the number of teaspoonfuls of sugar; to provide for standards of information provision in advertising of food and drinks; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 November, and to be printed (Bill 70).

Mr Speaker: Truly, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) will prove to be a busy bee.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I am buzzing away now.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is buzzing away now, as he helpfully and originally points out.

We now come to the ten-minute rule motion, which the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) has been so patiently waiting to move.

European Union (UK Withdrawal from Membership)

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

1.43 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a bill to implement the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from membership of the European Union; and for connected purposes.

The House knows that the position of the Government is very clear. Brexit means Brexit, and we will make a success of it; also, Brexit means Brexit, and we need to get on with it. I think it important for us to understand, agree with, and endorse the position that article 50 is a matter for the Prime Minister alone. She has the mandate of the masses, given to her—or to the Prime Minister, and the Government—on 23 June, and it is right for her to invoke it. I believe that the sooner she invokes it the better, so that we have the security, the stability and the certainty that we need as we seek to build a post-Brexit Britain.

I am introducing the Bill first to give the House an opportunity to endorse and accept the decision of the British people on 23 June; secondly, to talk about the red lines that the British people clearly identify in terms of what Brexit will look like; and, thirdly, to talk about the vision that we can have for the post-Brexit Britain that we will build.

First, let me deal with the issue of where Members of Parliament stood when it came to the referendum. As the House knows, I was very concerned about the border between Calais and Dover: I did not want it to move back from Calais to Dover. The British people did not share my concerns, and I am here today to say that that is their decision, and we must endorse it.

This is an opportunity, in particular, for the Labour party to reject the talk of the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), who says that we should have a second referendum to drag the British people back into the European Union. It is an opportunity for the Labour party to say, “We accept and we will submit to the will of the British people, and we will help to make Brexit a success.” I also say to members of the Scottish National party, who do not seem to like the result of any referendum that is held in these isles, “Do not be the Scottish Neverendum party.” I ask them first to accept the decision of the Scottish people, by an overwhelming majority and with an overwhelming turnout, to remain part of the United Kingdom, and, secondly to accept the decision of the British people as a whole that this country, this nation, this United Kingdom, should seek a future outside the European Union. I say to them that it would be wrong to think that “If at first you don’t succeed, vote, vote again” should be their motto. That would be the wrong approach.

Let me now deal with the red lines. It is clear that the British people are deeply concerned about the level of uncontrolled EU immigration. They were told, and it was pledged in manifestos, that net migration would be brought down to tens of thousands, but last year the figure was 330,000. People in Dover tell me regularly that they are very concerned about the downward pressure that that exerts on their wages, and their concern has

[Charlie Elphicke]

been underlined and proved right by important research conducted by the Resolution Foundation which shows that, on average, the mass migration that we have experienced has caused wages to be about £450 lower for the hard-working classes of Britain. According to the foundation, if we did succeed in bringing migration down to tens of thousands, they would have a pay rise. Work by the OECD, published in 2014, emphasises that mass migration does not benefit, and has not benefited, the people of Britain or those in the rest of the world. It does not have an economic good, and it does not work for the British people in their daily lives. That red line is crystal clear: we must end uncontrolled EU immigration.

The second red line—which was confirmed by Lord Ashcroft's recently published poll—is also very clear. People do not want billions for Brussels: that has to end. We cannot have any kind of Brexit deal that includes the handing over of billions to Brussels. Instead, the money should be spent here at home, and invested in Britain. My constituents say that we need a renaissance for the towns and regions of Britain, and we need to use that money wisely—which brings me to my final and most important point.

What is the post-Brexit Britain that we are going to build? What will this country look like? My constituents say to me, "It always seems to be about investing in HS2, or runways at Heathrow, or £4.7 billion for Crossrail. It always seems to be about benefiting London, or benefiting the jet-set elite. What about us in Dover? Why has the A2 not been dualled? We have been waiting for that project for decades." Every single region in the country will be able to specify an infrastructure project for which it has been waiting for a long time, while things always seem to work for the jet-set elite and the metropolitan populace in London rather than for other towns and regions. We need a rebalancing for the 90% who live in the towns and regions of this nation, rather than the other 10%. It is time that Britain worked for everyone. It is time that public expenditure worked for everyone as well. London receives about £10,000 of public expenditure per head, while the figure for the south-east is less than £8,000. That is a difference of some 26%. My constituents say, "The allocation of resources in this country is not fair. When we get this money back from Brussels, there will be an opportunity to make it fairer."

It comes down to this question: who does Britain work for? Who do my constituents, and the constituents of the towns and regions of this nation, feel that Britain works for? They feel that it too often works for the Philip Greens of this world, for the privileged few rather than the hard-working-class kids of Dover and Deal and Doncaster and Darlington, and they think that that needs to change. First, big business needs a change of culture. We all know how Apple has been gaming the tax system and paying hardly any tax in this country: it is a bad Apple. We also know that Amazon has a Luxembourg structure. We should look closely at its books, and I hope that HMRC will do so. On Google, we need to make sure that the Public Accounts Committee is supported in its searching, and make sure that Google pays a fair share of tax in this country. When it comes to car rental businesses like Avis, it just shows that we are being taken for a ride when, the other

day, it imposed a Brexit tax on Britons but is not paying any corporation tax to Britain because it has a Luxembourg structure. It is that kind of thing that drives the people of Dover and Deal round the bend and we need to call a stop to it. We can do that when we leave the EU very simply, because we will not be struck by its anti-discrimination rules that make it so hard for us to secure our tax base.

We need to make sure that Britain works for the people as a whole, rather than have the bloated boardroom bonuses we have seen too much of in recent years. The ground-breaking research of my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp) recently showed that pay in the boardroom for chief executives is 150 times that of employees of FTSE 100 companies. That is not right, and that has doubled in the last 12 years. When a shareholder vote rejects that, companies like BP just say, "Well, we're not accountable to you; we'll do what we like." That culture needs to change.

We need to have a country that works for everyone, not just the privileged few. It is important that we make sure that we have more investment for the regions—that we have runways in places like Bristol and Birmingham and Manchester and that we have railways and roads that work for everyone in the regions. It is important that we have bigger investment.

Finally, I simply say that Brexit means Brexit. We are going to make a success of it, but it is also an opportunity to change how we run Britain, to change our national way of life and who our country works for and make sure it works for literally everyone, rather than just the privileged few, which is how people have felt for too long. That is the kind of change we can make.

It was the towns and regions of this country that decided to take us out of the EU, and they should be supported in leading the charge for the kind of future we can build as we head out into the single market of the world.

1.52 pm

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I want to decline the right of the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) to bring in his Bill. He said that we in Scotland, the Scottish National party in particular, should respect the decision and the outcome of the referendum. I very much respect the decision of those nations who voted to leave the EU; I would simply say to my friend from Dover that perhaps he and his colleagues should respect the wishes of those nations who voted to remain in the EU.

It is always sweet to be chided by the hon. Gentleman, who railed against the jet-set elite and talked about the imbalance in boardroom pay. We do not need to leave the EU and destroy our trade opportunities to tackle the imbalance in boardroom pay. He talked about the imbalance in public spending, and he was right to do so; indeed, other parts of the country—the east of England, the north-west of England—get even less than the south-east gets, such is the imbalance. But we do not need to leave the EU and weaken job opportunities and export opportunities to rebalance public spending throughout the English regions. If only we had an English Parliament to deal with these things, then things would be so much better. The hon. Gentleman spoke about corporate tax and how little is paid by some of the Goliaths of the global corporate world. We do not

need to leave the EU and weaken opportunity further in order to deliver fairness in corporate taxation.

In essence, though, the hon. Gentleman made a pitch to leave now because, he said, “Brexit means Brexit” and we will “make a success of it”; I think I am quoting accurately. The problem, and the reason why no one can support this ten-minute rule Bill, is that when the Prime Minister—the leader of Government, the high yin of the Tory party—is asked, “If Brexit means Brexit, does it mean we will be staying in the single market?”, she does not know. When she was asked the most straightforward question earlier today—“Will the passporting in place for financial services be maintained?”—she said “I refer you to the answer I gave last week,” which is, “I don’t actually know.”

So on the basis that “Brexit means Brexit” is no more than a meaningless campaigning expression, and that none of the benefits described by the hon. Gentleman in terms of Brexit—tackling corporate pay and corporate taxation, tackling the imbalance in regional public expenditure in England—will in any way, shape or form be addressed, let alone improved, by Brexit, I fear we are going to have to call against the hon. Gentleman’s valiant attempts to drag the whole of the UK, including those parts who voted to stay in, out of the EU before there is even a plan.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 50, Noes 179.

Division No. 65]

[1.55 pm

AYES

Blackman, Bob	Mercer, Johnny
Bone, Mr Peter	Metcalfe, Stephen
Borwick, Victoria	Mills, Nigel
Cash, Sir William	Nuttall, Mr David
Davies, Chris	Offord, Dr Matthew
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Redwood, rh John
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Dorries, Nadine	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Duddridge, James	Robinson, Gavin
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Shannon, Jim
Elliott, Tom	Simpson, David
Elphicke, Charlie	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Fysh, Marcus	Smith, Royston
Goldsmith, Zac	Stringer, Graham
Henderson, Gordon	Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Hoey, Kate	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Tomlinson, Michael
Howarth, Sir Gerald	Turner, Mr Andrew
Jenkyns, Andrea	Vickers, Martin
Knight, rh Sir Greg	Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Leigh, Sir Edward	Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Lewis, rh Dr Julian	Wiggin, Bill
Lilley, rh Mr Peter	Wilson, Sammy
Lopresti, Jack	
Main, Mrs Anne	
Mann, John	
McCartney, Jason	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Ian Paisley and
Craig Mackinlay

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Betts, Mr Clive
Abrahams, Debbie	Blackford, Ian
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	Blackman, Kirsty
Alexander, Heidi	Blomfield, Paul
Anderson, Mr David	Boswell, Philip
Arkless, Richard	Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Brennan, Kevin

Brock, Deidre	Huq, Dr Rupa
Brown, Alan	Hussain, Imran
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Johnson, rh Alan
Bryant, Chris	Johnson, Diana
Buck, Ms Karen	Jones, Gerald
Burden, Richard	Jones, Graham
Burgon, Richard	Jones, Helen
Burnham, rh Andy	Jones, Susan Elan
Cadbury, Ruth	Keeley, Barbara
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Lavery, Ian
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Law, Chris
Champion, Sarah	Lefroy, Jeremy
Chapman, Douglas	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Chapman, Jenny	Lewis, Clive
Cherry, Joanna	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Cooper, Julie	Lucas, Caroline
Cowan, Ronnie	Lynch, Holly
Coyle, Neil	Malhotra, Seema
Crawley, Angela	Maskell, Rachael
Creagh, Mary	McCabe, Steve
Creasy, Stella	McCaig, Callum
Cummins, Judith	McCarthy, Kerry
Cunningham, Alex	McDonald, Andy
Dakin, Nic	McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
Danczuk, Simon	McDonald, Stuart C.
David, Wayne	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
Day, Martyn	McInnes, Liz
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	McKinnell, Catherine
Donaldson, Stuart Blair	McLaughlin, Anne
Doughty, Stephen	McMahon, Jim
Dowd, Peter	Meale, Sir Alan
Dromey, Jack	Mearns, Ian
Durkan, Mark	Miliband, rh Edward
Eagle, Ms Angela	Monaghan, Carol
Edwards, Jonathan	Monaghan, Dr Paul
Elliott, Julie	Morris, Grahame M.
Ellman, Mrs Louise	Mullin, Roger
Elmore, Chris	Murray, Ian
Esterson, Bill	Nandy, Lisa
Farrelly, Paul	Nicolson, John
Fellows, Marion	Onn, Melanie
Ferrier, Margaret	Onwurah, Chi
Fitzpatrick, Jim	Osamor, Kate
Flint, rh Caroline	Owen, Albert
Flynn, Paul	Paterson, Steven
Fovargue, Yvonne	Pearce, Teresa
Foxcroft, Vicky	Pennycook, Matthew
Furniss, Gill	Perkins, Toby
Gapes, Mike	Phillips, Jess
Gardiner, Barry	Phillipson, Bridget
Gethins, Stephen	Pound, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia	Qureshi, Yasmin
Glass, Pat	Rayner, Angela
Glendon, Mary	Reed, Mr Jamie
Grady, Patrick	Rees, Christina
Grant, Peter	Reynolds, Jonathan
Green, Kate	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Greenwood, Lilian	Robertson, rh Angus
Greenwood, Margaret	Salmond, rh Alex
Gwynne, Andrew	Saville Roberts, Liz
Haigh, Louise	Shah, Naz
Hanson, rh Mr David	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Sheppard, Tommy
Hayes, Helen	Sherriff, Paula
Hayman, Sue	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Hendrick, Mr Mark	Siddiq, Tulip
Hendry, Drew	Slaughter, Andy
Hermon, Lady	Smeeth, Ruth
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Smith, Angela
Hollern, Kate	Smith, Cat
Hosie, Stewart	Starmer, Keir
Howarth, rh Mr George	Stephens, Chris

Stevens, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Turley, Anna
Twigg, Stephen
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom

Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Jessica Morden and
Jeff Smith

Question accordingly negatived.

Social Security

2.6 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): I beg to move,

That the draft Welfare Reform and Work (Northern Ireland) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 6 July, be approved.

The order will ensure that the welfare reforms enabled by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 in Great Britain are delivered in Northern Ireland while also ensuring that the Northern Ireland Executive have a workable budget. This order is an important part of delivering the “Fresh Start” agreement and will enable the Northern Ireland Executive to provide for supplementary welfare payments from within their own budget. Before the “Fresh Start” agreement, the impasse on agreeing the implementation of welfare reform meant that the Northern Ireland Executive had been operating on an unworkable budget. This had created significant political instability and it risked collapsing the devolution settlement.

This order today brings changes that will help to ensure that the budget of the Northern Ireland Executive is placed on a stable footing. We want to work with the Executive to support a Northern Ireland where politics works—a Northern Ireland with a stronger economy and a stronger, secure and united society. It is in the light of these goals that the Government have agreed to legislate on behalf of the Executive to enable the welfare reform changes in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 to be implemented. Those changes include the introduction of universal credit, personal independence payments and the benefit cap. This formed an integral part of the “Fresh Start” agreement in November last year.

The Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order passed in December last year has enabled the making of more than 30 sets of regulations replicating in Northern Ireland the welfare reforms in the 2012 Act. The order before the House today is the next step in that process. It has been drafted with the full consent and collaboration of the Northern Ireland Executive to bring social security in Northern Ireland back to a position of parity, thereby helping to rebalance and strengthen the finances of the Executive.

Across the UK, our welfare reforms have focused on supporting people to find and keep work. They have focused on employment, fairness and affordability while supporting the vulnerable. Over the past six years, we have stuck to our economic plan, delivered welfare reform and seen great progress, with employment up 2.7 million. Broadening life chances is a central part of this Government’s plans. In Northern Ireland, the raising of tax thresholds will take 110,000 of the lowest paid people out of income tax altogether, and 700,000 people will benefit from reduced taxes. Also, 100,000 people in Northern Ireland are projected to benefit from the national living wage by 2020. The Government’s support for working people goes hand in hand with the welfare reform programme to encourage people into work.

We have also invested in Northern Ireland. The Stormont House and “Fresh Start” agreements included financial packages of £2.5 billion to support investment and reform. This includes £350 million of additional capital borrowing explicitly for economic development projects.

By working together, the Government and the Executive have achieved significant successes, including bringing £60 million of additional finance to Northern Ireland businesses, providing additional borrowing for shared education projects and boosting green investment by £70 million.

In Northern Ireland, 55,000 more people are in employment than in 2010, but there is much more still to be done. The most recent Northern Ireland unemployment rate of 5.6% is above the overall UK average of 4.9%. The percentage of unemployed people who have been out of work for more than a year is 47.8%—markedly higher than the UK average of 27%. Some 22% of working-age households in Northern Ireland are workless compared with 15% in the UK as a whole.

The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 built on the 2012 reforms, and this order provides the legislative framework to replicate some of its most important aspects, including changes such as improving fairness in the welfare system by changing the level of the benefit the cap. The order will ensure parity by bringing the cap that exists in Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Changes also include providing new funding for additional support to help employment and support allowance and universal credit claimants with health conditions and disabilities into work and removing the ESA work-related activity component, so that the right support and incentives are in place for those who are able to take steps back to work. The unsustainable rise in benefit levels compared with earnings will be corrected by freezing most working-age benefits. Importantly, the changes will help to ensure that the budget of the Northern Ireland Executive is placed on a stable footing.

It was agreed in the “Fresh Start” agreement that the Executive could supplement benefits from within their own budget. The agreement allocated up to £585 million of the Executive’s block grant over four years to provide for supplementary welfare payments in Northern Ireland, and that will be reviewed in three years. Under the 2015 order, the Assembly has already passed some regulations for supplementary welfare payments relating to the 2012 reforms. The provisions of this order will give the Assembly the ability to design and pass further such regulations, including supplementary payments to those affected by the removal of the spare room subsidy. These time-limited payments follow the recommendations of the Evason report, which flowed from a commitment in the “Fresh Start” agreement.

The order is about delivering the “Fresh Start” agreement and returning Northern Ireland to a position of legislative parity and financial stability, and I commend it to the House.

2.13 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for bringing this order to the House, but it is a shame that the matter could not have been resolved in Northern Ireland. The order is the result of months of negotiations and an attempt to break budgetary deadlock and avoid the potential collapse of the Stormont institutions. I and many hon. Members were glad to see a deal reached and credit the work of all those involved: the parties in Northern Ireland, the Irish Government and many Members of this House.

I have been involved in Northern Ireland affairs for almost 30 years—within the trade union movement, as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and latterly as a vice-chair of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. In the union work in which I was involved in the 1990s, when we worked hard to deliver the peace process, we coined the phrase, “We are a non-partisan agent for change.” It is that phrase that has guided my work inside and outside this House, and it is with that attitude that I want to address the matter before us today.

The Labour party takes great pride in the role it played in bringing about peace in Northern Ireland, working with good people on the ground and around the world on the Good Friday agreement, the “Fresh Start” agreement and much in between. We have always worked in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland. What is paramount today is ongoing peace and stability in Northern Ireland, and Labour will work with the Government and all interested parties both in this House and in Northern Ireland on maintaining it. I am sure that that sentiment will be echoed by Members in the House today.

The “Fresh Start” agreement included legislative consent from the Northern Ireland Assembly to allow Parliament to enact legislation on its behalf. I respect the legitimacy of the Assembly to do that, but I am sad that it had to. Today’s order seeks to extend, among other measures, the welfare reform Acts of 2012 and 2016 to Northern Ireland. The Government’s welfare reform programme has devastated the lives of far too many vulnerable people across Great Britain, plunging them into financial distress. In the hour before this debate, we heard about the tax credit fiasco. Real people are suffering as a result of measures brought in by this Government over the past six years. I and many other Members from across the country see the effects of the cuts in our constituency surgeries.

This legislation is in the interests of ongoing stability in Northern Ireland, so we will not stand in its way, but the Labour party will never stop showing its ongoing opposition to the Tory austerity agenda, which we have consistently railed against in this House over recent years. We have opposed cuts to tax credits that hit families in the pocket, changes to ESA that hurt those suffering from disease and injury, a benefits caps that does not rise with inflation, cuts to council tax credits, and cuts to crisis loans. We must also never forget that 42% of those deemed fit for work by Atos were actually declared unfit on appeal—a damning indictment of the Conservative party. I could go on and on.

Welfare reform was intended by this Government to impact hard on the UK’s most vulnerable people and to force them to work when they are not well equipped to do so. The desire to inflict on the people of Northern Ireland the same disastrous policy that has blighted the lives of so many of our constituents right across Great Britain is a desperate tactic from a Government more concerned with ideology than compassion. The use of austerity as a weapon of policy was and still is a crude and blunt instrument. The role of austerity in the now hardly mentioned long-term economic plan will be the epitaph of our dear departed friend from Witney and his sidekick from Tatton. Saying “We will make work pay” rings hollow for those forced to look for work while struggling with long-term illness, injury or disease.

[Mr David Anderson]

The truth is that this Government want to make it impossible for anyone to survive on benefits, which is hugely unfair to those struggling from day to day through no fault of their own.

There may be some who say that the changes should apply to Northern Ireland because they apply across the rest of Great Britain, but, to put it simply, two wrongs do not make a right. The Conservative party clearly believes in the equalisation of misery. Labour believes in the alleviation of misery. When we get back into power, we will not be attacking the sick, the young, the elderly and the disabled or calling them scroungers and skivers. We will not be declaring war on anyone whose curtains are not open by a specific time every day. We will not be making the poor pay for the failings of the rich and those who dabble in money markets. It is interesting that the “Fresh Start” agreement includes measures to mitigate the ongoing austerity regime. While I welcome such measures, does that not show that these changes should not be made in the first place? It is accepted that problems are going to be piled on people who do not deserve them.

We have been advised that the cuts will take £750 million out of the Northern Ireland economy and that the loss per working age adult, at £650 per year, is 38% higher than the UK average. In Northern Ireland, it was recently announced that the Michelin factory in Ballymena will close, resulting in the loss of 860 jobs, that another 250 jobs will be cut in the Caterpillar factory in Newtownabbey and that there will be job losses at Bombardier. Those men and women will find less support than ever and this order will do nothing but compound their difficulties as they try to find their way through the world of unemployment.

As the Minister mentioned, Northern Ireland has some of the highest levels of long-term unemployment in the United Kingdom. Almost one in 10 adults of working age is in receipt of disability living allowance—almost twice the national average—and so will be hit more than those in other parts of the UK. Belfast will be damaged most by the reforms. Poverty is a genuine everyday reality for many in Northern Ireland, and the reforms will serve no purpose other than to compound such difficulties. The cuts will hurt the vulnerable. They hit the disabled, families and children and Labour cannot be complicit in that.

We have to accept that despite the huge opposition to these so called reforms, they have been enforced on the people of Great Britain. But that does not make them any more palatable and it does not give any more reason also to force the changes on the people of Northern Ireland. We have to accept the very real circumstances of its history and of the current difficulties the people of Northern Ireland face. According to figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, since 1998 more people have taken their own life in Northern Ireland than died throughout the troubles, with research showing that during the recession those figures increased. The suicide rate in Northern Ireland is 70% higher than the UK average. Forcing the vulnerable in society further into despair will do nothing to defeat this problem.

We support any work aimed at maintaining the long-term stability of the institutions in Northern Ireland, as those of us who remember the days of direct rule can attest; we will say how important it is to make sure that

these institutions not only carry on, but flourish and improve. On that basis, we will not oppose this order today, but that should in no way be taken as our condoning what is being done by this Government to the people of Northern Ireland.

2.20 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) for outlining the position on welfare reform and the fact that it can be so pernicious in bringing about bad impacts on people already on a low income. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment is here today, as he has previously been in the Treasury. He has outlined this supplementary legislation.

My party has always been clear about our position, which is on the record both in this Chamber and in the Northern Ireland Assembly: legislation dealing with welfare reform should have been dealt with in the Assembly, as originally envisaged. Westminster's interference in our devolved welfare arrangements was inappropriate, as were the subsequent fines. As a former Minister for Social Development in Northern Ireland for three years, I recall bringing forward “karaoke” legislation on welfare issues. Why should it have been different this time?

The Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin voted through the legislative consent motion in the Assembly to hand our welfare powers over to Westminster. Indeed, far from its original promises that no claimant would be worse off, Sinn Féin handed our welfare powers over to London to carry out its dirty work, while its Members do not even take their seats in this Chamber. The essence of devolution is to improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland, and devolution is damaged if the two largest parties in the Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive pick and choose which powers they have and when they have them. People in Northern Ireland must be able to have confidence that the political institutions upon which we agreed in the referendum in May 1998, and the people and politicians involved, are serious about the powers they have and will fiercely defend any attempts to reduce them.

This legislation should have been a matter for the devolved Assembly, which should have resisted the Treasury's interference and taxes on our devolved budget. Instead, the DUP and Sinn Féin were delighted to have the powers taken off their hands for some 13 months. My party made numerous attempts to build consensus on welfare reform as far back as 2010, both in the Assembly and in this House through my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan). He made those attempts when the original Welfare Reform Bill was going through the House—even before the issue came to the Assembly.

The Social Democratic and Labour party was always realistic about the implications of welfare reform and made the case for mitigation that was sustainable and would be included in the devolved budget. I can well recall a meeting we had with Lord Freud, then a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions, where we outlined specific measures that would help to mitigate the impact of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. Surprisingly—or perhaps not so surprisingly—those mitigation measures areas were eventually to come about. We divided on the Bill last year and on the order when it came to this House in 2015.

I would welcome clarification from the Minister on another matter that is directly related to this order. My hon. Friend the Member for Foyle raised it last week. Clause 9 of the Finance Bill provides for the Treasury to ensure that

“no liability to income tax arises on supplementary welfare payments of a specified description”.

But it also makes provision for the Treasury to make regulations to

“impose a charge to income tax under Part 10 of ITEPA 2003 on payments of a specified description.”

The SDLP has been at the forefront of securing mitigating powers for the Assembly to enable it to make supplementary payments. Can the Minister confirm today that the clause does not give the Treasury the green light to interfere in decisions by the Executive and the Assembly on supplementary payments by dictating that those payments could be subject to a tax clawback? As he knows, such top-up welfare payments will be made from the Executive's own devolved budget and will not come under annually managed expenditure, which is the usual route for the payment of benefits throughout Northern Ireland. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury confirmed last week that the clause will not allow that. Can the Minister for Employment reconfirm that position?

As I said, the SDLP has worked to secure mitigation, and the passing of this order will be necessary to release the moneys for mitigation measures or supplementary payments, which we do not want to obstruct. For that reason, we will not push the House to a vain Division on the order today—I am sure some people will be pleased about that. Notwithstanding that, it is important to remember that welfare reform, and particularly the legislation upon which this order is based, will introduce pernicious measures into Northern Ireland and will have an impact on those with low income who are reliant on benefit. I fear that it could push people further into poverty. It is therefore incumbent on the Government to ensure that people are protected and that there is some form of cushion for them. I respect the fact that the mitigation measures will ensure that there is, but the Government must consider other measures to ensure that people can live decent lives.

Earlier today, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) initiated a debate on social fund funeral payments. The SDLP participated in that debate, because there is a feeling that those payments have been capped for several years and there has been no corresponding increase when the costs have exceeded the bounds of many people's income. The Minister responding to that debate did not give us a helpful response about future DWP or Treasury measures to increase such payments. When we discuss welfare matters in relation to Northern Ireland, it is important that we take into account the special circumstances of the many people, particularly in urban areas, who find themselves unemployed, perhaps through no fault of their own, and are in receipt of benefits. They must have a financial cushion and protection in order to live their life without any detriment.

2.29 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The fact that this order has been brought before the House today indicates the radical steps that had to be taken to rescue

the Northern Ireland Assembly from financial and political collapse. Let us be in no doubt about this: the Northern Ireland Assembly faced collapse because of the attitude of those who, despite all the protestations that legislation on matters devolved to Northern Ireland should be dealt with by the Northern Ireland Assembly, took a totally irresponsible view and blocked the Assembly's ability to make decisions. That plunged the Assembly into financial crisis.

It is less than a year since the welfare reform legislation went through the House of Commons. Although the matter had been devolved to Northern Ireland, it was always assumed that the legislation passed in this place would be reflected in the legislation passed in Northern Ireland. The bill was being paid through the AME payments that came to the Northern Ireland economy—in other words, it was money that was paid on demand. If unemployment went up, we did not have to find the money from the block grant; it came centrally from the Exchequer. If there was a change in the number of claimants for a benefit, the money was automatically made available.

Of course, there was opposition to some of the welfare reform measures—indeed, my party voted against a number of them—but once they had been through the House of Commons the stark choice for the Assembly was between deviating from those measures and paying for the deviation, and complying with them and ensuring that payments to the Northern Ireland expenditure block continued. There were some who, because of their minority position in the Assembly—the SDLP led the charge—wanted to have it both ways. They wanted to ensure that the budget in Northern Ireland was not put into jeopardy, but at the same time, like Pontius Pilate, they wanted to wash their hands of what was happening and say, “By the way, the consequences of welfare reform are nothing to do with us, because we voted against it. It was all those other parties that voted it through.” That was the position that we faced because of the political structures in Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) suggested that attempts were made to reach consensus with other parties in Northern Ireland. Can my hon. Friend recall any proposal that was made to build consensus and overcome the significant hurdle that he has just outlined, which was that we could either deviate from the welfare reform measures or follow them?

Sammy Wilson: That was the problem. In his short intervention, my hon. Friend did not have the opportunity to explain what happened. We were not delighted that the powers were taken away from us, but because of the use of the petition of concern by the SDLP and others, the ability to bring legislation forward was blocked. We then faced a situation in which we could not bring forward our own bespoke Northern Ireland legislation because of the block.

Ms Ritchie *rose*—

Sammy Wilson: I will give way in a moment, but let me just explain this, because it is important. Rather than being delighted that Westminster had taken responsibility, our party worked frantically to try to find ways of ensuring that the worst aspects of welfare reform—the ones that we believed were the most damaging and that, for structural reasons, could not be introduced

[Sammy Wilson]

in Northern Ireland—were dealt with by taking money from other priority areas. We used that money to alleviate some of the difficulties. That was blocked—stopped dead in its tracks—by the SDLP's use of the petition of concern. We worked our socks off to try to get a bespoke arrangement for Northern Ireland, which could be agreed to by all of the parties and would therefore have some kind of democratic authority, but it was impossible to do that because of the actions of the SDLP. It protested that it wanted the legislation dealt with in Northern Ireland, but did its darnedest to ensure that it could not be dealt with in Northern Ireland and that it had to be dealt with here.

Ms Ritchie: Let me refresh the hon. Gentleman's memory, as I fear that he and his colleagues may have forgotten what actually happened. My colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly proposed an all-party Committee as far back—[*Interruption.*] It is not flannel. It was proposed as far back as March and April 2011 to address this issue. We wanted to achieve all-party consensus so that we could go forward to the Treasury here in London as a united team to achieve the best possible deal for the people of Northern Ireland.

Sammy Wilson: I was the Finance Minister in Northern Ireland at the time, and I can remember those discussions. There was a whole list of demands. Basically, it was demanded that we should not introduce any of the welfare reform proposals and that we should just go ahead as usual. The important question was who was going to pay for it. There was a naive belief that if all the parties in Northern Ireland came to Ministers here in London, with the great and the good from Northern Ireland on their coat-tails, and pleaded a special case, we would somehow be exempt from the welfare changes that were being made in all other parts of the United Kingdom. That was the cunning plan. I am afraid that even those who were sympathetic to the SDLP's point of view knew that nothing would come from it. Indeed, Baldrick could not have devised a more stupid plan had he sought to do so.

There is no point in saying that the SDLP tried to find ways of changing this; the only suggestion was that we should oppose the changes and say that we therefore did not want them for Northern Ireland. The more realistic position, and the one now reflected in the order, was to say that we should look at what resources were available, look at the most damaging aspects of the legislation and see whether we could find, within our own resources, the ability to mitigate some of them.

Over the term of this Assembly, we will find from our own resources—that means reducing the priority in some areas—a way to protect the most vulnerable. We will mitigate the measures by, for example, not enacting the spare room subsidy, or by compensating people for it. We may also use the work allowance and a range of other things. We will find half a billion pounds over the lifetime of the current Assembly to alleviate some of the impacts of the welfare reform changes, and those are reflected in the legislation that is before the House today.

It is a great pity that there was not the maturity to have those changes made through legislation that was debated and passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

At the “Fresh Start” talks this time last year, or just later, it was agreed that, rather than going through the process of trying to force this issue through the Assembly when we knew the blocking mechanism would be employed again by the SDLP and some of its allies, it would have to be dealt with here in the House of Commons, and that is the position we are in today.

Let me just emphasise a number of points. First, there are welfare changes that we supported here in the House of Commons because we believed that welfare did need reform. Secondly, we believe that any welfare system ought not to be designed in a way to dissuade people from wanting to look for work—that is important. Therefore, we did support some of the changes, even in the debates here in the House of Commons. Thirdly, there were things that we did not support, but once they got through the House of Commons, and we knew we could not afford them in Northern Ireland, we accepted that they should be part of the legislation. Fourthly, there were things that we believed we could change and that we could find the money to change, with bespoke legislation for Northern Ireland, and those things are reflected in the proposal before us.

The last point is, of course, that this will all be devolved back to Northern Ireland at the end of this year. I trust that we will have learned from the debacle that brought the Assembly and politics into disrepute, and that we will learn that sometimes, there are hard choices to be made and that we should at least be prepared to face up to those hard choices and find ways of dealing with the consequences of legislation that comes from this place.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): Will the hon. Gentleman not honestly accept that, really, the whole debacle was more about him and his party not wanting to troop through the Lobby in a love-in with Sinn Féin to inflict poverty on people in Northern Ireland?

Sammy Wilson: This is the amazing thing: I know there are all these attempts to rewrite history, but it was a DUP Minister who actually brought the legislation to the Assembly—who was prepared to walk through the Lobby and to vote for it. However, because a petition of concern was introduced by the SDLP, even if a majority of Members in the Assembly had voted for the legislation, it would still not have become law. Once that petition of concern was triggered and the legislation was turned down, we could not have any welfare reform Bill. That is the truth of the matter—not that we ran away. We faced up to things. I can remember doing interview after interview where we even faced flak from people who said, “You’re going to hurt individuals because of part of this legislation.” We argued, “At least we’ve done something to mitigate it. We have got the best possible deal.”

Can I just say that we did get changes and allowances made by the Department for Work and Pensions? I want to give credit to Ministers in the Department. When we were negotiating on welfare reform, they accepted that Northern Ireland could make changes, albeit that we had to accept the financial consequences of those changes. However, flexibility was demonstrated by the Department, although it was rejected by those who wanted simply to be able to say, “We are purer than everyone else on this issue. We have stood on our principles”—regardless of the consequences of that.

We have the legislation that we have today. Those who are most vulnerable in Northern Ireland have been safeguarded by the changes that have been made and by the resources that have been devoted to this issue by the Northern Ireland Assembly, and that has been a painful choice, because, of course, it means that there is less money to spend on other things.

Ms Ritchie: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady had plenty of opportunity to make her point during the debate, and I have allowed three or four interventions already—I know she is struggling with the case that she has and with the embarrassment of the way in which the SDLP has handled this issue.

We now have this order. I recommend it to the House—it is the best deal we could possibly have got. Unfortunately, it would have been far, far better had it gone through the Assembly, but because of the Assembly's structures and the ability of minority parties to obstruct legislation through a petition of concern, this measure was the only avenue by which we could ensure that the Assembly finances were protected and that the political process in Northern Ireland was able to continue.

2.45 pm

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I may come later in my short speech to a few of the points that the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) raised. First, however, on the detail of the legislation, I want to make it clear that the Ulster Unionist party supports the benefit cap, for example, because it is important that we keep people in work. People are better off in work than totally relying on benefits, so we do support a raft of these issues.

We are still concerned that the split cap level between London, where it is £23,000, and the rest of the UK, where it is £20,000, represents the most significant non-conformity in the UK's social security system. It will need to be watched closely, and the issue is obviously with the reserved Government here at the moment. Clearly, that is where the watching brief must be, and I am sure that the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive will also make representations here.

It had originally been planned to introduce universal credit in Northern Ireland from 2017, but that has now moved to the autumn because the development work on the Northern Ireland changes to the universal credit information and communications technology system has been delayed. The deadline still remains June 2018. As such, the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland has now found itself with the unenviable task of trying to implement one of the biggest shake-ups in a generation over less than 12 months, but I am sure it will manage that with the help of others.

We still do not support the abolition of the work-related activity component of employment and support allowance for new claimants from April 2017. However, the debate has been held, and the Government have not taken that on board, so we must progress with what we have. We must now move on to identify all the additional support and help that claimants need to help them return to work.

On a more principled issue, there is huge frustration that, first, this measure has had to come back here to be implemented and, secondly, that it has taken so long, at

a huge cost to organisations such as the health service and the education service, where there have been delays after delays. A lot of this has just been grandstanding. I fully accept the point that some people just did not want to vote for this in the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. Let us be blunt about it: Sinn Féin was the biggest proponent of that, assisted to some extent by the SDLP. The reality is that this issue could have been resolved many months—in fact, years—ago. The delays have been at a huge cost to the people of Northern Ireland—the ordinary people who needed that health care and that education.

I support the continuance of this measure. There are some changes that I would have liked to see that did not happen, but we are where we are, so I support the progression of this measure. Clearly, however, we cannot get into another mess like the one we have been in for the last couple of years; otherwise, the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly will be back to a very difficult position and, once again, to stalemate.

2.48 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Tom Elliott). I want to support what my hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) said very powerfully about why we are here today debating this statutory instrument. It is important to emphasise that this is not a situation that we on these Benches wanted to see. We want to see the Northern Ireland Assembly legislate in those areas that are devolved, although it should be noted that the Scottish Parliament, with the extensive powers it has, does not have responsibility for welfare. This is an area where Northern Ireland took responsibility, and those who negotiated the 1998 Belfast agreement decided it would be a good idea to devolve welfare to Northern Ireland, with the massive cost that comes with that, although the vast bulk of it, as my hon. Friend said, comes from direct payments and not out of the Northern Ireland block grant. As a former social development Minister back when devolution began in 1999, I remind the House that the understanding was that there should be parity, because if we deviated from that, then Northern Ireland would have to pay for it out of the block grant. Areas such as hospital spending, education, the environment and housing would all have to suffer cuts to pay for any deviation.

This comes to the crux of the arguments that took place in the Northern Ireland Assembly in recent times. People in certain parties—notably the SDLP, and at times Sinn Féin and others—would say, “Let’s deviate, let’s do our own thing—we’re not accepting these welfare cuts.” Their proposal to try to get something for Northern Ireland was to say, “Let’s set up a committee, go and knock on the door of the Treasury, and demand that Northern Ireland receives hundreds of millions of pounds extra,” which was never going to happen.

Had this measure not been introduced—had the “Fresh Start” negotiations that took place primarily between the DUP and Sinn Féin not had a successful outcome—then by now we would have had full, untrammelled direct rule from this place. That is the reality of it. We would have had welfare changes in Northern Ireland that were exactly the same as those in England and Wales. There would have been none of the mitigations—none of the changes that we implemented, and wanted to see

[Mr Nigel Dodds]

implemented. So the consequence of the approach of members of the SDLP and others who opposed a sensible compromise would have been full, untrammelled welfare changes of the sort that they say they oppose.

Tom Elliott: Can the right hon. Gentleman enlighten us, because I have not got to the bottom of it, on why Sinn Féin has done such a somersault on this? It totally opposed it for years, and then all of a sudden it seemed to come to its senses and accept the principle of it. Can he shed any light on that?

Mr Dodds: It is for Sinn Féin to explain its own position. It is not for me to speak for it, especially when its Members do not come to this House. Certain Members are often seen about the corridors. They are here to collect their allowances—their political representation money and their constituency office allowances—but that is all they do; they do not take part in any other parliamentary processes. I will therefore leave it to them.

The reality had to dawn on people in Northern Ireland that we were facing the collapse of the political institutions. It is a bit like a local council in England or Wales, or anywhere else, being told, “Here’s your financial settlement—here’s what you’ve got to work within,” and the leading party there saying, “Sorry, we’re not going to accept that. We’re going to set budgets that are way beyond that, we’re going to just ignore the financial realities, we’re not going to make any compromises which will safeguard the most vulnerable”—

Ms Ritchie: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Dodds: No. The hon. Lady had plenty of time to put her arguments to the House, and the fact that she was unable to put any convincing arguments is her responsibility.

In terms of financial responsibility, serious parties of government—parties that are serious about running countries and being in government—have to take difficult decisions within the financial parameters that they are set, especially in a devolved Government. If we simply say, “We’re not going to do that—we demand that you give us more,” it eventually leads to collapse.

Let us remember that the people of Northern Ireland had their say—

Ms Ritchie: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Dodds: No, no—the hon. Lady has had her opportunity to speak, and I am not giving way.

The people of Northern Ireland have had their say. There was an election in May in which they delivered their verdict on the whole social security debacle and on how the DUP and other parties had performed. The SDLP and certain other parties had their worst ever result in Assembly elections. The DUP was returned with one of its best results ever and is back at the head of government in Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland saw very clearly what was going on. They recognised that parties and politicians have to face up to their responsibilities. If they are not serious about that, they will be rejected at the polls.

I, too, welcome this order. I wish the DWP Minister, who has moved from the Treasury, well in his work. I hope that we come to a point where we do not need such legislation to come to the Floor of the House of Commons and can get back to dealing with it in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

2.54 pm

Damian Hinds: Let me emphasise that this order fulfils a vital commitment made as part of the “Fresh Start” agreement. We have had a robust debate on some of the historical aspects of how we got to this point. In the interests of time, I think it best that I do not reflect further on that. Suffice it to say that the two largest parties in the Assembly signed up to the “Fresh Start” agreement of which this legislation was a crucial part. Moreover, the Assembly passed a legislative consent motion supporting the legislation to be dealt with here in Westminster. As the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) said, Northern Ireland has long kept to parity on social security, as set out in section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Restoring that parity is a crucial part of keeping the Executive’s finances stable. The provisions on the welfare supplementary payments will be put forward in full detail by the Executive and the Assembly.

In response to the question about taxation from the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), supplementary payments to non-taxable benefits will be non-taxable, and supplementary payments to taxable benefits will be taxable, so the tax treatment will be the same as in the current system.

This order is a crucial part of delivering the “Fresh Start” agreement. It will help to build a politically and financially stable Northern Ireland. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Welfare Reform and Work (Northern Ireland) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 6 July, be approved.

Social Security

2.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): I beg to move,

That the draft Pensions Act 2014 (Consequential Amendments) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 4 July, be approved.

This order implements a small number of further minor consequential amendments in connection with the introduction of the new state pension. It does two things. First, it ensures that existing administrative arrangements that are designed to facilitate the annual uprating exercise will continue to operate as they do now. Secondly, it gives appeal rights to decisions about national insurance credits that count for new state pension purposes.

Let me deal first with the amendments to do with uprating. Article 2 amends the Social Security Administration Act 1992, which deals with alterations in the payable amount of certain income-related benefits due to uprating: that is, income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance, income-related employment and support allowance, universal credit, and pension credit. These provisions allow an existing award of these benefits to be altered automatically to take account of the uprating of another benefit in payment to the claimant or their partner, without the need for a further decision by a decision maker. They can also enable the decision maker to take account of the new rates from the uprating date when he or she is determining a new award that begins before the uprating order has come into force, rather than having to revisit the award to apply the new rates at a later date. Article 2 retains long-standing administrative easements that support the annual uprating exercise. It is simply a case of delivering business as usual in a case where a person or their partner's benefit income is the new state pension. These amendments will therefore apply for the first time in April 2017, with the first uprating exercise for the new state pension.

I turn to the amendment to do with appeal rights for national insurance credits. Article 3 amends schedule 3 to the Social Security Act 1998, which lists decisions that carry the right of appeal. This schedule already includes decisions on credits awarded under the old 1975 credits regulations, and also needs to include those provided for under part 8 of the new State Pension Regulations 2015. The policy intention is that decisions made in relation to those credits should carry the right of appeal. That should have been enacted with effect from 6 April 2016, but I regret to say that it was overlooked and that, as the law stands, they do not have that right. The amendment makes good that omission and it will come into force on the day after the order is made.

Of course, that means that there will be a period in which decisions will be made that were intended to carry the right of appeal but that cannot in law be appealed. Those decisions are made by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs officials on behalf of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, so my officials have been working very closely with HMRC to find a solution.

That solution involves a workaround. Once the order comes into force, any decisions made under the provisions in part 8 of the State Pension Regulations 2015 will be appealable. HMRC will revisit any decisions made before

the order comes into force, and when fresh decisions are made they will carry an appeal right. There will be no substantial difference in outcome between an original decision, had it been appealable and successfully appealed, and a fresh decision that is successfully appealed. A successful appellant will have credits awarded to them.

Importantly, I reassure the House that, to date, no one has in practice been affected. That may seem unlikely at first glance, but there are a number of reasons for it. First, the omission can affect only certain decisions made since 6 April 2016. Secondly, it affects only credits for which a person has to apply.

The practical impact of this gap in the law relates only to decisions about credit that a person has applied for since 6 April 2016. They include new credits that cover past periods in which a person was accompanying their armed forces spouse or civil partner on an overseas posting. Ordinarily, credits awarded for the tax year 2016-17 would be taken into account only in the assessment of new state pension awards that will be made after 6 April 2017. However, those new credits could affect state pension awards made since 6 April 2016.

A further mitigation is that, before a person can lodge an appeal, they have to ask for the decision to be reconsidered by a decision maker—a process known as mandatory reconsideration. Mandatory reconsideration enables a decision maker to reconsider the decision and the facts taken into account in making it. If, on reflection, it is considered that the decision should be changed, it can be revised without the claimant having to go through the whole appeal process. HMRC data from the last tax year, 2015-16, tell us that fewer than 10 cases where a credits decision under the 1975 regulations was disputed ended up progressing to appeal.

Finally, out of 324 applications for the new armed forces partner credits that have been refused up to 5 September, 201 of those refusals were because the tax year being applied for was already a qualifying year for other reasons, so the applicant would not need the credit in order to establish their new state pension entitlement.

It is an unfortunate situation, but I hope that I have reassured the House that, even if a case did materialise, we have measures in place to ensure that, while justice may be delayed, it will not be denied. We are confident that no individual will be disadvantaged by the oversight.

I am sure you will be delighted, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I can confirm that I am satisfied that the instrument is compatible with the European convention on human rights, and I commend the order to the House.

3.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I warmly thank the Minister for introducing the order. May I also take this opportunity to welcome him to his place? It is nice to see him there.

Although I recognise that the order principally tidies up existing legislation—as such, I will not oppose it—I want to make a few comments about articles 2 and 3, as well as about the decision not to conduct an impact assessment.

Article 2 enables the income-related benefits awarded to recipients to be adjusted to account for additional income being received through an uprating of the new state pension, without requiring Secretary of State oversight,

[Debbie Abrahams]

as the Minister has explained. The arrangement applies to the old state pension and it is now being carried forward to the new one, so it is relatively uncontroversial. However, I want to push the Minister on the specific changes to entitlements for couples.

The explanatory memorandum states that, currently, where one member of a couple has reached a qualifying age for pension credit but the other has not, the couple can choose to claim either pension credit or the relevant working-age benefit. The explanatory memorandum points out that most choose to go for pension credit as, should they choose to access the working-age benefit, they will be subject to conditions that do not apply to pension credit. From 2018, it is planned to remove the option to claim pension credit, replacing it with universal credit for mixed-age couples making new claims.

What are the proposed transitional arrangements to cover those changes? Would someone covered by transitional protections who loses their entitlement to pension credit for a short period then be expected to enrol on universal credit? How do the Government plan to communicate those changes? Given the important differences in the amount awarded under pension credit compared with most other working-age entitlements, as well as the strict conditionality requirements of universal credit, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is very important to ensure that all those affected are well informed.

Article 3 provides for a right of appeal against a decision as to whether a person is to be credited with earnings or contributions for the purposes of entitlement to the state pension. Under the old state pension, people who reached state pension age before 6 April 2016 already had a right to appeal decisions regarding whether they were eligible for credits. The order, as the Minister has explained, extends that right of appeal to the new state pension.

The explanatory memorandum states that that right should have been in place from 6 April 2016 but that it was “unfortunately overlooked”. That omission is disappointing, not least for those who might have been affected. Although the Minister has taken pains to explain that it has not affected anybody and that there are measures in place to ensure that no one will lose out, I would be grateful if he wrote to me to clarify how many people have been denied a claim since 6 April and who might have been affected. For example, were women and people on low incomes more likely to have been affected? I would also be grateful if he confirmed in writing how the situation for all those who have had applications for credits declined will be resolved?

I want briefly to touch on the related issue of take-up of national insurance credits. NI credits cover circumstances in which people are not working, and in some cases they require an application to be made. In 2013, the Government acknowledged that there was a low level of awareness and understanding of some NI credits, such as carer's credit. They said that the low take-up rate suggested that the credits were

“not achieving their stated aim of protecting the state pension position of individuals who take time out of paid employment due to caring responsibilities”.

Of course, in many cases, those affected are women.

The Government undertook to review the system, develop a customer-focused communications strategy and work with outside agencies to encourage take-up. They said that state pension statements, which individuals have to request, would be the vehicle for providing individuals with personalised information about their entitlement. In last week's debate on this order in the other place, the Minister for Welfare Reform said:

“There are around 400,000 eligible for carer's credit and, in August, there were 10,900 recipients.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 8 September 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1221.]

According to my maths, that is about one in 40, which means that a very low proportion of those who are eligible to apply have received entitlements. Do the Government have plans to review their approach and to look again at some of the recommendations made by the Work and Pensions Committee in its report, “Communication of the new state pension”?

Finally, I want to push the Minister on the decision not to undertake an impact assessment when preparing the order. The Government argue that the order has no impact on civil organisations or the private sector. Is this not a narrow interpretation of when an impact assessment should be carried out? Can the Minister reassure the Opposition that a dangerous precedent is not being set? As we know, impact assessments by this Government have tended to be rather inadequate.

3.10 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Minister to his place. It is a pleasure to see him here. We on the Scottish National party Benches look forward to working with him to the benefit of pensioners when it is appropriate to do so.

We welcome the measure in so far as it enables the award of certain income-related benefits to be adjusted automatically when the new state pension is uprated, but when the measure was drawn up was consideration given to the results of the EU referendum and the uncertainty that arises for the 400,000 UK pensioners living in EU countries? The House will be aware that long-standing rules enable the co-ordination of social security entitlements for people moving within the EU. One result is that the UK state pensioners resident in EU countries receive annual increases to their UK state pension. Elsewhere, the UK state pension is uprated only if there is a reciprocal social security agreement requiring this.

The Government could have taken the opportunity today with these measures to address the concerns of the 400,000 UK pensioners living in the EU. Why has this not been done? Does the Minister agree that those UK citizens residing in EU countries who are entitled to a UK pension and all annual increments, as would be the case if they were living in the UK, should have those rights protected after the Brexit vote? Can he give an assurance today that this will happen?

In a parliamentary answer on the issue on 8 July the then Minister for Europe, now Leader of the House, said:

“It will be for the next Prime Minister to determine, along with their Cabinet, exactly the right approach to take in negotiating these provisions going forward but the Government's guiding principle will be ensuring the best possible outcome for the British people.”

Given that the Prime Minister has had time to settle in, there has been ample opportunity to address this question. May we have an answer today and remove this uncertainty for UK pensioners? Prior to our entry into the EU, the UK had bilateral arrangements with a number of European countries. What will be the situation where this was previously the case? Do those arrangements remain in force and can the Minister reassure pensioners in those countries?

The measures before us also fail to address the issue of the 500,000 UK pensioners living in territories where there is no annual uprating. Why are not the Government bringing forward today plans to restore annual uprating to all British pensioners, based on entitlement and regardless of domicile? It is morally unjust and truly unfair for the Government to strip pensioners of their right to equal state pension payments. There are a host of reasons why a pensioner may choose to move abroad in later life, such as wanting to be closer to family or friends, or to enjoy a different lifestyle. It is simply wrong to punish them for making that choice.

Pensioners who have paid the required national insurance contributions during their working lives, in expectation of a decent basic pension in retirement, will find themselves living on incomes that fall in real terms year on year. Payment of national insurance contributions in order to qualify for a state pension is mandatory. All recipients of the British state pension have made these contributions, and although historically the level of pension received has varied according to the level of contributions made, it is clearly unfair to differentiate payment levels by any other criterion.

Pensioners will now face ending their days in poverty because they chose to live in the wrong country, in most cases without any knowledge of the implications of their choice for their pension. Others are forced back to the UK, away from the family they love, just to secure an income on which they can retire. All should receive their full and uprated pension according to their contribution, regardless of where they choose to reside. Reform would bring the UK into line with international norms, as most other developed countries now pay their state pension equivalents in this way. We are the only OECD member that does not do so.

Most pensioners had no idea that their pension would be frozen when they chose to emigrate. The frozen pension policy acts as a disincentive to pensioner emigration. As the International Consortium of British Pensioners put it, people currently living in the UK who would like to emigrate and who are aware of the frozen pension policy know they would not be able to afford to live on a state pension at its current level in their older years, by which time inflation will have decreased its value, and accordingly they decide not to move.

There is a real disparity in the treatment of UK pensioners and no consistency in how overseas British pensioners are treated. Those who live in the US Virgin Islands get a full UK state pension; those who live in the British Virgin Islands do not. Overseas pensioners are entitled to fairness. The state pension is, after all, a right, not a privilege. It is not a benefit; it is an entitlement to a pension based on paying national insurance contributions.

Given that the measures before us are provisions that support the annual exercise to uprate social security benefits in payment, will the Minister clarify the Government's position on the triple lock? There have

been suggestions that the triple lock may not survive. We on the SNP Benches fully support the continuation of the triple lock. It is the right thing to do to protect the interests of our pensioners. Will the Minister join me in championing the triple lock and commit the Government to continuing with it?

As we are talking about pensioners' rights, equity and fairness, can the Minister tell us why, when we are discussing the state pension, there is no mention of the WASPI—Women against State Pension Inequality—women and no solution to the injustices that many face in this secondary legislation package? It is not right that women born after 1953 are having to wait so much longer than those born in previous years to collect their state pension. The Government will have to bring forward mitigation to deal with these injustices, and do so quickly. Why are there no measures in this package to deal with those issues?

3.17 pm

Richard Harrington: I am grateful to the hon. Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for their contributions to the debate and for their kind words, which I appreciate. I am sure this will be the first of many occasions when we take part in such debates.

Let me deal briefly with the points that the hon. Gentleman made. I am aware that he has spoken many times on the frozen pensions issue, but the policy on that is unchanged. It has been in place for almost 70 years, under all sorts of Governments, and there are no plans to change it. The Government comply with their legal obligations where reciprocal agreements exist with other countries. There are no plans to change that and I would not like to mislead the hon. Gentleman by saying that there are.

On the triple lock, I will happily send the hon. Gentleman a copy of the Conservative party manifesto, if he is interested. I am sure it is still available from all good bookshops, and probably some bad bookshops as well. The Government are committed to retaining the triple lock throughout this Parliament. They have said so several times in the past and I am happy to repeat it for him.

The hon. Lady commented on the statutory instrument. On the transitional arrangements—for example, on ending the choice for mixed-age couples—the choice is ending because it is not right that a working-age customer should be exempt from any work-related conditionality just because they have a pension-age partner. Couples in receipt of pension credit at the date that the change is introduced will continue to be eligible for pension credit unless entitlement ends for some other reason—some change in their circumstances.

The hon. Lady asked me if I could indicate the number of claimants to date who had been denied a right of appeal as a result of the omission that we have mentioned. I will check and, if necessary, respond to her in writing. To my knowledge, we do not hold that information because administrative data are not routinely collected by HMRC on volumes of all clerically administered credit applications, but I am happy to get back to her on that point.

Very briefly—hon. and right hon. Members have had a lot of patience with this statutory instrument—the credits affected include applications predominantly for

[Richard Harrington]

spouses and civil partners of members of the armed forces, as the hon. Lady said, but also for partners of recipients of child benefit where entitlement to the credit is transferred to the applicant, for people providing care for a child under the age of 12—that is called grandparent credit—for being a foster parent and for persons approaching pensionable age.

I have explained what the order covers and these consequential amendments, and we have been through them both in quite some detail. We have acknowledged the gap in the law. This is the first time we have dealt with that gap in the law, but we have put mechanisms in place to make sure that no one is disadvantaged. Fortunately, we have not yet needed to employ them because no one has sought to appeal.

I hope I have provided the clarification that the hon. Members required, but I am very happy to speak to them separately, should they require further clarification. I commend this order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We now come to motion 4 on local government. I remind the House that as the Speaker has certified that this instrument relates exclusively to England and is within devolved legislative competence, this motion is subject to double majority. If a Division is called, all Members of the House are able to vote in the Division. Under Standing Order No. 83Q, the motion will be agreed only if, of those voting, both a majority of all Members and a majority of Members representing constituencies in England vote in support of the motion. At the end, the Tellers will report the results, first, for all Members and, secondly, for those representing constituencies in England.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft West Midlands Combined Authority (Election of Mayor) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 30 June, be approved.—(*Andrew Percy.*)

The House divided: Ayes 290, Noes 3.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England: Ayes 271, Noes 3.

Division No. 66]

[3.22 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Baron, Mr John
Afriyie, Adam	Barwell, Gavin
Aldous, Peter	Bebb, Guto
Allan, Lucy	Bellingham, Sir Henry
Allen, Heidi	Beresford, Sir Paul
Amess, Sir David	Berry, Jake
Ansell, Caroline	Berry, James
Argar, Edward	Bingham, Andrew
Atkins, Victoria	Blackman, Bob
Bacon, Mr Richard	Blunt, Crispin
Baldwin, Harriett	Boles, Nick
Barclay, Stephen	Bone, Mr Peter

Borwick, Victoria	Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Garnier, Mark
Bradley, rh Karen	Gauke, rh Mr David
Brady, Mr Graham	Ghani, Nusrat
Brake, rh Tom	Gibb, Mr Nick
Brazier, Mr Julian	Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Bridgen, Andrew	Glen, John
Brine, Steve	Goldsmith, Zac
Brokenshire, rh James	Goodwill, Mr Robert
Bruce, Fiona	Gove, rh Michael
Buckland, Robert	Gray, Mr James
Burns, Conor	Grayling, rh Chris
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Green, Chris
Burrowes, Mr David	Green, rh Damian
Burt, rh Alistair	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Cairns, rh Alun	Gummer, rh Ben
Carmichael, Neil	Gyimah, Mr Sam
Carswell, Mr Douglas	Halfon, rh Robert
Cartledge, James	Hall, Luke
Cash, Sir William	Hancock, rh Matt
Caulfield, Maria	Hands, rh Greg
Chalk, Alex	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Chishti, Rehman	Harrington, Richard
Chope, Mr Christopher	Harris, Rebecca
Churchill, Jo	Hart, Simon
Clark, rh Greg	Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Cleverly, James	Hayes, rh Mr John
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Heald, Sir Oliver
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Heaton-Harris, Chris
Collins, Damian	Heaton-Jones, Peter
Costa, Alberto	Henderson, Gordon
Crabb, rh Stephen	Hermon, Lady
Davies, Byron	Hinds, Damian
Davies, Chris	Hoare, Simon
Davies, David T. C.	Hollingbery, George
Davies, Glyn	Hollinrake, Kevin
Davies, Dr James	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Davies, Mims	Hopkins, Kris
Davis, rh Mr David	Howarth, Sir Gerald
Dinenage, Caroline	Howell, John
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel	Howlett, Ben
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Huddleston, Nigel
Donelan, Michelle	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Dorries, Nadine	Hurd, Mr Nick
Double, Steve	Jackson, Mr Stewart
Dowden, Oliver	James, Margot
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Javid, rh Sajid
Drax, Richard	Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Drummond, Mrs Flick	Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Duddridge, James	Jenkyne, Andrea
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Jenrick, Robert
Dunne, Mr Philip	Johnson, Gareth
Elliott, Tom	Johnson, Joseph
Ellis, Michael	Jones, Andrew
Ellison, Jane	Jones, rh Mr David
Ellwood, Mr Tobias	Jones, Mr Marcus
Elphicke, Charlie	Kennedy, Seema
Evans, Graham	Kirby, Simon
Evans, Mr Nigel	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Evennett, rh David	Knight, Julian
Fabricant, Michael	Kwarteng, Kwasi
Fallon, rh Michael	Lamb, rh Norman
Fernandes, Suella	Lancaster, Mark
Field, rh Mark	Latham, Pauline
Foster, Kevin	Lee, Dr Phillip
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Lefroy, Jeremy
Frazer, Lucy	Leslie, Charlotte
Freeman, George	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Freer, Mike	Lewis, Brandon
Fuller, Richard	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Fysh, Marcus	Lidington, rh Mr David
Gale, Sir Roger	Lilley, rh Mr Peter

Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Mercer, Johnny
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Opperman, Guy
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber

Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Christopher Pincher and
 Graham Stuart

NOES

Hoey, Kate
 McCabe, Steve
 Skinner, Mr Dennis

Tellers for the Noes:
 Ms Gisela Stuart and
 Mr John Spellar

Question accordingly agreed to.

Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY]

NHS Sustainability and Transformation Plans

3.37 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that NHS Sustainability and Transformation Plans are expected to lead to significant cuts or changes to frontline services; believes that the process agreed by the Government in December 2015 lacks transparency and the timeline announced by NHS England is insufficient to finalise such a major restructure of the NHS; further believes that the timetable does not allow for adequate public or Parliamentary engagement in the formulation of the plans; and calls on the Government to publish the Plans and to provide an adequate consultation period for the public and practitioners to respond.

I am glad to open this debate on the NHS sustainability and transformation plans. As the whole House knows, the NHS has a special place in the affections of our constituents. No other public service engages with us all when we are at our most vulnerable—in birth, death and illness—and the public and NHS staff are increasingly aware that the NHS is under severe financial pressure, a matter I will return to.

In that context of financial pressure and concern about the availability of services, the sustainability and transformation plans are arousing concern. They sound anodyne and managerial, and there is undoubtedly a case for bringing health and social care stakeholders together to improve planning and co-ordination. But the concern is that, in reality, the plans will be used to force through cuts and close hospitals, will make it harder for patients to access face-to-face consultations with their GPs, and, above all, will open the door to more privatisation. It tells the public how little the Secretary of State cares about their concerns that he is not in the Chamber to listen or respond to this debate. We know that recently he has missed all seven recent meetings of the NHS board. The public are entitled to ask how much he cares about their very real concerns.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned cuts, but this Government are putting more money into the national health service—an extra £10 billion a year. The Labour party had no intention of making that sort of financial commitment to the NHS, as we saw in its failure to do so before the last election.

Ms Abbott: The NHS was never better funded than under the last Labour Government and the public know that. That is why they trust us with the NHS.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I need to make progress.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: Yes.

Hon. Members: Ah!

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I think we can spot that the hon. Lady has just given way to a Government Member and now she is giving way to an Opposition Member. We do not need the cheering to go with it.

Steve McCabe: I want to check this with my hon. Friend. The last time I checked, Simon Stevens had said that STPs were designed to make up the £22 billion shortfall that the Government are not prepared to put in. Is that not the case?

Ms Abbott: It is indeed the case; rather than being an anodyne managerial exercise, the sustainability and transformation plans are designed to make up the missing £22 billion.

One of the most alarming aspects of the STPs is their secrecy. England has been divided into 44 regional footprints, and it is worth noting that they are called footprints to distract from the fact that they are ad hoc regional structures—they are the exact same regional structures that the Tory health Bill was supposed to sweep away. Because they are ad hoc and non-statutory, they are wholly unaccountable. In the world of the STPs, the public have no right to know.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Abbott: I give way to my hon. Friend.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. We have a leak of the STP for Merseyside and Cheshire, which states that there is an “appetite for hospital re-configuration” because the existing set-up is “currently unaffordable”. Given that it also says that almost a £1 billion gap is to be expected by 2021, and that the public have not yet been consulted, does my hon. Friend agree that when the public are consulted, there will be an absolute outcry?

Ms Abbott: That is the reason for the secrecy thus far. The Government know that if the public understood what STPs meant, there would be an outcry.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the hon. Lady agree that unless the local community are fully engaged in the process of considering how the health and care system needs to change their area, the process is destined to fail and simply will not work?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. For nearly the whole time I have been in Parliament, there have been attempts to reconfigure hospitals and close A&Es and make other changes in London. We have found that when the local community does not take ownership of the plans, it is impossible to take them forward. That secrecy runs counter to making the reorganisations we might have to make.

Sir Simon Burns: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: Initially, the STPs were discouraged from publishing their draft plans, freedom of information requests were met with blank replies, and enquirers

were told that no minutes of STP board meetings existed. We are therefore bound to ask: if the plans are really in the interests of patients and the public, why has everyone been so anxious to ensure that patients and the public know as little as possible?

Sir Simon Burns: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: In some cases, even local GPs have not been fully involved in decision making. Hon. Members may not take that seriously, but I assure them that their constituents will. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. It is up to the hon. Lady whether she wishes to give way or not. Shouting and screaming will not help with the debate, because Members on both sides want to hear. I am sure that, when she wants to give way, she will do so, but screaming will not help, and it certainly does not help my ears.

Ms Abbott: GP leaders in Birmingham said that it would appear that plans by the STP to transform general practice, and to transform massive amounts of secondary care work into general practice, are already far advanced. Only at this late stage have they been shared with GP provider representatives.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Freedom of information requests have also uncovered the substantial role of the private sector in formulating these plans. GE Healthcare Finnamore, for example, is advising STPs across the south-west, and I have no doubt that work is under way for it to get larger slices of the action in the future. In the name of transparency, does my hon. Friend agree that all their boards should publish everybody who is on them, with their declared interests as well?

Ms Abbott: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. All STPs should publish who is on them, what their financial interests are, and how far advanced they are in planning. However, thanks to the work of organisations such as Open Democracy and 38 Degrees—and, frankly, thanks to leaks—the picture of what STPs will mean is becoming clearer.

We know from the information we have been able to glean that the reality of STPs is quite concerning. For instance, in the black country there are plans for major changes to frontline services at the Midland Metropolitan hospital, including the closure of the hospital’s accident and emergency. The plans also propose to close one of the two district general hospitals as part of a planned merger. We know that by 2021 the health and social care system in the black country is projected to be £476.6 million short of the funds it needs to balance its books. *[Interruption.]* Government Members may shout now, but they are going to need an answer for their constituents when the reality of some of these proposed closures becomes apparent.

In Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, there are apparently plans to reduce the number of hospitals in the area from three to two. By 2021, the health and social care system in the area will be £700 million short of the money it needs to balance its books. In Suffolk and north-east Essex, the STP plan refers to the “reconfiguration of acute services within our local hospital, Colchester Hospital University Trust”.

The whole House knows that, historically, reconfiguration in the NHS has meant cuts. There are also plans to close GP practices.

The context of these plans, of which I have given an idea, is the current NHS financial crisis. Most recently, we have heard from NHS providers about this financial crisis. They represent the NHS acute, ambulance, community and mental health services. NHS providers say that despite the best efforts of hardworking staff, including junior doctors, hospital accident and emergency performance is the worst it has ever been. Waiting lists for operations, at 3.9 million, are the highest they have been since December 2007. We ended the last financial year with trusts reporting the largest deficit in the history of the NHS: £2.45 billion.

Sir Simon Burns: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I have to make a little progress.

Many STPs will be facing a large financial deficit. *[Interruption.]* I have to say to Government Members that they do not seem to be taking this debate seriously. When their constituents come to them asking about these cuts and closures, they will have to take it seriously. Many STPs will be facing a large financial deficit, which is subject to “control totals”—that is, cuts. In the case of north-west London, which does not have the largest projected deficit by any means, spending on acute care is projected to fall in nominal terms over a six-year period, despite a population that is both increasing and ageing, and despite cost pressures such as the sharply rising cost of drugs.

STPs have made an assessment of their own deficits by 2020-21. Researchers have disclosed that approximately 29 of the 44 STPs have projected substantial deficits.

Sir Simon Burns: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I have to make some progress.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it a requirement for a Member of this House to know the difference between a debate and a monologue?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): It is for me to make that decision. I am quite happy for the shadow Secretary of State to decide whether she wishes to give way or not. In fairness, this is an Opposition debate, and the hon. Lady is leading it. Let us not have any more pointless points of order. I am worried about how many Members want to speak; I want to try to get everybody in.

Ms Abbott: So when the STPs talk about efficiency, they actually mean cuts. Increasingly at the heart of these STPs are asset sales of land or buildings to cover deficits. No wonder the leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, Stephen Cowan, has said of his local STPs that

“this is about closing hospitals and getting capital receipts”.

He went on:

“It’s a cynical rehash of earlier plans. It’s about the breaking up and the selling off of the NHS.”

Sir Simon Burns *rose—*

Ms Abbott: I need to make some progress.

The King’s Fund has said:

“There are some concerns that NHS leaders have focused their efforts on plans for reconfiguring a few hospital services, despite evidence that major acute reconfigurations rarely actually save money and sometimes fail to improve the quality of care.”

The BMA has said the same thing. The King’s Fund has also said:

“The cuts under the STPs are eye-watering”.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con) *rose—*

Ms Abbott: I am anxious to complete my remarks so that Conservative Members will all get a chance to intervene in the debate.

The Health Select Committee’s recent report on the impact of the 2015 spending review stated:

“At present the Sustainability and Transformation Fund is being used largely to ‘sustain’ in the form of plugging provider deficits rather than in transforming the system at scale and pace. If the financial situation of trusts is not resolved or, worse, deteriorates further, it is likely that the overwhelming majority of the Fund will continue to be used to correct short-term problems rather than to support long-term solutions”.

Sir Simon Burns *rose—*

Anna Soubry *rose—*

Ms Abbott: Other aspects of the STPs that relate to cutting expenditure involve a combination of factors, including the use of new technology such as apps and Skype, patients taking more responsibility for their own health, “new pathways” for elderly care, increased reliance on volunteers and the downgrading of treatment by skills, responsibilities and pay bands. It seems to me that while some of these proposals might have some merit in themselves, it is delusional to imagine that they will deal with the financial black hole in the NHS. There is no evidence that among the patient population as a whole, increased use of apps, Skype and telemedicine can produce the efficiencies required while beds, units, departments and hospitals are being closed.

I remind Members, many of whom speak to their constituents in their advice surgeries on a weekly basis, that the truth about speaking to people face to face is that it is often towards the end of the conversation that people will come out with what really concerns them. My concern about the increased use of Skype is that many patients will not get the familiarity and comfortableness with their interlocutors to enable them to say at the end of the Skype session what it is that they are concerned about.

The STPs talk a great deal about increasing preventive medicine. That would indeed have the effect of lowering demand for acute NHS care, but it would also require a very substantial investment in public health programmes—and this Government have just cut public health funding. The elderly, the poor and patients for whom English is not their first language are the least likely to use these apps, telemedicine and Skype. It is inappropriate and unrealistic to assume that elderly patients who, I remind Members, are the biggest users of acute care and the fastest-growing demographic, will want to use Skype for any sensitive matter. “New pathways” for the elderly is sufficiently vague as an idea to raise alarm bells, given the projected rise in demand for geriatric services and continuing cuts in social care funding.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important point. She has already touched on the financial problems in the NHS, but allied to those are the financial problems in adult social care. We shall not have the truly integrated health and social care that we all desire when these STPs are being swept under the doors without people knowing precisely what they will mean for public services in their areas.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend has made an important point.

The danger is that, in a blizzard of apps and Skype, patients—particularly the elderly—will find it harder to access one-to-one care, and that those who can afford it will find themselves forced into the private sector.

Let me now say a word about the increasing private sector involvement in the NHS.

Sir Simon Burns: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: It was the NHS England director of STPs, Michael McDonnell, who said that they “offer private sector and third sector organisations an enormous amount of opportunity”.

We know that PricewaterhouseCoopers has been heavily involved in the formulation of a large number of these plans, and we know that—as was mentioned earlier—GE Healthcare Finnamore, which was taken over by General Electric in the United States, has been heavily involved in the formulation of plans in the south-west and possibly more widely. The strong suspicion is that a combination of cuts, the reorganisation of services on a geographical basis, and the growth of hospital “chains” will facilitate greater privatisation of the NHS.

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sir Simon Burns: Will the hon. Lady give way, and if not, why not?

Ms Abbott: Let me now draw my speech to a close. It is absolutely right that health and social care stakeholders should come together to plan for the future. It is absolutely wrong that social transformation plans should be hatched in secret and used as a cover for cuts and hospital closures—and it is increasingly clear that STPs may be a stalking horse for more privatisation. Conservative Members may not take this issue seriously—[*Interruption*—and Conservative Members’ response may be to shout, but I stress to the House that the consequences of these STPs will be very material for all our constituents.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: They will also be very material for those who work in the NHS. I take this issue seriously. [*Interruption.*] That is why we have called the debate, and I wait with interest to hear what Ministers have to say.

3.57 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to be here today, and I welcome the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) to her post. I think this is the first time she

has opened a debate in her present position, and I am pleased to be doing so for the first time myself. I believe that she was appointed about three weeks before me, and I think it would be fair to say that we are both on a steep learning curve.

I am also pleased that the hon. Lady has chosen the sustainability and transformation plans as the subject of the debate, because that gives me an opportunity to correct some of the misconceptions that she has just revealed, and, more importantly, to inform the whole House of the status of the NHS’s plans. Let me begin by reminding the House of their origins. The NHS’s own plans for the future, set out in the “Five Year Forward View” and endorsed by the Government—but not, as it happens, by the Labour party—recognised three great challenges facing the NHS: health and wellbeing, care and quality, and finance and efficiency.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): May I congratulate my hon. Friend, and say how delighted I am to see him at the Dispatch Box fulfilling such a crucial brief? While he is on his steep learning curve, will he visit Hereford County hospital, so that he can understand the difficulties faced by rural patients and see what he can do to help us?

Mr Dunne: I am delighted to accept that invitation from my neighbour and friend, not least because many of my constituents look to Hereford County hospital for their acute care, but also because it is one of the hospital trusts that are in special measures, which is my specific responsibility. I look forward to seeing my hon. Friend there, perhaps even during the coming recess.

Norman Lamb: I wish the Minister all the best in his new role. Does he share my concern about the evidence from around the country that in many areas mental health is peripheral to the STP process? Will he ensure that no STP plan will be accepted unless mental health is central to it?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful for that intervention from the right hon. Gentleman, who has taken such a personal interest in this subject. I can confirm that mental health is one of the issues that will be addressed in each of the plans that will be taken forward. I hope that reassurance helps.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Dunne: I am going to make a little progress, as I have only just started.

The “Five Year Forward View” also recognised that the challenges facing different areas of the country differ, so the issues facing Hackney are not the same as the issues facing Ludlow, and a single national plan would not be effective or appropriate. Indeed, the Labour party recognised that in its 2015 general election manifesto, which most Labour Members present stood on. It said:

“To reshape services over the next 10 years, the NHS will need the freedom to collaborate, integrate and merge across organisational divides.”

Sir Simon Burns: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Catherine West: I thank the Minister for giving way and hope he does well in his first performance here in the House. What percentage of acute trusts are in deficit, and what proportion of clinical commissioning groups are in special measures?

Mr Dunne: Many trusts were in deficit in the last financial year, and those deficits were funded by the Department of Health. Looking forward, we are using the financial discipline of control totals not to instigate cuts, as the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington suggested, but to hold the accountable managers to account for delivering within the financial envelope that those control totals represent. That is what a responsible Government do—we give money to public services and expect them to live within those means. This year the NHS has received one of the largest cash settlements it has ever had, three times more than the rate of inflation.

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, a courtesy not extended by the Opposition Front Benchers.

May I ask my hon. Friend to look very closely at STP footprints? The experience of those of us who represent rural areas is that aligning our areas with more urban centres can often mean that our constituents get a raw deal, and since my footprint includes urban areas in Bath and Swindon I am slightly concerned that the same thing may happen again.

Mr Dunne: If I manage to get there, I am going to come on to the footprints and how it was that 44 areas were identified, but in rural areas in Wiltshire and Shropshire we do look to urban areas to provide the acute care for all our local residents, so it is appropriate that the footprint areas encompass both the acute and the full range of primary sectors.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new job. What is happening in relation to bed-blocking, and what are the Government and the national health service doing to deal with care in the community in particular?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman raises a critical point and one of the real challenges facing the NHS at present, which is how to make discharge out of the acute setting, and movement right the way through the patient flow, more effective. As I will come on to say—if I get there—that is precisely why we are looking at bringing local authorities into the footprints for these STPs, so that the entire patient pathway can be taken into account.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Dunne: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns), who has been most persistent in trying to participate in this debate but has not so far been allowed.

Sir Simon Burns: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. So that there can be no misunderstanding, because the shadow Secretary of State does not seem to have fully grasped the brief, will my hon. Friend, with

his superior knowledge, explain categorically to the House about transparency in the health service with regard to not only STPs but other reconfigurations? There automatically always has to be a public consultation with local communities before any decisions are made—something that the shadow Secretary of State seems to be totally oblivious of.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has a great deal of experience in this area, having served in the Department for many years. He has preempted what I am about to say, which is that all the STPs will be subject to full and appropriate public consultation once we are in a position to do that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Dunne: I am going to continue my remarks, as I have already been quite generous in taking interventions.

As part of its annual planning round in 2015, NHS England published planning guidance last December—nine months ago—calling for clinical commissioning groups to come together with their providers across entire health economies to develop a collective strategy for addressing the challenges in their area. Those are the sustainability and transformation plans. There are 44 areas, which were agreed six months ago in March. They cover the whole of England, bringing together multiple commissioners and providers in a unique exercise in collaboration. Their geographies have been determined not by central diktat but by what commissioners and providers felt made the most sense locally.

Each area has also identified a strong senior leader who has agreed to chair and lead the STP process on behalf of their peers. They are well respected, credible figures in their local health economies, and we and NHS England are committed to supporting them to bring people together to agree a shared plan for how best to improve and sustain health services for their local populations. Local authorities, too, are fully engaged in the development of the plans. In some cases, local NHS organisations have agreed with local authorities that a senior council leader will lead the STP for their area. I think that is happening in Birmingham—I see a number of Birmingham Members present.

Maria Eagle: It is clear from the leaked document that Merseyside and Cheshire are looking to save £1 billion by 2021. In that context, does the Minister not agree that there will be an outcry when the secret proposals—which have now been leaked—to merge much-loved hospitals and cut services in Liverpool, for example, are finally consulted on? Does he acknowledge that they will have no chance of receiving any support?

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady is leaping much too far ahead. There are no proposals at this point—[*Interruption.*] I will explain the exact state of the STPs shortly. There are a number of draft ideas to try to improve the services that are delivered to patients. Looking to the future and the efficiencies that need to be provided, as part of the five-year forward view the NHS leadership asked the Government to fund £8 billion of additional cash for the NHS. We provided £10 billion; the Labour party refused to provide anything like it. In return, the NHS agreed to look for £22 billion of efficiencies up

[Mr Dunne]

to 2020. We have assisted it through the efforts of Lord Carter, whom we asked to undertake a review of efficiencies across the NHS. He has identified 10 work streams in which clear efficiencies can be found—many of which, incidentally, have been identified by Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington herself has referred in the past to areas of the NHS in which there is waste, and a newspaper article this week by the former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), referred to “absurdities” in the spending practices in the NHS. We are trying to put right some of the practices that have been swept under the carpet for too long.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Dunne: I am going to make some progress.

I turn now to the timetable and the progress that has been made so far. Each area was asked to work together over the first six months to draw up its initial thinking into a first draft plan by the end of June. Those plans were individually reviewed by senior leaders from NHS England and NHS Improvement during July and August. Each area is now in the process of developing its STP, with a view to submitting a worked-up plan to NHS England in October. The plans, as one would expect, will vary in their proposals, but all are expected to demonstrate a shared understanding of where an area is in relation to the three challenges set out in the five year forward view and where they need to be by 2020-21.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He was very generous the last time I had an opportunity to intervene on him.

Part of the concern in my constituency about the north-west London STP relates to the fact that Harrow receives less NHS funding per patient than any other part of London. For some months we have sought a meeting with a Health Minister to discuss that issue. Is the Minister prepared to receive a delegation from our clinical commissioning group?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my willingness to take interventions from both sides of the House.

I am interested that the hon. Gentleman should mention funding allocations. Across the NHS, the allocations are a legacy of the formulas that were set in place by the Labour Government, of which he was a member. People across the country, not least in rural areas such as Shropshire, cannot understand why the funding per capita is much less generous in some parts of the country than in others. I am taking an interest in that and would be willing to sit down with him and other colleagues to understand the particular circumstances in north-west London, which we will have to do after the coming recess.

Returning to the progress that is being made, all the plans are expected to present an overall strategy for their area and to identify the top three to five priorities required. In the most advanced plans, we are also

expecting areas to set out how they will deliver a number of national priorities, including on mental health and diabetes. Some will build on the early work of vanguard or Success Regime joint working, which has been developing better co-ordinated care models over the past year or so.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: Shortly. I must make some progress.

The plans offer the NHS a unique opportunity to think strategically. For the first time, the NHS is planning across multiple organisations—both commissioners and providers—with local authorities to address the whole health needs of an area and the people it serves. Also for the first time, the NHS is producing multi-year plans showing clearly how local services will develop over the next five years to deliver real improvements in patient care and better efficiency to ensure that the NHS continues to be able to cope with rising demand from our ageing population. That is leading some STPs to face up to tough choices about the future of some services. Such choices have often been postponed again and again because they were too hard or relied on individual organisations operating on their own to shoulder the responsibility rather than it being shared across the geography or the whole healthcare economy.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Does the Minister recognise the concerns in constituencies such as mine that have a border with Wales? The numerous closures of hospitals in Wales by the Labour Welsh Government are placing pressure on NHS trusts in Cheshire and Merseyside.

Mr Dunne: My constituency also shares a border with Wales, so I am acutely aware that Welsh patients regrettably have to wait longer and have worse access to treatment than those in England. Many of them look to English hospitals for services that are unfortunately not available in Wales, in part due to a conscious political decision of the Welsh Government to allocate less funding to the health service in Wales.

Alex Cunningham: I met a young surgeon at my north-east hospital in a personal capacity last week. She was excellent and caring and was clear in what she had to explain to me. She was so dedicated that it made me proud that she worked for the NHS. I was not proud, however, to hear about the facilities with which she has to work following the cancellation of our new hospital project in 2010 by the Tory-Lib Dem Government. Does the Minister agree that we can have as many plans as we like, but if we do not have the infrastructure, we cannot deliver the care required by some of our neediest communities?

Mr Dunne: There is undoubted pressure on infrastructure, as there is on technology. As technology improves and becomes available to the NHS, it provides opportunity—for example, for much more care to be undertaken closer to the patient. In many cases, this can be done increasingly in or near their home. That will have consequences for our existing infrastructure estate, and some of that will lead to a reconfiguration of existing hospital services. There is a programme of renovation across our hospitals, but of course that cannot get to everywhere at the same time. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman that he does

not have the shiny new hospital that he would like, but there is a building programme, which will continue in the future.

Sue Hayman *rose*—

Mr Dunne: I will now give way to the hon. Lady, who has been very patient.

Sue Hayman: I appreciate that. As the Minister is aware, we face particular issues in Cumbria, which has led to our having the Success regime. We are about to go into consultation on that, in key areas such as maternity, accident and emergency and the community hospital's future. My constituents are concerned about how the STPs are going to fit in with the Success regime, what the fit will be and whether all that will be challenging and confusing.

Mr Dunne: As I have said, and as the hon. Lady knows, the Success regime in her area will become subsumed within the STP, but the advantages for areas in the Success regime is that it means the organisations have been working together for much longer than in the pure STP areas, and that will bring benefit in terms of the maturity of their plan and their willingness and ability to implement it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Dunne: I am not going to take any more interventions, as I am going to have to wind up shortly.

The hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington has raised concerns in her remarks today and outside this place, and I would like to address a few of them before I finish. She has said that the STPs will result in significant cuts and changes to front-line services. I wish to make it absolutely clear to the House that, for all her protestations, these plans are not about cuts; they are about local areas, including commissioners, providers and local authorities, coming together and deciding how to improve services in the medium and long term. Some areas are taking difficult decisions, often looking to tackle long-standing problems, but this will be subject to rigorous local and national scrutiny. I can categorically assure her and this House that no changes will occur without local consultation and the normal process in the event of any proposed reconfiguration.

The hon. Lady has also accused the STP process of lacking transparency, being undertaken in secret and lacking time. Planning within the NHS is not new; an annual planning round culminates in December each year. As I have said, NHS England announced STPs publicly in its planning guidance published in December last year, and since then local STPs' leads have been engaging locally, as they deem appropriate—there has been no secret. What is new is that for the first time in years different NHS bodies, with local authorities, have been working collaboratively together to develop these plans. The 44 local areas are submitting their worked-up plans to NHS England for consideration in October. The NHS will scrutinise these plans and make recommendations over which to take forward and prioritise for discussions with Ministers and for formal public consultation, which will follow. Implementation will take place once the feedback from consultation has been assessed, so that this implementation will begin from early next year, with timings dependent on each individual area's specific proposals.

The hon. Lady has claimed that the process does not allow for adequate public or parliamentary engagement. These proposals remain at a draft stage, but we have made it clear to local leaders that they are responsible for ensuring that plans engage with all local stakeholders when they are ready, and proposed changes will be subject to local consultation. Many have already engaged with groups of clinicians and other stakeholders in their area in preparing draft plans. I have also indicated that local areas will be launching public consultations shortly, once their updated plans have been scrutinised by NHS England, and we welcome involvement from the public and from MPs. I have no doubt that there will be opportunities in the coming months for us to continue these discussions in this House and in the Department, and I will be willing to talk to MPs who are concerned about activities in their area.

The hon. Lady has called on the Government to publish the plans. As I have said, these plans are being prepared by local areas within the NHS, and they will be published and subject to further consultation in due course. She has also raised concerns about the use of private sector advisers in developing the STPs. I just point out gently to her the irony that 38 Degrees, which she prayed in aid for much of her advice in preparing for this debate, relied itself on a private sector advisory group, whose report I happen to have here—Incisive Health, a recognised private sector adviser within the NHS and elsewhere. It is a bit rich of her to come to this House arguing against the use of the private sector when she does so herself.

4.20 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I am sorry that this is such an acrimonious debate. I welcome the principle of the sustainability and transformation plans, as they are a key opportunity to reverse fragmentation and to reintegrate the NHS, but we have to get it right. To turn this whole matter into just a game of moving the deckchairs on the Titanic is something that we would all regret in a few years' time. We are talking about a place-based approach, which is very similar to what we have in Scotland. I absolutely welcome it, but the places must be right—they need to cover the whole population and the geography must make sense. That is in the relationships of the organisations that are there, but we have to think of things such as public transport. There is no point plonking a community in an STP if there are no connections to it. How these places are designed is really important, as are the partners that are in them. All of this should be about integration and re-integration from acute care through to primary care and local authority care. We need single pathways and wrap-around patient-centred care.

Andrew Gwynne: I have some sympathy with what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she agree that that integration will not happen if any one part of those partnerships is severely underfunded? For example, she mentions local authorities. Many of the pressures in the NHS today are solely as a result of the severe underfunding of adult social care. Do we not need to ensure that the finances are in place for these STPs to work?

Dr Whitford: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I was about to come on to that. However, it is not just the funding, but the entire model. The tariff model that

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

we have at the moment rewards hospitals for doing more minor things, and punishes them for doing more acute things. Taking on more A&E cases and more complex cases, working harder and doing more make their deficits grow. Our problem is that we have all sorts of perverse incentives in the system that mean that organisations will still be looking out for their budgets and their survival instead of working together.

In Scotland, we got rid of hospital trusts and primary care trusts, and, since 2014, we have had integrated joint boards. Those boards were handed joint funding that came from health and the local authority, which meant that the whole business of “your purse or my purse” disappeared. They were then able to start to look at the patient’s journey and the best way to make the pathway smooth. That is what we want to see.

Having a shared vision of where we are trying to go to is crucial. That means that stakeholders—both the people who work in the NHS and the people who use it—need to believe in where we are trying to get to. Public conversations and public involvement are the way forward. We should not be consulting on something that has already been signed off, but involving people in what they would like the plans to be, as that would make those plans much stronger.

We need to make deep-seated changes to the system, as opposed to only talking about the money for the deficits. This is something that the Health Committee has been talking about for ages. The phrase “sustainability” has become shorthand for paying off the deficit. Of the £2.1 billion earmarked for sustainability and transformation, £1.8 billion is for deficits, which leaves only £300 million to change an entire system. I know that we talk about money a lot in here, and of course it is important, but we have far bigger sustainability issues than the £2.5 billion deficit in the NHS. We have an ageing population, and those people are carrying more and more chronic illnesses, which means that we have more demand, more complexity and more complications. That is one of the things that is pushing the NHS to fall over. On the other side of that, we have a shortage in our workforce; we do not have enough nurses or doctors, and that includes specialists, consultants, A&E and particularly general practitioners. Although the advice has been very much that finances were third, and prevention and quality of care were meant to come first and second in delivering the five year forward view, finances seem to be trumping everything else.

It is absolutely correct that health is no longer buildings; there are lots of methods of health that are bringing care closer to patients, and also some things that are taking patients further away from their homes. We have hyper-acute stroke units, and we have urgent cardiac units, where they will get an angiogram and an angioplasty that will prevent heart failure in the future. However, we cannot start this process there; we cannot shut hospitals and units to free up money to do better things. We have to actually go for the transformation and do the better things first. We have to design the service around the pathways we need—that wrap-around care for patients—and then work backwards. If more health and treatment is coming closer to the patient, at some point they will say, “Actually, I don’t go to the hospital very often. I want the hospital to have everything it needs when I need it.” Then we can look at the estate to see whether

we have the right size of units and the right type of units in the right place. What concerns me is that the process we have seems to be the other way around—we are starting with hospitals, which is often a very expensive thing to do, and hoping it will deliver everything else.

Norman Lamb *rose—*

Dr Whitford: I give way to Norman.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, even if she used my first name. Does she share my concern that, out of the original sum allocated for this sustainability and transformation process, the vast bulk appears to be going, in effect, to propping up acute trusts that face substantial deficits, and that little is available for transformation?

Dr Whitford: As I said, the proposals leave only £300 million. We cannot transform a system on the scale that is being considered with £300 million.

As I said, the guidance talks about prevention. We need to be tackling health inequalities. We need to be focusing on health and wellbeing—and by that I do mean physical and mental wellbeing. We need to be strengthening public health—something else that has been cut. We need to be looking at the quality of health and care, and that means right across into social care. We must fund social care, because it can make a difference to things like delayed discharges. We are not even three years into the integration in Scotland—we are only two and a half years into it—but delayed discharges have dropped 9%. Yet, the last time the Secretary of State was in the Health Committee, they had gone up 32% in NHS England. So literally just moving things around and allowing one part of the system to fail will mean that the entire system fails.

Dr Murrison: I always listen with great care to what the hon. Lady has to say, and I agree with a great deal of it. Does she agree that part of the problem in England in relation to delayed discharges has been that we have seen a retrenchment of community hospitals and their beds, which have provided step-up, step-down care—intermediate care beds. Unfortunately, they are no longer available, which means inevitably that hospital discharges are delayed, with all the distress that causes.

Dr Whitford: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think it is about care in the home for those who are able to have that and convalescence for those who require it; that, basically, is the step up, step down. In my health board in Ayrshire and Arran, we have rebuilt the three cottage hospitals. They are now modern, state-of-the-art, small units. That means that our population has less far to travel and that older people will not, in the end, need to come to hospital. Now, we are still in that transition; those units are not doing everything they have the potential for—indeed, we are a rural population. However, certainly in Scotland, there is much more recognition that we need intermediate care between people being at home and being looked after by their GP, and people ending up in a very expensive acute unit. It is not just about finance; any Member who has been in hospital knows they do not want to be there, and nor do our elderly population. These levels of care are therefore crucial, and it is important that that grows out of the STPs. I see that as a crucial opportunity for the NHS, which cannot be missed.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a startling fact about the underfunding of social care that Ministers cannot get away from, whatever they do or say? We have heard today of the case of care workers who are suing the contractor that they work for because they were paid only £3.27 an hour. How can somebody be discharged from hospital in an adequate way when that is the domiciliary care that will be waiting for them? It was interesting to hear the former care Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), say this morning that “we have not got the cost of...adult social care really sorted out.”

Dr Whitford: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. I am not sure whether she took part in the carers debate that we had not that long ago, where I pointed out that unless we develop social care as a profession, then we all face a fairly miserable time in our old age. Nursing is a profession that is recognised and valued, and caring for our older ill population should also be recognised. We need to recognise them, to give them time to do their jobs, to pay them adequately, and to give them a career development structure that means that we bring the best people up and get them running teams.

As I said, I am disappointed by the aggression on both sides of the House. I know that such a debate is always a good tennis match for point-scoring, but the development of the STPs is an opportunity to do things that everyone in this House would agree with. However, if it is not done properly—if it is just a fig leaf whereby we pretend that something is being done—the NHS will suffer and we will be the generation of politicians who moved the deckchairs on the Titanic.

4.31 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my colleague on the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

I absolutely agree that we should see this as an opportunity to move away from a fragmented system where people are perhaps commissioning and providing care in isolated silos to one that looks across the whole system, and across geographical areas, so that we can move towards a truly integrated approach between health and social care. To do that, local authorities, as well as the health system, need to be involved in the STPs—and crucially, we need to involve local people. The lesson that we learn from every major reorganisation has been that if we take local people with us on the journey, and on the thinking behind it, it is much more likely to be successful. We should not see genuine local consultation and engagement as an inconvenience but as something that improves the eventual plans.

It is a real shame that this debate has developed a hashtag of “secretNHSplans”. I am afraid that NHS England now has to look at that, take a step back, and ask how it could have been better at engaging local communities—and those who represent them. It is a great shame that Members across this House were unable to see the draft plans until they were leaked to the press. That is not the right way forward for any genuine engagement.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that if staff, whether nurses, doctors, physios or pharmacists, had been involved right from the start of

the process, that would have helped staff morale in the NHS, which is struggling, and that they probably have the best ideas of anyone as to how the STPs could progress?

Dr Wollaston: I absolutely agree. This is about local communities and their representatives. Public meetings are important, but so are involving bodies such as HealthWatch and making sure that under-represented groups are involved. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) talked about the need to involve mental health services in these plans. It is very important that we make sure that under-represented groups are involved, and that does include those who use mental health services.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hon. Lady, with her lifetime of experience in the national health service, is absolutely right about the importance of consultation. Does she therefore understand the concern being expressed by the staff at the Dove sexual health centre in one of the poorest constituencies in England, Erdington, because none of its 2,000 patients has been consulted, and neither have any stakeholders, about a proposal to close this absolutely vital facility?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As I said, the plans that are produced at the end of the day will be better if we involve those who are using the services and those providing them, as well as those commissioning them, as we go along, rather than present a plan, even if it is a draft, as a fait accompli, because then it becomes a binary choice rather than one where people can make suggestions to improve the plans as they develop.

Dr Philippa Whitford: I know that Scotland is a lot easier to get around in population terms, although size and transport are not always that easy, but one of the mechanisms that the Scottish Government use when developing strategies is what they call the national conversation, whereby the ministerial team literally go walkabout and have meetings to hear from people directly before anything goes on paper.

Dr Wollaston: If we get too caught up in the process of consultation, we will not address the other serious hurdles in the way of STPs achieving their aims, chief among which is the issue of finance. The NHS is now in its seventh year of a historic level of austerity, and the average of a 1.1% annual uplift in funding for the NHS over the past six years represents an extraordinary challenge in the context of increasing demand. It is good that we are living longer, but we are doing so with much more complex conditions, and the treatments available to tackle them are more expensive. We need to be clear that, because of that, and even though the settlement for health has undoubtedly been generous in relation to other Departments, a significant gap is opening up in health, and the situation is even worse in social care.

Figures from the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services show that 400,000 fewer people are in receipt of social care packages in 2015-16 than there were in 2009-10, and not only are fewer people receiving social care packages, but those packages are smaller. Many STPs are about transferring care into the community.

[Dr Wollaston]

We need to make sure not only that the funding is available to provide those social care packages, but that we have the workforce to deliver them. The proposal in the area that I represent is to close two community hospitals that are used by my constituents. As a former rural general practitioner, I know just how important those facilities are to local people. They are special to them not only because of the step-up, step-down care that they provide and to which the hon. Lady has referred, but because these are the places that more people like to be at the end of their lives. They provide personal care and allow people, particularly those in rural areas who are doubly disadvantaged by not being able to travel to larger local centres, the opportunity to be treated closer to home.

Antoinette Sandbach: In my constituency, Tarporley cottage hospital has been adopted by the local community and continues to provide that step-up, step-down care without being part of the NHS. I wonder whether my hon. Friend would be interested in meeting some of the hospital trustees. It may provide some hope for the future as an example of how communities can come together and support their local assets.

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend for that invitation. In fact, I have visited the Community Hospitals Association on many occasions, to hear from community hospitals around the country. I will continue to do so and I commend them for the valuable role that they play.

Dr Murrison: Does my hon. Friend agree that community hospitals can also keep the bean counters happy? If they get the case mix right, it is much more affordable to treat people in community hospital beds than in an acute unit, which is extraordinarily costly. Furthermore, that would clearly give patients what they would like, which is care close to their homes, as my constituents in Warminster—we still have community hospital beds—will attest. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) would say the same for Shaftesbury.

Dr Wollaston: Members on both sides of the House are aware of how valuable and important community hospitals are to our constituents. Taking that a step further, I would say that the best bed for any patient is their own bed, provided that they can be given the right package of care close to home. We know that there are many people even in community hospital beds who do not need to be there. They are there for want of the right social care package that could enable them to be at home.

In welcoming STPs, we should be realistic about the financial challenge that they also face and the costs sometimes of providing those services. That is a huge challenge for them. In my area alone the STP is facing a £572 million shortfall by 2021 if no action is taken. I can understand why, for example, it will look at the relative cost of providing care to people in acute hospitals, in community hospitals and at home, and make an argument that sounds very reasonable about how a larger number of people could be much better cared for at home.

I return to the point that the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made. Access to the transformation part of the sustainability and transformation plans is necessary to be able to put those services in place and very often to build the infrastructure that we need. For example, in Dartmouth in my area, the possibility of providing more care closer to home within a community hub will require the up-front funds to build a new centre that allows the workforce to be developed and more services to be provided closer to home. Unfortunately, what we often see is the closure of a much loved facility without the new service in place.

As the sustainability and transformation plans progress, I would like to see a genuine focus on the opportunities to provide more care closer to home. I fear that we will miss that opportunity because, as we have heard, £1.8 billion of the £2.1 billion sustainability and transformation fund is going towards the sustainability bit, for which read “plugging provider deficits”, and only £300 million is left nationally to put in place all these plans.

We know also that part of the way that the Government have managed to fulfil their promise to NHS England in respect of the funding that it asked for has been by taking funding out of capital budgets because those are essentially flat cash, and also by taking money out of Health Education England budgets and public health budgets. It concerns me that many of the principles behind the sustainability and transformation plans are put at risk by other parts of the system being squeezed. We have heard the point about prevention. Central to the achievements of the sustainability and transformation plans is the prevention piece—the public health piece. It is a great shame that public health budgets have been squeezed, limiting the ability of those aims to be achieved.

I know that many Members wish to speak so I shall move on and make some asks of the Minister, if I may. There is more that the Government can do. We on the Health Committee were very disappointed that none of the witnesses who came before us from NHS England, NHS Improvement or the Department of Health was able to set out the impact of cuts to social care on health planning. We need to do much better at quantifying the cost to the NHS of cuts to the social care budget.

The Minister needs to take the long view on prevention and help the service by implementing policies that could help local authorities to make changes. For example, I suggest making health a material consideration in planning and licensing, in order to provide the levers to make a difference. We need a much greater focus on workforce, because the STPs cannot achieve their aims if the workforce to achieve them is not in place. Finally, will the Minister kindly visit my area to look at the proposals in the sustainability and transformation plans in south Devon, and at the opportunities and how we would achieve them?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The next speech, in the same way, will not have a time limit, but after that it will be five minutes. Some people will not get in. Please explain to them why those who took advantage of the time did so—it is totally unfair.

4.44 pm

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. Sustainability and transformation plans—what are they, should the

public be concerned, and are the plans good, bad or a mixture of both? As we have heard, over the last eight months or so STPs have been drawn up in 44 areas in England by a range of people involved in the running of the NHS and local government. As far as I can work out, they have come about because NHS England could see that in the chaos following the previous Government's Health and Social Care Act 2012, there was no obvious body responsible for thinking about how best to organise NHS services at a regional and sub-regional level, so NHS staff and local government officials were tasked with assessing the health and care needs of their local populations, considering the quality and adequacy of the provision to meet those needs, and developing ideas about how those needs might be better met within available resources.

So far, so good, we might say, but there are three big problems. First, the current financial pressures on the NHS mean that the plans are likely to be all about sustainability, not transformation. Secondly, this is a standardised process to define and drive change, so we run the risk of good proposals being lumped in with bad ones, and of some plans simply focusing on the achievable, as opposed to the necessary and the most desirable. Thirdly, it is an inescapable fact that these plans are being developed when there is huge public cynicism about the motives of a Tory Government when it comes to change in the NHS. If the Government want to deliver change, the debate with the public needs to start in the right place—not behind closed doors, and not using jargon that no one understands. It needs to be focused on patients and their families, not on accountants and their spreadsheets.

I think most people understand that the NHS cannot be preserved in aspic. They understand that compared with the 1950s, we now use the NHS in a very different way. At the moment, they simply see an NHS under enormous pressure. They are waiting longer for an ambulance, to see a GP, to be treated in A&E and for operations. They see staff who are stressed out and who are on the streets in protest. When Ministers and NHS leaders talk about sustainability and transformation, the public are therefore dubious. For sustainability, they read cuts, and in some cases they will be right—it will mean cutting staff, closing services and restricting access to treatment. No matter good the plan, how thorough the analysis or how innovative the solution, we cannot escape the basic problem of inadequate funding for the NHS and social care.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In my constituency, we are very concerned because Bristol is in surplus but the footprint means that we will be going in with North Somerset and South Gloucestershire, which both have cumulative deficits. No matter what else is part of the plan, to us in Bristol it means cuts.

Heidi Alexander: That is the story we hear from all over the country. This is not profligate overspending on the part of NHS bosses or local government leaders; it is chronic underfunding on the part of Government. There was much fanfare associated with last year's comprehensive spending review and what it meant for the NHS, but when we look at that financial settlement, along with the one in the last Parliament, we see a flatlining budget to deal with soaring demand.

As a country, we have a growing and ageing population. The reality is that in the last 10 years, the number of people living beyond the age of 80 has increased by half a million, and the NHS and social care are buckling under the strain. Although we should never give up on trying to organise the NHS in the most efficient and effective way possible, we have a choice. Do we want to cut services to match the funding available, or do we want to pay more to ensure that our grandparents and our mums and dads get the sort of care that we would want for them? If the NHS is to provide decent care for older people we need not only to fund social care adequately, but to find better ways of organising services to keep people out of hospital for as long as possible.

That leads me to the next problem. STPs are being used as a catch-all process to bring about change in the NHS, but many run the risk of focusing on the wrong things. They are being used as a vehicle to do different things in different places, and although some may lead to better treatment and better outcomes, the danger is that there will be knee-jerk, blanket opposition to everything. Some proposals will inevitably be controversial—the closure or downgrading of an A&E or maternity department will never be easy—but, in other cases, the plans may end up focusing on something that is not the burning issue.

Let me take my local area as example. The STP for south-east London proposes two orthopaedic elective care centres. The sites for them have yet to be decided, and the STP plan has yet to be signed off by NHS England. On the face of it, there is little wrong with the proposal to create centres of excellence so that all hip and knee replacements are done in one of two places. The problem is that when the front page of a national newspaper talks about the “secret” STP plans under which A&Es will close, my constituents fear the worst. “We’ve been here before,” they will say. They will smell a rat, even where one might not exist.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will not give way. I am aware that many Members want to speak, and I wish to conclude my remarks.

My constituents ask me these questions. What happens if Lewisham is not the site of the new centre, its elective work is shifted elsewhere and the hospital then struggles to staff the emergency department? Is orthopaedic care really the burning issue in south-east London? What about the queues of ambulances outside the Queen Elizabeth hospital? What about the homeless young man who pitches up in A&E because he has nowhere to sleep and there is no support for him in the community?

Where will the money come from physically to redesign the NHS buildings that such a care centre would entail? With £1 billion taken out of capital budgets and switched to revenue last year, it seems fanciful to think that there will be money lying around for such projects. The NHS is on its knees. Everyone knows that hospitals ended up £2.5 billion in deficit last year. We have all seen the reports of A&Es closing overnight because they have not got the staff. We all know that GPs are run ragged, that ambulance crews are stressed out and that nurses are demoralised, and that is before mentioning the junior doctors.

[Heidi Alexander]

This is the main problem for the Government: if you do not fund the NHS adequately and if you do not staff it properly, do not be surprised when the public do not trust your so-called improvement plans. There is deep public cynicism when it comes to anything this Government wants to do to the NHS. People believe Ministers are trying to privatise it. They believe services are contracted out to the private sector to save money, not to improve quality, and in many cases they are right. The problem is not STPs as such, but the context in which they are being developed—inadequate funding, an inability to make the case for change, a workforce crisis that is leading to overnight closure of services and, as a result of all of these, a deep public mistrust of the Government's intentions.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is now a five-minute limit.

4.53 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I will be as brief as I can be, Mr Deputy Speaker.

May I congratulate my old Whip on his elevation to Minister of State, Department of Health? I hope that he brings with him all the skills he learned at the Ministry of Defence, as there are many tough challenges ahead. At a time when there is upheaval in every Department in Whitehall, I suggest that this is a good time for him to look afresh at where the Department of Health is going, and I want to propose some initiatives.

This debate is divided neatly into sustainability and transformation. I suggest to the House that, if we are to have a sustainable health service, sustainability will need to be about reducing demand—we must look at ways of reducing the demand on the service—and if we are to have transformation, it will have to include increasing supply and looking for new types of treatments that are available.

I am proud to have represented the middle of England, Leicestershire, for many years, and in particular pretty much the whole area of Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council. I would like to share the initiatives that the council has taken since the Health and Social Care Act 2012 came into being, and then suggest what we need to do beyond those kinds of initiatives, taken by a council that is very successful and, I might add, Conservative-controlled.

The council has taken three major initiatives in my constituency. One is getting people of all ages to be more active, including through young people putting on activities such as days for soccer tots aged two to four, bikeability courses for six-year-olds, BMX track work, parachute games, skipping and making smoothies. There are all kinds of activities. The council has also built a new leisure centre, which has been a huge success. The number of people attending swimming in the borough has gone up exponentially. It has produced some excellent facilities.

It is sad to relate, however, that in my constituency 7% of people have diabetes and 68% are recorded as having excess weight, of whom 20% are obese. Obesity in children is still increasing. My point is that however good local people are, we have to take other steps. I can

see the Chair of the Health Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), looking over at me, and she knows what I am going to say, because we worked on this when I was on the Committee: we have to have more action on obesity. The sugar tax is very important and welcome, but it is not enough. We have to deal with diet and food consumption. The template for moving ahead should be the campaign of more than 100 years to stop people smoking and stop cigarettes dominating our lives. That campaign really began with the passage of the Regulation of the Railways Act 1868, which mandated smoke-free carriages to prevent injury to non-smokers, and culminated in England going smoke-free in 2007.

As for the transformation of local services, we need more services, but some are not properly co-ordinated. I served on the Committee for the Osteopaths Act in 1993 and the Chiropractors Act in 1994. Both groups of practitioners are now regulated by an Act of Parliament, but osteopaths, chiropractors and orthopaedic surgeons do not talk. It is ridiculous. Far too many people are having operations who could be dealt with by chiropractors or osteopaths. The head of the Professional Standards Authority, Harry Cayton, regulates 17 registers and says that of the 63,000 practitioners on those 17 accredited registers, covering 25 occupations, far too few are being used in the health service. That is very sad.

I will finish on this point, for the benefit of the Chair of the Health Committee as much as anything: homeopathy has been officially recognised by the Swiss Government as legitimate medicine to coexist with conventional medicine, following a 2009 Swiss referendum—referendums are not only in Scotland—when two thirds of the population decided that they wanted homeopathy, acupuncture, traditional Chinese medicine, herbal medicine and holistic medicine as part of their health service. Swiss insurance companies now agree.

4.58 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister and shadow Minister to their new responsibilities. The Labour party was right to choose this topic for the Opposition day debate. I wish the Minister well in confronting the financial difficulties that face him.

In confronting those difficulties, the Government's "Five Year Forward View", which was published in 2014, called for £22 billion of efficiency savings to be found by 2020, on top of the £20 billion of efficiency savings to be found between 2010 and 2015. I simply do not think that should or can be done. The total deficit in all national health service trusts reached £2.45 billion in 2015-16, a figure that is almost three times greater than in 2014-15 and almost half a billion pounds higher than the national health service's own revised plan. Monitor estimates that even if all realistic efficiency savings were made, a deficit of £1.5 billion would remain in this financial year. It is simply not possible to deal with the situation through efficiency savings. The Government know that and are stuck, hence the sustainability and transformation plans covering the next five years, organised along 44 footprint areas that do not have any existing coherence with existing health service organisational boundaries. In the north-east, the Northumberland and Tyne and Wear footprint covers five clinical commissioning groups, six local authorities and seven foundation trusts.

Newcastle, the city I have the honour and privilege to represent, enjoys well run and efficient health services, which is testament to staff working at all levels in the NHS there. Our health services are well regarded in the local area, but the sustainability and transformation plans raise at least three serious questions. If NHS England and NHS Improvement think that more than half of clinical commissioning groups are underperforming, why are they asking CCGs to draw up the key documents that will transform the structure of the NHS? Given that many CCGs will have to merge, where is the motivation for them to create clear, competent and credible plans? Given that the footprints will have no formal structure, who is accountable for the long-term consequences of the plans?

The approach that is being adopted bears a striking resemblance to the previous top-down, unwanted revision of the NHS that we were promised would not happen when the Government came to power in 2010. They are doing something that one would have thought difficult—they are breaking their promises twice.

This is not the first threat that the north-east has faced. We have faced the redistribution of moneys and the downgrading in the distribution formula of the social deprivation component, with far more emphasis being placed on the age-related part of the formula, which affects the well elderly rather than people who are ill.

In government, Labour promised to increase health spending to match the then European average of 8.5% of GDP. We kept that promise, but successive Governments since—the coalition Government and the Tory Government—have failed to commit funds to the NHS. That is why health spending as a proportion of GDP will fall to 6.6% by 2020-21, which will leave us lagging behind the OECD average spend of 9.1% and comparable countries such as Germany, which spends 11%.

The Government should be honest with people about the challenges the national health service faces and the response needed to meet them. The sustainability and transformation plans are a fundamentally bureaucratic response to the funding crisis in the NHS. As such, the Government completely misunderstand the fact that the NHS needs not more meetings but more money.

5.3 pm

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Change in life is frequently a source of anxiety or downright scary. When people are young and change schools, when they get married or when they start a job, that change is scary. There is nothing scarier for a community than change in how its health services are provided, so perhaps it is not surprising that the NHS has found managing change to be one of the most profoundly difficult things to accomplish.

As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned, we frequently face substantial or overwhelming challenges in society, with people growing older and having more complex needs, and the requirement for more expensive equipment and supplies to meet ever increasing standards for and expectations of healthcare in our country. The NHS was presented with two options for change. One is radical and will meet those challenges in a fine future that offers great health outcomes for all,

but sounds a little too scary. The other option is the incremental approach, which will move things along a little bit. It will not deal with the fundamentals but it will enable us to feel that we retain the institutions and structures with which we are familiar.

As someone who was born in Bedford hospital, grew up in Bedford and now represents Bedford, I am very familiar with each of the buildings and institutions in my community. To see them change is a very scary thing. When we consider processes of change, we have to recognise that the population start from that position of anxiety. It is therefore important that Members do not play on those anxieties. It is not effective opposition to create scare stories ahead of an outcome. That is not in the public interest. We can raise concerns, yes, but in a way that looks to the sensitivities of local situations. That is what I would like to focus on in my remarks: the specific circumstances of my part of the country.

I welcome the STP approach because of the integration of care with health and because it provides local authorities with a voice, for the first time, in decision making about local care choices. For the first time, the NHS will not be getting its own way, if this process lives up to the promise of local decision making. That will be helpful in getting local support and control. In my own locality, we have a cross-party community approach. We have a Liberal Democrat mayor, a Liberal-Labour group on the council and Conservative Members of Parliament. We are all united in an approach of wanting our voice heard on local care in the NHS. An STP is a way of us having that.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Would it not therefore have been more effective, particularly if there is cross-party working in the local authority, to have local consultation early on about what could be gained in exchange for what might be felt to be lost?

Richard Fuller: I very much appreciate the hon. Lady's question, because it gets to my point. I am actually quite sceptical about what consultation means. She might not know that Bedford has been through a review process for our acute services. I was trying to measure the length of that process in terms of Members of Parliament for Corby: it preceded Louise Mensch becoming Member of Parliament, carried on through the whole period of Andy Sawford being Member of Parliament, and is now taking up the time of my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove). We do not involve Corby any more; it is now just Bedford and Milton Keynes. That process included consultation and participation, with the NHS saying that it wanted to listen to people. It consulted them, yes. Did it listen to them? No. It was the NHS's own process. It ticked all the boxes, but it was a complete and utter disgrace to local accountability.

I do not have distrust of Pauline Philip, chief executive officer and leader of our STP, and I do not need to know everything. I want to know that our local authorities are having their voice heard in the process just as much as our local CCG, as they are our representatives. I feel relatively comfortable that the process will lead to options that are more acceptable to the population, because it involves local authorities as well as the NHS. We should, however, expect the outcomes of the process to be highly varied around the country. Some will be correct

[Richard Fuller]

and acceptable, and will go forward. Others will be controversial, and others will be downright wrong. We should not curse this whole process across the country, because it achieves a difference in outcome in different parts of the country. We should be prepared to look at each on its own merits and judge them accordingly.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Is there not a real challenge to reconcile the reticence to change and adapt with the clear imperative to have new technologies and new ways of doing things that can offer a step change, which are often resisted? Consultation will not necessarily deal with that.

Richard Fuller: My hon. Friend is right. I come back to the central part of what is different about STPs: they involve local authorities. On issues such as mental health and care in the community, that voice will be heard much more clearly. Our local authorities represent our local people—that is their interest. Their voice will make a substantial difference.

I have two brief final points about Bedford to which the Minister can perhaps reply. First, our CCG is under legal direction. Will that affect local decision making? Secondly, our CCG set up a joint committee with Milton Keynes to review acute services. Is he in a position to assure me that that joint CCG will not take any part whatever in the decision processes when the result of the STP is reached?

5.9 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In common with many other Members, I have received hundreds of emails from concerned constituents about the sustainability and transformation plans and what they mean for the NHS nationally, regionally and locally. To provide some local context, my constituency covers an area that sits largely in the middle of two health trusts: the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust and the Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust. There are four clinical commissioning groups: North Kirklees, Wakefield, Calderdale and Greater Huddersfield. We are in the borough of Kirklees Council, which serves a population in excess of 430,000.

The Mid Yorkshire trust is in the advanced stages of reconfiguration—or downgrade, as many people, including myself, see it. Dewsbury hospital will this week lose its consultant-led maternity unit, and there will be changes and reductions in services for acute surgery, gynaecology and paediatrics. Next spring, the A&E department will be reduced to an urgent care centre with no provision for acute services.

On the other side of my constituency sits the Huddersfield Royal Infirmary. The Greater Huddersfield and Calderdale CCGs have just completed a so-called consultation on their “reconfiguration of services”—or, once again, downgrades. If the proposals are accepted, the infirmary will have its A&E department downgraded and the whole of Kirklees, which includes all of my constituents, will be left without full A&E provision. That is over 430,000 people who will have to travel outside the borough to access vital emergency healthcare for themselves and their loved ones.

Kirklees is a vast geographical area that spans many towns and rural and semi-rural areas. Many people there rely solely on public transport as a means of travel, and parts of the borough are in the top 10% of the country’s most deprived areas, which brings about huge health issues and inequalities. The cuts to services are not improving life chances or enhancing healthcare provision; they are purely part of a cost-cutting exercise that could result in lives being put at risk. It has been reported just this afternoon that a senior representative from a local CCG has commented that it is almost as if NHS England is putting money before quality.

We now learn that the Government have set up STPs to look at health services on a larger footprint. Some might say that is akin to shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. How can these STPs work, given that we are so far down the line already? The reconfigurations and downgrades that have been developed are being implemented completely in isolation from each other, with no regard for the wider population or the geographical boundaries that they cover. How can the STPs work—unless, that is, they have been put in place simply to implement further cuts to our already overstretched NHS services?

Sadly, we on the Opposition Benches have to acknowledge that our NHS is in crisis. We are genuinely fearful for the future of health provision in our country, and that fear is shared by many health experts. The British Medical Association has said that

“one of the key aims of STPs is to achieve financial balance by 2020”,

and that it has concerns

“that this will be the priority for STPs rather than developing the best models for patients.”

The King’s Fund has said:

“Our assessment of draft plans shows that, in the absence of eye-watering efficiency improvements, there will be a financial gap running into hundreds of millions of pounds by 2020/21 in most of the footprints”,

and that even with cost efficiency measures that are already being implemented,

“it will still not be possible to achieve the financial balance expected by national regulators.”

Its assessment of seeing one STP struggle to achieve its goals was that it was like

“attempting to undertake synchronised swimming against a rip tide”.

How many more years will we have to endure this, and how many lives will be lost before the Government admit that their “efficiency plans” are simply not working and that the only way fully to address people’s needs is to stop the cuts and to pledge more money to fund our NHS adequately?

A constituent contacted me this week desperately worried about a loved one who was suffering many health problems in hospital. I said to her the words that many of us have used many times over the years, “At least he’s in the right place; he’s in hospital, getting the best care”. Although I know at first hand how hard those on the front line of our health service are working and how much our incredible staff do in our hospitals, how much confidence can we have in those words nowadays? At a time of diminishing budgets and major

cuts to services, can we really have confidence that our health services are adequate to provide the best care for our loved ones?

As Nye Bevan, whom I have quoted a number of times and will continue to quote, said:

“The NHS will last as long as there are folk left with faith to fight for it.”

Let it be known that I, along with my hon. Friends, will continue to fight tooth and nail to ensure that this Government do not succeed in destroying the health service that we hold so dear.

5.14 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a great honour to be able to speak in this important debate. We have heard some very interesting contributions, and some contributions which were, perhaps, less constructive. I will not state publicly which are which, but I would like to take up what was said by the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), who spoke of Labour's commitment to meeting the OECD's health spending average in 2001.

I think it perfectly acceptable, in a discussion of this kind, to point out that in 2001 the Labour Government had succeeded in running a balanced budget for four years, more or less, and we thought at the time that we had the money to meet that commitment. Having been a member of the Labour Government, the right hon. Gentleman will recall that over the next nine or 10 years we ran consecutive deficits, and as a consequence of policy that I happen to believe was misguided in many instances we had a deficit of £160 billion when the coalition Government took office in 2010. Given the circumstances, it was inevitable that there would be a constraint on finance, and that is something that we have to speak about.

If I recall correctly, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), whose speech I enjoyed very much, said that we kept talking about finance, and that it should be the third consideration. I wish it were as easy as that—I wish we could relegate finance to a subordinate, back-burner role—but I do not think that that would be fair to the country, or to our constituents.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Forgive me; I cannot. The debate is very constrained now, in terms of time.

The right hon. Gentleman talked, obviously, about the budget constraints, but he also talked about the fact that we were not spending enough money. I think that the STPs present the opportunity for a serious engagement with what all Members recognise is an ongoing problem. We have a growing population and an ageing population, and inevitably, whether we like it or not, issues of finance and resources will become increasingly important.

I am pleased to learn that local consultation will be at the centre of the draft proposal, because that is essential, and it is what our constituents want. There are two hospitals in my area; one is just outside my constituency but many of my constituents go to it, while Ashford hospital is in the centre of Spelthorne. A number of the facilities have been downgraded—it has been a difficult time—but the borough council and I, as the local Member of Parliament, always tried to explain to residents

what was driving the decisions and the changes that we sought to make, and they were broadly very understanding. I think that people throughout the country are very sensible when we explain to them and carry them with us, and that they take a measured view of health services. They realise that the old NHS of Nye Bevan and 1948 has had to evolve. I believe that they are much more open to evolution and change than many Members of Parliament.

The last point that I want to make is slightly negative. I have attended many debates of this kind—not necessarily on the health service, but on the economy and welfare—and all that I hear from Labour Members is the same old mantra: “Stop the cuts, more money.” That seems to be their sole solution to every single problem that we face as a country. It is said that to a man with a hammer, every problem is a nail. Labour Members seem to think that “Stop the cuts, more money” is the answer to everything, and I consider that entirely unconstructive. I find it very disappointing to hear no constructive ideas and no proposals for reform, and to observe no appetite for fresh thinking and absolutely nothing in the way of intellectual engagement with the real problems that we face as a nation. I find it very disappointing to take part in yet another debate and hear the same old mantra: “Stop the cuts, more money.”

5.19 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I want to start by saying that I very much agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that this ought to present a real opportunity. It has brought people together, and discussions have started across organisations that in the past have not talked to each other nearly enough—both across the health and social care divide, and also bringing in people from outside the health service and social care system—but I fear that the opportunity will be fatally undermined for three central reasons.

First, there is the point that I made in my challenge to the Minister, on mental health: unless every STP addresses the burden of mental ill health in every community centrally as part of its plan, it will fail. There is no doubt about that. I noted the Minister's attempt to reassure me, but the parliamentary answer I received recently did not reassure me, because it appears that it is not going to be a requirement that every plan must centrally address this problem. I understand that the more developed plans will do so, but if this is not done, it will absolutely fail. We are dealing often with some of the people who are failed most by the system, and who use A&E departments more than any other people, yet my fear is this will be a massive missed opportunity in that regard.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because I want to make the point again—I will say it very clearly—that if an STP does not come forward with very clear plans as to how the mental health and dementia programmes are going to move forward quickly, it will not go ahead. That cannot be clearer.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister for that, and I hope that that message goes out across the country,

[Norman Lamb]

because Andy Bell from the Centre for Mental Health today has again raised concern about the process in many parts of the country.

The second issue that causes me very real concern is the financial backdrop and the ability to deliver on the plans given the finances that are available. We have already heard that the bulk of the money that is available is going into clearing the deficits of providers, rather than into the transformation that is so necessary in order, as the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) made clear, to spend money more efficiently and effectively in delivering care for our communities.

Chris Ham, chief executive of the King's Fund and a well-respected commentator, says that its assessment of the draft plans

“shows that, in the absence of eye-watering efficiency improvements, there will be a financial gap running into hundreds of millions of pounds by 2020/21 in most of the footprints”—

not across the country, but in most footprints. This is completely unachievable, and he questions the deliverability of plans which include the closure of cottage hospitals in many areas—the very things that can keep people out of acute hospitals, yet we are planning in many areas to close them down. This seems to me to make no sense at all.

There is a related concern about governance. Currently in the NHS we regulate organisations, not systems, so within an STP footprint every organisation still has to focus on its own financial survival, rather than looking at the best approach for the entire health and care system in that locality. I fear that that in itself will be a central flaw.

Finally, there is the question of openness and transparency. I note the point that there will be a consultation process, but let me just tell the Government that if they really think that a formal consultation process after full draft plans have been produced in a secret process will in any way convince the public that they are being properly involved, it will fail. It is inevitable that it will fail. People are so suspicious of consultation processes that they simply do not believe that they are being properly engaged in them.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne made a good point: people are often prepared to go on a journey. They are prepared to listen to potentially radical changes and potentially to use money more effectively, but the only way they will do that is if they are involved from the start—involved in shaping the proposals, rather than responding to something that has been fixed behind closed doors. The hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) knows full well how the public react when they are presented with what looks like a fait accompli. If the public are not involved in the development of plans to close cottage hospitals, to slim down acute hospitals and to merge hospitals around the country, we should be in no doubt that those plans will be rejected. The Government will be facing a political disaster if they plough on in this way. They must, for example, open up and involve the non-executive directors, who have been told that they cannot even be part of the discussions. That is ridiculous. For goodness' sake, if we are to take people with us, we have to take them on a journey, engage with them and involve them in the plans.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab)
rose—

Norman Lamb: I will give way very briefly to the hon. Gentleman—[*Interruption.*] I am being given a clear signal by Mr Deputy Speaker that I should not—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. You have only 30 seconds to go.

Norman Lamb: I take your point, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am sorry for my ill discipline.

I will conclude by saying that this is the right approach but it will be undermined because of the rushed process which does not involve the public, because it does not take people with it on the journey and because there is not enough money to deliver the transformation that is required.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am dropping the time limit to four minutes in order to get everybody in.

5.26 pm

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I value our wonderful NHS, having volunteered again this summer in my local community hospital, and I should like to put on record my admiration for all the wonderful staff who provide great care, free at the point of delivery, in our communities. Every day, our NHS is performing 4,400 more operations and seeing 2,500 more people in A&E within four hours than it did in 2010. NHS spending in England is going up by £10 billion in real terms by 2020-21, of which £6 billion will be delivered by the end of 2016-17. Despite this, however, many communities are seeing big challenges, and it was really good to hear the calm, rational and knowledgeable comments from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) on that subject. As a result of those challenges, many of our communities are facing the reconfiguration of local services.

I want to speak briefly about my proposed local reconfiguration. My local clinical commissioning group is planning to downgrade the A&E department at Huddersfield royal infirmary, a hospital in my constituency. A huge community campaign called Hands Off HRI is supported by the local community, local MPs of all parties, local councillors and local GPs. If the downgrade happens, Huddersfield will be the biggest town in England without a full A&E, and patients needing A&E in our growing university town will have to travel all the way to Calderdale hospital along the notorious Elland by-pass.

On 25 May at Prime Minister's questions, when the then Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), was taking questions, I asked him about this reconfiguration. He said that any decisions “must be based on clear evidence that they will deliver better outcomes for patients.”—[*Official Report*, 25 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 534.]

He also said that these decisions by local clinicians would have to meet four key tests, and I want to update the House on how we are doing in that regard. The first test is that the plans must demonstrate public and patient engagement. However, the results of the official consultation show that some 80% of the Huddersfield

people who completed the survey said that the plan would make the care they receive worse. The second test is that the plans must have the support of GP commissioners. Okay, the commissioners on the CCG are proposing this change, but the Kirklees local medical committee, which represents 200 local GPs, has said that local resources should be developed instead and that this controversial plan should be dropped.

The third test is that the plans should be based on clinical evidence. I am pleased to say that the recent Care Quality Commission report gave the A&E departments at Halifax and Huddersfield good ratings, but the consultant-led maternity unit, which was centralised at Halifax nearly a decade ago, was rated as requiring improvement. The fourth test is that the plans must take account of patient choice. It is clear that patients want the millions of pounds that would be spent on a new planned care hospital in Huddersfield to be used instead to improve and safeguard existing local A&E services.

I am really not interested in the partisan politics of this. I am standing up to focus on fighting to save my local A&E unit. I really believe that patients should come first. In finishing, I have one question for the Minister. I am hearing that the STP plans for West Yorkshire will be released on 21 October, the day after my CCG makes its decision. How will that impact on the future for a full A&E department at Huddersfield royal infirmary?

5.29 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I have serious concerns about the lack of transparency in the process. If there had been more consultation, it would have been far more transparent. The plans' only aim is to fit funding, rather than to examine and improve services.

Hospitals are under huge pressure in Blackburn and the surrounding Pennine area—as I am sure you are aware, Mr Deputy Speaker—with the closure of the A&E at Chorley hospital. Coupled with the huge burden facing local authorities, the Pennine Lancashire health authority has the challenge of finding £238 million over the next five years. With the best will in the world from local authorities, NHS trusts and communities, I fear that the change will not be for the better under that kind of financial pressure.

Let us not forget the savage budget cuts that local authorities have faced. Blackburn with Darwen Council alone has already had to cut £100 million from its budget, with another £48 million to cut by 2020. I am not opposed in theory to a system approach of hospital trusts and local authorities working together. In fact, that was always one of our main aims during my many years as leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council, but it was used to improve services. It is not fair that that council has effectively been handed the task of improvement with vanishing resources.

The exemption of adult social care from STPs has caused concern in local authorities across the country. It is not helpful that they have been told to leave that bit out of their submitted plans because it does not quite fit in with the budget. That will certainly not produce a more efficient and better service. The funding gap in adult social care is a real crisis that local authorities must face, but no remedy to fix it is currently forthcoming. Many pressure groups, experts and even the chief executive of NHS England, Simon Stevens, have publicly advised

the Government to make extra funding available for social care, yet the Government have been silent. They have made no commitment to make additional funds available in 2017 to support adult social care. I would like to give them an opportunity today and will happily give way to a Minister if they are prepared to clarify that point. Will the Government make additional funds available to ease the burden on adult social care, leading to better transformation of services?

Like many of my constituents, I seek clarity on whether additional funding will be made available, because if it is not, STPs will fail miserably. If we really want a transparent process and improved services, before we move on to transformation I suggest that my colleagues and I are at least made aware of what the plans contain or are assured that resources will be available to stabilise NHS and local authority services.

5.33 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome the new ministerial team to their places. I also welcome the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), but may we have a more constructive debate about healthcare in future? She should not talk about cuts. She knows perfectly well that this Government will be putting an extra £10 billion a year into the NHS by 2020. That is not a cut. That is £10 billion extra of taxpayers' money. Will she please not mislead people by talking about cuts? As she well knows, her party did not commit to spending anything like that on the NHS.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I do not think that an hon. Member would try to mislead another. That is not a word that we would use.

Helen Whately: My apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker. I did not mean to use that word. The hon. Lady mentioned the £22 billion shortfall set out in the "Five Year Forward View" analysis, so will she clarify whether her party is now planning to make that up? If so, where will it find the money from? That was not entirely clear in her comments.

I will move on, because I sincerely believe we need a far more constructive debate about the real challenges the NHS faces and how to improve the care it provides to our constituents. The NHS is under pressure—no one here is denying that. I know it as well as anyone, as my grandmother spent five of the last six months of her life recently in hospital, and if the system had been better she would not have been there and would have had a much better end to her life. We know that people are living longer, with multiple conditions: about 70% of NHS spending goes on dealing with long-term conditions. The treatments available have increased vastly and are therefore more expensive than they were in the past, and patients expect far more of the NHS.

The NHS should not constantly be criticised, as is so often the case, as it is seriously rising to the challenge. It is performing thousands more operations, with thousands more patients being seen every day. In addition, in response to what happened at Mid Staffs and other such incidents, tens of thousands more doctors and nurses are working in the NHS. Skilled staff do not come about overnight; training takes years. A lot is therefore being done also to address the pressures on the NHS workforce. None of that should be overlooked, although it is also costly.

[Helen Whately]

I ask us all to focus on talking about how the NHS rises to the challenges it faces, doing so in a financially sustainable way. We do not have a blank sheet of paper for this; the “Five Year Forward View” was published in 2014. As you may well know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I have previously asked questions about what was happening to drive forward that review at the pace and scale needed. The STPs are a vital part of the process, as across the country they are about putting the five year forward view into practice. They are doing that in an important way, looking at the place and the whole population, bringing together a diversity of organisations across the NHS and involving local authorities. We are talking about organisations that are rarely in the same room. In Kent, organisations have come together where previously people have literally not spoken together—chief executives have not previously been in the same room together. This is really important. The STPs are also putting public health at the core of the future plans for health and care across the region, and they are looking not just at treatment but at how the population can be healthier and how we can reduce health inequalities.

Finally, I urge all colleagues to do what I am trying to do, which is make sure that the STP in their area rises to the challenges and delivers the care that we all want for our patients in future.

5.37 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): A recent report to my local health and wellbeing board on STPs stated:

“There is a growing consensus that one of the most powerful ways to achieve change is through local services working together—across entire communities and pathways of care—to find ways to close the gaps between where we are now, and where we need to be in the future.”

That was the hope of the many people who have written to me on this matter. I really appreciate the time they have taken to share their concerns with me, but I can give them little comfort as things stand. Regrettably, in my area the “footprint” is an area in Cheshire and Merseyside, not in the Liverpool city region. That was determined unilaterally by the governance structure and it is regrettable, getting the process off to the wrong start, with the suggestions of local political leaders dismissed. That act has compounded the problem, in that they are the very people the NHS should be consulting: local communities, the leaders of councils and local councillors. These are the democratically elected representatives in those areas.

This move is all the more disappointing given that there is a council leader who has responsibility for the health and social care brief across the city region. It is more than disappointing—it is bizarre, especially as local government is supposed to be a significant partner of the NHS. The Government have pushed the issues of health and social care integration no end, but it seems more in theory than in practice. NHS England can hardly put out a press release without mentioning it, yet I suspect that many health footprints are in the same situation as those in my constituency. There is no doubt that people are being excluded. I have emphasised this issue because it goes to the heart of the willingness of the NHS to step out of its self-imposed bureaucratic mindset. Worryingly, though, it appears to have an almost pathological inability to break out of it.

In my area, it is a case of going back to the past. The default position of my local NHS is to reinstate the old Cheshire and Merseyside health authority areas. My message is to stop and think. We are in the 21st century, not the 20th century. The reality is that the democratic lack of accountability in the NHS, certainly at a local level, leads to an inability to recognise that, in setting the terms of engagement with local community partners, it must do so before decisions are made, not after.

As far as I am concerned, the Government are telling us that all is well, that they have poured loads of money into the NHS and that there is enough in the system, so it is just a question of making better use of it. Yet the Germans spend 40% more per head than we do, and across the European Union the figure is 25%. People take the Government’s claims with a big pinch of salt, as all they see are waiting lists growing longer; ready access to their GPs becoming increasingly difficult; waiting times in A&E growing by the day; ongoing industrial disputes with junior doctors; and GP-led clinical commissioning groups beginning to start the process of rationing. And so it goes on. We need an NHS that has the consent of our community and an NHS that links in with communities. In this respect, I fear that the plans will turn out to be neither sustainable nor transformational, which will send the message that the NHS is not safe in Tory hands.

5.42 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Before I start, I wish to declare an interest as a registered nurse. I welcome this debate this afternoon as STPs are a really important issue and, as many Members have said, they have a huge potential to transform care at a local level, bringing in social care and third sector organisations. They represent a huge opportunity, and not one that we want to get wrong.

However, because many of these 44 STPs have not shared or consulted on their plans, there is a suspicion, rightly or wrongly, that they are an excuse to bring in cuts or to bridge financial deficits. I would welcome the Minister’s thoughts on this, and a signal that consultation will happen. That consultation is not happening at the moment, which is part of the problem. It enables those who want to perpetrate this myth and this fear that this is all about cuts to have some breathing space.

My area, which falls into the Sussex and East Surrey STP, has not published its STP. Although it makes great claims to be working with hospitals, clinical commissioning groups, local councils, GPs and HealthWatch, no one I know, and certainly no local MPs, has been involved in discussions about the process. I am very disappointed that some of our key community groups in Lewes and Seaford, such as our senior forums, Families for Autism and many other groups have not been consulted. It is right that STPs should submit their plans to NHS England to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach across the country, but it is vital that there is time for consultation. I am worried that there is only a short period after October for that to happen.

However, what I say to the doom-mongers who are trying to instil fear into my constituents is that if current investment is anything to go on, I am optimistic about what our STP will look like. My constituency

does not have a hospital. We depend on either the Royal Sussex county hospital in Brighton or Eastbourne district general hospital. We are seeing huge investment by this Government: £480 million on a new redevelopment of the Royal Sussex county hospital; £58 million promised for Eastbourne district general hospital; and a new multi-million pound radiotherapy suite at Eastbourne. Only last year, a new dialysis unit was opened in Polegate, which means that patients do not have to travel to Brighton three times a week for dialysis. Working with my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), we have been involved in developing a new state-of-the-art GP practice surgery in Eastbourne. There is a new Macmillan cancer centre in Sussex, and I could go on. There has been huge investment and new services that provide local treatment for local patients.

With all this investment, why are local people so worried about cuts? Despite an increase of £10 billion a year in funding, the NHS has to deliver £22 billion of savings. My constituents know that there is a 6% a year increase in demand for services, that more treatments are available that are costly and that there are more conditions that can be treated. There are concerns that we have not tackled wastage in the NHS, such as in the case of the chief executive of the troubled Southern mental health trust who was offered £240,000 for a new job instead of being investigated for the many hundreds of deaths that happened while she was in her previous role.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): To be efficient and effective, the NHS must stop these non-jobs. The creation of highly paid advisory roles is not helpful in letting patients be heard in this process, yet executives are heard, in terms of being given new offices and new pay cheques.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely, and £240,000—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Andy Slaughter.

5.45 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I hope that I am in a position to assist some of the Members who feel that they are in the dark or confused about what is in their STPs. That is not because my own sub-region, north-west London, is one of the two, I think, that have officially published their schemes—I fear that, like most NHS documents, it is written in a style and language that make it difficult for the ordinary public to understand. Rather, it is because, for north-west London, this process has not mushroomed overnight, as has been the case with STPs generally, but has been developed over four years. In the wonderful Orwellian language that is used, we have had something called “Shaping a Healthier Future” since the middle of 2012, and that has simply morphed into the STP, so I can perhaps give a little insight in the few moments that I have.

What did “Shaping a Healthier Future” mean? It meant the loss of 500 acute beds. It meant that of around nine major emergency hospitals two would, effectively, be downsized to primary care, and four A&Es would lose all their consultant services—and that, as far as I am aware, is still the plan. What has become clear with the transformation into STPs is that this is very much about money. The original language

four years ago was that unless we implemented these cuts to acute services, we would “go bankrupt”. When that language did not go down very well—not surprisingly—with the 2 million people affected in west London, the language changed, and it was all about clinical care.

I am pleased that at least the honesty is now back in the system, and the proposals are now very much about money. One sees why when my own hospital trust—a very important, prestigious trust called Imperial, which runs three major hospitals—is over £50 million in deficit this year alone. The CCGs are flatlining on funding. The importance of that is that the only possible justification for these major cuts in acute care is that social care, community care and primary care funding will be increased. How that is possible with budgets that are, at best, standing still, I really do not know.

The other interesting factor is the delays that have occurred over this time. We had this proposal in the middle of 2012 and a slight revision in February 2013—and then silence. I have lost count of the number of times I have been promised that a full business case will be published. I act as the unofficial shop steward for the 11 Labour MPs in the sub-region, and I summoned them all to a meeting and said, “You’re going to get the business plan this month.” It was going to be next Tuesday, and we were all coming in in the recess to look at it, but, guess what, it has been put off until at least after the new year.

Moreover, the plan is now thought to be so unwieldy and so difficult to achieve that it has been split in two. My own hospital—Charing Cross—was due to lose 90% of its acute beds and its consultant emergency services, and we simply do not know when the proposals will now be published, but it has already been taken outside of the STP process. In other words, it is beyond the five-year horizon, and nothing will happen until 2022. Now, in one way, of course, I am delighted that the demolition balls are not going into Charing Cross for that period, but in the meantime the lack of support the hospital is getting worries me greatly.

These STPs are a Trojan horse for cuts. They are about cuts in acute services before there are compensatory services. For that reason, Members should be extremely concerned and worried about them, and I am happy to share my pain and knowledge on the subject if any Members wish to hear about them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next Member, let me say that the person after the next speaker will go down to three minutes, and I encourage no interventions in order to get everybody in.

5.50 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): There are two things that we need to nail before we go any further. I listened to the Castro-esque monologue of the shadow Secretary of State, who prayed in aid the King’s Fund. She refused to take an intervention, but I was keen to ask her why she was not quoting the King’s Fund when it described privatisation in the NHS as a “myth”. Considering that the Conservative party has been in government for the longest time during the existence of the national health service, if we wanted to privatise it,

[Simon Hoare]

frankly, we would have done it by now. All Conservative Members, like all Labour Members, are champions of the NHS, determinedly and doggedly trying to ensure that our constituents have the very best healthcare.

I am also slightly incredulous about the “wanting to have the penny and the bun” approach that Opposition Front Benchers have advocated. They want to see greater transparency in the process, as we all do, but as soon as there is the whiff of an idea coming through in consultation, up they get with their shrouds, running around saying, “This is closing, everybody’s going to die, rickets is coming back.” It is therefore perfectly understandable, though regrettable, that, rather like a snail, those who are trying to think about changes retract further into their shell.

One idea for the Minister—I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this will not be ruled out of order—is that if we want to improve sustainability in healthcare and the health service, we should be taking advantage in our soon-to-be-free Brexit world of being able to have across the health service, through our procurement process, entirely British-made and produced foods and milk. That would certainly add to sustainability. I say this on the National Farmers Union’s Back British Farming day, and as a DEFRA Parliamentary Private Secretary.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) mentioned, there are problems afoot in my constituency with regard to the Westminster Memorial hospital at Shaftesbury, a popular and useful community hospital. This is causing enormous concern among my constituents. I for one, once as a district councillor and now as a Member of Parliament, firmly support and champion the provision and continuance of our community hospitals. They provide a very useful spoke in the healthcare framework in providing the transition from the acute sector, where there is often pressure on beds, right the way through, one hopes, to patients returning to their homes. I ask the Department to think about this. Often the word “consultation” is used when what is meant is “information”, and scenarios are not put forward. The public are not stupid. They need to know what happens here if they choose this option, and what happens there if they choose that option. I hope that even at this late-ish stage we can have some clearer guidance from the Department about how to go about consulting the population to make sure that they buy into these proposed changes.

I am keeping an open mind about the plans for healthcare across North Dorset. We cannot just close the door to innovative thinking and the need to meet modern clinical demands. Patient care must come first, although that cannot be a defence in order to try to avoid change and challenge in service provision. I hope that anchored in the Dorset plans for healthcare is a very clear role and place for our community hospitals, particularly in Shaftesbury.

5.53 pm

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): This so-called transformation process has been going on in fits and starts in Staffordshire since 2014. By 2020-21, the deficit will be £347 million, including social care, according to the draft STP presented behind closed doors in Whitehall in July. The Secretary of State has

refused to publish that plan, of course, but what is important is that the menu being cooked up behind the scenes is already being dished out in practice, with no meaningful public consultation, playing fast and loose with NHS guidelines. It is being driven by cost-cutting, bullied through by NHS England, not rational planning for better integrated care in the future, even if that means that, in the short term, the pressure on patients is increased, particularly at our local Royal Stoke University hospital, where the wretched sight of trolleys queuing up in A&E corridors is now commonplace.

Before the summer, the closure of ward 4 at the local Harplands hospital took away a safe place of discharge for patients with mental health problems. Cuts to the county’s better care fund threaten the viability of drug, alcohol and other services, as well as respite and rehab facilities such as those at Brighton House in Newcastle. Last month, we learned that both wards at Cheadle community hospital will close, further affecting discharges, while social services struggle to cope. Children’s A&E at Stafford has shut, and last week staff at Newcastle’s community hospital, Bradwell, learned that three of its wards are to close this winter or next spring. As a result of all that, the pressures on our local acute hospital will simply continue to multiply.

As a county, Staffordshire does not fit together as a healthcare whole. While the north and west look to Stoke, the south engages with Birmingham, Wolverhampton and even Worcester, and the east with Derby. Rather than plan integrated care along those pathways, I understand that a county-wide merger of everything is now on the cards. That monolith has been called, with no sense of irony, an accountable care organisation, yet the health and care transformation board has been anything but accountable so far, not least in relation to the pay that senior executives are raking off from this process.

The parachuted-in programme director, Penny Harris, is being paid a salary of £168,000 a year for a four-day week, and her deputy, Sarah Carter, is on £172,000 for a five-day week. The lead finance officer, Neil Chapman, is on £244,000 a year. Add in two other people on the Staffordshire board who are on £131,000 and the annual bill for just five of them comes to £846,000. Another £675,000 is going to KPMG, which means that more than £1.5 million is being paid by the local NHS. These people, quite simply, are devouring what is left in the pot for transformation.

5.57 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate.

Two hospitals serve my constituency, namely the Countess of Chester hospital and Leighton hospital, which is actually in my constituency. There are going to be pressures on Leighton hospital: the clinical commissioning group is indicating that it may cut its funding, despite an increase in funding to the four local CCGs that serve my constituency.

I was surprised by the speech made by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), because the big pressures on health in Cheshire are a result of the slash-and-burn tactics adopted by Labour in Wales. It is a case of, “Do as I say, not as I do.” Labour’s actions over the border in Wales have had an impact on health

services in Cheshire. It has cut the health budget—it has not even kept pace with inflation—and downgraded a huge number of hospitals. It has closed almost all the community hospitals, and it suggested that some patients would need to drive for more than two hours to access maternity wards. One of those hospitals would have been the Countess of Chester—it would have had to have served a huge rural hinterland—and it is not in Wales, so I take no lessons from the Labour party when it comes to transformation plans. Labour's actions in Wales mean cuts, the downgrading of services and worse access to care than the current position in England.

I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the transformation programme provides huge local opportunities, including to form tailor-made plans that will suit local populations, particularly in Cheshire, which has large rural populations. The opportunity to deliver more services in a primary care setting should be welcomed.

On funding for social care, I welcome the fact that changes in the budget mean that additional funding from council tax receipts will go to local authorities to help with their social care budgets. To that extent the involvement of the local authorities, Cheshire West and Chester, and Cheshire East, in the transformation plans, and in particular the integration of social care and health services, provides an opportunity which I hope the STP in Cheshire will seize.

6 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I draw attention to my entry in the register of interests. My husband is a non-executive board member of Chelsea and Westminster Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

Like many Members, I have had a very large mailbag about today's debate because so many of my constituents rely on the NHS to keep them and their families in good health, and they want the NHS to carry on providing good, appropriate services that are accessible and timely, and free at the point of entry. They want funding not only to address the deficit, but to invest in improvement of services. Those who work in the NHS care deeply about its future and want to be able to do their best for their patients.

Like the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), people in my constituency are deeply concerned about the future of Charing Cross hospital—a large general hospital with a busy A&E department in the neighbouring seat which serves many of my constituents. The hospital's future has been uncertain for at least five years, since the north-west London NHS first proposed closing A&E there and in four other north-west London hospitals.

People are extremely worried about the travel times from Chiswick to the nearest A&E, about the inevitable downgrading of the other services on that site once A&E goes, and about the capacity of neighbouring hospitals to cope with the inevitable additional pressure. The issue has been ongoing for a while for us.

The STP comes at a time when we have a £1 billion funding gap in north-west London. It is proposed to close 500 beds and a 40% cut is proposed in face-to-face consultations. This is against a background of rising population and increased health needs and in the context of our services currently missing many targets.

Social care cuts are crucial to the argument. How can STPs have any credibility if the NHS cannot plan nationally when the other main services relevant to people's long-term health are funded and controlled in a different place and in a different way and are being cut and cut and cut?

The north-west London STP, as I said, proposes cutting beds. We all want treatment to be less dependent on spending nights in hospital beds, and some reduction in acute beds is inevitable with changes in modern health provision, but 500 beds is a staggering number proposed to be cut in west London, where the population is rising and ageing.

I will end by responding to Members on the Government Benches about the funding gap in the NHS. The NHS would not have a funding crisis if this country matched the health funding per head of similar countries. The King's Fund has shown that the UK public purse spends a smaller proportion of GDP on healthcare than countries such as Portugal, Japan and the Netherlands. If those countries value health in this way, surely so can the UK.

6.3 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): First, I would like to place on record my thanks for the tremendous work of NHS staff throughout the country, in particular NHS staff in my constituency and the constituencies of other Members in Staffordshire, at the County hospital, the Royal Stoke hospital, GPs surgeries and so on. They have done a great job over the past five or six years when our health economy has been in the national spotlight.

Of course, we have had our own sustainability and transformation plan since 2012, with the trust special administration of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. It was an extremely difficult and challenging time and I want to draw out two points from that. The first was eloquently made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb)—the vital importance of consultation at every level. Do not leave people in the dark. There is nothing that my constituents like less than finding leaked reports and things that they are supposed to know about that they do not know about. Please keep as much in the public domain as possible. No doubt there will be plans that arouse anger and hostility, but it is better to deal with that properly and in public. That is what we discovered.

The second thing I want to say is: "Stick to what you agree." What the trust special administrator for Mid Staffordshire came out with was not what we wanted. In fact, it was far short of what we wanted, although it was better than the minimum that was proposed at first, largely as a result of our local campaign. We have just had, as the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) mentioned, the temporary closure of our children's emergency centre on safety grounds. That centre was specifically committed to in the trust special administrator's proposals, and it only opened a year and two months ago. It must be brought back immediately, or as soon as possible—that means in the next few weeks—because it was a commitment. Commitments that come out of the STPs must be met.

The final point I want to make, following on from what others have said, is that we spend too little of our GDP on health. Even *The Economist*, as it made clear

[Jeremy Lefroy]

in an article last week, says that we need to spend a higher proportion of our GDP on the NHS. That means raising the money; in my view, we should do so through higher rates of national insurance in the long term. My hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) and I wrote an article about this a couple of years ago, in which we recommended a hypothecated tax. I believe that that is still an important way forward. As others have said, the STPs offer a good opportunity to go forward and make necessary changes, particularly around health and social care, but STPs that do not look beyond 2020 at the percentage of our GDP that we spend on health and social care will not succeed.

6.6 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): The Nuffield Trust has said that the sustainability and transformation plans could lead to

“fundamental changes in the shape and nature of health and care services.”

As we have heard in this debate, despite the significance of the plans, there has been very little opportunity for patients, the public, NHS staff or Parliament to scrutinise them. The BBC has seen draft STPs that propose ward closures, cuts in bed numbers and changes to both A&E and GP care. The Nuffield Trust, which has examined the STPs, sees the same possible changes plus a questioning of the role of community or cottage hospitals, which Conservative Members have referred to. Those are the reasons why many people, including my constituents, are concerned about the lack of consultation on the plan.

In Greater Manchester, the devolution document “Taking Charge”, which was published last year, is being used as the basis for the STP for Greater Manchester. It outlines the need for integrated health and social care, and reform plans for cancer, mental health and a number of other services. Our health and social care partnership believes that it made significant efforts to reach out to local people with the “Taking Charge” document, but when I looked at it I found that the actual number of people who were definitely reached was quite a small proportion of the 2.5 million population of Greater Manchester. A number of information booklets were sent out, there were 200 meetings and 6,000 people completed a survey, but we have 2.5 million people living in Greater Manchester.

The document does not include detailed plans about which services will be changed or any cuts that will be made in Greater Manchester under the STP. The document does outline savings totalling £1.5 billion—including from things such as prevention, reform of NHS trusts, productivity savings and joint working—but it provides no detail about how that will be done.

The health and social care partnership board is now finding a number of gaps that need addressing, including in the delivery of the nine “must dos” in the five-year forward view. As with savings, decisions about how to deliver those “must dos” are bound to have a significant impact on existing local services. The financial situation of our health and social care sector is, to me, one of the most important issues. I am concerned that the Government are passing the buck to local authorities and NHS trusts, leaving them to make plans without sustainable funding.

In Greater Manchester, as the Minister probably knows, we have revised down the size of the funding gap to £1.75 billion, but that is still a very significant financial challenge for our area. There are plans to centralise mental health, pathology and radiology, but what will it mean? Will services close? Those are the sorts of decisions that local people are entitled to know about before the STPs are signed off. We have an opportunity in Greater Manchester to tailor services to local needs, but that opportunity for positive change will be lost if we do not have a more sustainable financial model for our health and social care services.

6.9 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow some very hard-working and committed campaigners on health issues, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who has done so much to champion the NHS. I join him in thanking all NHS staff members across the country, who work incredibly hard day in, day out. A lot of them do not get the thanks they deserve.

Compared with some Members, I have had an very good range of consultation exercises with my clinical commissioning group on the STPs. The group has engaged with MPs not just in Bath and north-east Somerset, where the Royal United hospital is located, but across Wiltshire and Swindon. If the ministerial team are looking at examples of best practice, I am more than happy to host them and the group on STPs in Bath and north-east Somerset to show them the work being done to engage thoroughly across the entire patch.

I am incredibly pleased to speak in today’s debate, because Bath has a range of very difficult niche concerns about healthcare—not just the ageing population, but the fact that in a city such as Bath we have not only one in five children living in poverty, but some of the highest levels of alcohol and substance misuse in the south-west, a fact which is often glossed over. The STPs will provide an excellent framework for tackling some of these issues, which have not necessarily been tackled previously. I am also incredibly pleased that the Minister will look at the idea of changing the funding formula in the NHS so that people who need more should get more. Unfortunately, the NHS has not necessarily been able to provide the funding that it absolutely needs to carry out reforms.

I fear that huge misconceptions and a lot of scaremongering have arisen from this debate. Unfortunately, that is harming what is likely to be an incredibly positive policy, which has been required for many years. In Bath, we want to work with Swindon and Wiltshire through the new sustainability and transformation plans, as well as with neighbours in other areas as well. Will this be a constantly evolving project, because as devolution is created throughout the UK, the plans will sometimes need to be changed to make sure they fit the new footprint as devolution comes into force?

In such debates, it is incredibly important to stand up for what one’s clinical commissioning group is asking for. I would be failing it if I did not say that, although this year the finances have been okay, the projected finances for next year will be incredibly difficult. We need funding to match the plans. I think everyone in the House agrees that we must ensure that funding matches the requirements of local communities.

6.12 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): To understand the significance of the Government's creation of the sustainability and transformation plans, we need to be aware of what has gone before and consider the extent of the financial crisis. In 2012, the coalition Government passed the Health and Social Care Act, paving the way for the privatisation of the national health service and removing the duty of the Secretary of State to provide and secure a comprehensive health service in England. I believe the STPs are a key part of the Government's plan to drive through privatisation.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the concern in our part of the world is that the word "sustainability" is all about financial sustainability, not the sustainability of services?

Margaret Greenwood: My right hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head.

Monday's *Liverpool Echo* leaked some of the detail of Merseyside and Cheshire's STP, reporting an anticipated £1 billion deficit by 2021. The STP talks about a

"need to reduce demand, reduce unwarranted variation and reduce cost."

Those are all very nice ambitions, but the idea of trying to reduce demand just to plug a £1 billion funding gap is, frankly, the wrong way to deal with planning a sensible health service. The STP also says that there is an "appetite" for hospital reconfiguration—an appetite among whom, one might ask—as the existing set-up is unaffordable. It says there will be a requirement for

"our hospitals to be reconfigured, consolidated with less sites and clinicians and consultants working increasingly in new emerging networks."

There is a problem with commas in the document, so who knows what it means. In other words, there will be cuts to staff and cuts to hospitals.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Does that not show—it was certainly the case in the Chorley A&E closure—how this is being done by stealth? There has clearly been an increase in demand, but the support has been spread, rather than targeted at localities.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The plan goes on to say that

"the shape and size of the hospital's bed base will need to be reconfigured".

In other words, there is a real threat to the number of available hospital beds we will have, and I am particularly concerned about Arrowe Park hospital in my constituency. One radical proposal is the merger of four major hospitals in the area.

Let us be clear: the STPs are vehicles for cuts. They are being devised in secret—hence the need for the local paper to leak the details—and are to be delivered by local areas at arm's length from the Secretary of State, just as the Health and Social Care Act 2012 allows. He can just shrug his shoulders and say that it is nothing to do with him. That is absolutely not good enough.

The Government must publish the STPs in full. They must provide time and resources for meaningful consultation with healthcare workers, the public and elected

representatives, and provide the extra funding the NHS so desperately needs. Otherwise, the STPs will prove the final piece in the privatisation jigsaw, and we will see the sale of assets, our hospitals sold off, and the break-up of services, with patients having to find their way around a fragmented and dwindling healthcare system. Our hard-working NHS staff will see more and more of their jobs moving to private providers and their pay, terms and conditions being undermined. The public absolutely do not want that. They know what the Government are up to—I have had such a big mailbag on this issue. People are concerned and absolutely understand the context. There is a way around this: it is time for the Government to hold up their hands, admit that they have been rumbled and put an end to their privatisation of the national health service.

6.16 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): We have all become accustomed to the Conservative party's disdain for our NHS since the shambles of the top-down reorganisation that began in 2012. Now we have the stealth introduction of sustainability and transformation plans—secret plans that would bring yet more unjustifiable and drastic reforms to cash-starved hospitals. Instead of being given the funding they so desperately need, hospitals are being asked to make £22 billion of efficiencies to compensate for this Government's total mismanagement of our NHS. The audacity of making hospitals themselves pay the price for that by threatening them with closure or the reduction of acute services is the final act of treachery in a tragic and deliberate play to decimate our NHS.

South Shields is part of the footprint area of Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, an arbitrarily created boundary. By 2021, the health and social care system in that footprint area is projected to be £960 million short of the funds it needs to balance its books while maintaining the same level of care for patients. Make no mistake: these plans are about cuts. They are nothing to do with transforming our NHS for the better. The NHS has been set an impossible task by the Government; the endgame is to see it in private hands.

The Government have said that the initial STP submissions to NHS England are

"for local use, and there are no plans to publish them centrally"—a nice touch to put the onus once on to our hospitals again, so that the Government themselves do not have to deal with the flak.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I would rather not, because a lot of people are waiting to speak.

I was born in South Tyneside hospital. I am the local MP for the area, and I have not seen a single plan—not even the governors at my local hospital have, let alone the people of Shields, whose vital acute and emergency services could be devastated by these changes.

I am told that the timetable for implementing these unseen plans begins this autumn, yet the first we will see of them in my area is at the end of this month—that is, in the autumn. I am extremely alarmed at the lack of accountability and transparency with which the plans

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

are being pushed through. There is simply no time at all for consultation. I make a plea to all NHS leaders not to be complicit but to stand up for their hospitals and the communities that they serve. The Government have no mandate for such a radical reconfiguration of our NHS, one that could involve the closure of accident and emergency and acute services up and down the country.

Last week, the Prime Minister called in NHS leaders to order them to stop any hospital mergers or closures that risk causing local protests. There is already a protest in my constituency.

6.19 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Before entering the Commons, I worked for 33 years in the NHS and saw and experienced on a daily basis the service that it provides to millions across the UK, from its GPs to its world-leading research and development. With 80% of hospitals in debt, bed-blocking at record highs, an ageing population, waiting times for cancer treatment lengthening, underfunding of social care, mass staff shortages in hospitals and a future where collaboration with the European Union is unclear, we should show our commitment to our NHS in its time of need and give it the funding it deserves so that it can succeed for all patients.

The NHS STPs do not clearly address those issues. As many hon. Members have said, they have been shrouded in secrecy and drawn up behind closed doors. There has been no public consultation, and there is a staggering lack of evidence that they will deliver the reductions and improvements the Government promise. They will be untried and untested, and will come at an unimaginable cost to patients if they are found not to be the right path to pursue.

I am a Greater Manchester MP. When the metro mayor plan was introduced, bold promises of devolving power to the region were made, including in health.

Dr Huq: My hon. Friend mentions local government. Is she aware that, in north-west London, which is one of the few areas not to have had its STP published, the London boroughs of Ealing and of Hammersmith and Fulham have not signed up to the STP? They are refusing to do so because it threatens the closure of both Ealing and Charing Cross hospitals. The mistrust and secrecy is everywhere, including in local government.

Liz McInnes: My hon. Friend highlights the secrecy surrounding STPs and the attempts of local authorities and the devolved regions, including Greater Manchester, to deal with devolved health issues, as they are supposed to do.

The promise to devolve health was front and centre of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. Metro mayors would need to be consulted like any other political leader, and the plans jeopardise the autonomy of the metro mayor's powers. The *British Medical Journal* states that STPs may risk the post of metro mayor

"becoming a rallying point for opposition to service reconfigurations."

Not only metro mayors and clear legislation are needed if the STPs are to be effective. Councillors and committees must be at heart of the planning process, and health and wellbeing boards must be an integral part of it. They are the only place where local political, clinical and professional leaders come together. They can be pivotal in driving change, but they seem to have been put on the waiting list for consultation.

As with the disastrous Health and Social Care Act 2012, overseen by the former Prime Minister, and now former MP for Witney, the proposals take us on a journey to another calamitous reorganisation of the NHS. It is now a necessity that the Government abandon the timetabling and scheduling of such a major restructure package. Perhaps now is the time to step down and take stock, like the former Prime Minister. I call on the Government and Secretary of State for Health to go back and reconsider not only the timeframe but the proposals in general, and to have a full and frank public consultation, allowing for transparency and debate at local and national level.

6.22 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This has been a high-quality and interesting debate. I welcome the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), to his new role. As he is new to the role, I will forgive him for not knowing precisely how many trusts ended last year in deficit—it is 80%, by the way. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander) said, that is the context in which we are discussing the plans, which means that the public will rightly be cynical about them, particularly if they are presented with a final plan. The Minister underplayed their development a little when he said that they were simply ideas. If that is all they are, let us see them.

We have heard contributions from the hon. Members for Bosworth (David Tredinnick), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston); my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown); my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff); the hon. Members for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately); my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd); the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield); my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter); the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare); my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly); the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach); my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury); the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy); my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley); the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett); and my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). I am sorry that I am unable to refer more to hon. Members' contributions because of the time pressures.

Let us get down to the brass tacks. This is another reorganisation of the NHS, only this time it is being done behind closed doors. It is not just a reorganisation but an admission, as if we did not already know it, that the Government got the last one wrong. The Opposition

do not need persuading that there is a benefit to more localised strategic oversight of the NHS and the health sector. We know that because we opposed the Government's decision to scrap strategic health authorities as part of the 2012 Act. Unlike the strategic health authorities they are now trying to replace, there is no statutory basis for STPs and there is no scrutiny or transparency at all. Despite this, they are being asked to go further than any body has ever had to in the entire history of the NHS in terms of the cuts they are being asked to make. These cuts are being cooked up behind closed doors. This is happening without the involvement of patients, carers, clinicians, trade unions and staff. Consultation with the public does not mean presenting them with a completed plan as a fait accompli and asking them whether they support it. It means involving them from day one. The bigger the change, the better it is to start early with that consultation.

In my area, what has been published about the Cheshire and Merseyside plan states that it

"will require our hospitals to be reconfigured, consolidated with less sites and clinicians and consultants."

Yes, that means fewer hospitals, fewer doctors and fewer nurses. No wonder the Government do not want to talk about it. Many Members, including the Chair of the Health Committee, have talked about the importance of consultation. We know from history that if an attempt is made significantly to alter local health services without engaging with the public and establishing local support at an early stage, it will fail. That is not just my view. This is what the Secretary of State himself said:

"the success of STPs will depend on having an open, engaging, and iterative process that involves patients, carers, citizens, clinicians, local community partners, parliamentarians, the independent and voluntary sectors, and local government".

That just has not happened so far.

Not only are the public locked out of contributing to this process, they cannot even find out what is happening. I submitted freedom of information requests to NHS England and the 44 STPs, asking for copies of the plans submitted in June. The deadline for replies is tomorrow and so far not one has been provided to me. Many have simply refused to provide me with the plans, using the exemption that they are "intended for future publication." When I asked the Minister when the June plans would be made available, I was surprised to read in his response that

"The June submissions were a 'checkpoint' and will not be published."

We have STPs saying one thing and Ministers saying something else about whether the plans will be even published. No wonder people are concerned about what is in them.

Is this not the nub of the matter? Plans about fundamental changes to local health services have been sitting on the Secretary of State's desk since June, but he will not release them. Surely in the interests of transparency they should be made publicly available now. There is nothing wrong in principle with the idea of local partners working collaboratively to transform health services, but there is everything wrong with doing so without transparency, public involvement or clear lines of accountability.

I welcome the new Minister, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), to the Government Front Bench. When he responds to the debate, will he commit to dropping the secrecy and listen to the concerns

of clinicians and patients, and ask each area to make their plans publicly available immediately? Will he clarify his role in the plans? When responding to a point made by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), he said that plans will not go ahead if they do not deliver for mental health. However, the Minister of State, in response to a written answer, said:

"The reconfiguration of services...is clinically led and a matter for the local National Health Service."

So which is it? Who will get the final say? Will it be the Government or will it be the local STPs?

What we have seen so far is a process that has failed to engage with just about every stakeholder imaginable, but even those who have been invited to attend the meetings are beginning to lose faith in the process. Council leaders and officers are queueing up to express their concerns. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle about how his council leader's concerns were dismissed. The Conservative leader of Kent County Council, Paul Carter, said:

"In Kent and Medway, NHS England is doing everything it can to keep local government out of it."

Izzi Seccombe, Conservative leader of Warwickshire County Council, said that local government was being "left out in the cold and not involved in the integration agenda."

If STPs are the answer, can the Minister tell us why even council leaders from his own party are finding themselves totally disengaged from this process?

Many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East and the hon. Members for Central Ayrshire and for Totnes, made the point that much of the money set aside for transformation has been spent on deficits, so let us not pretend that STPs are a panacea. Do not take my word for it; listen to what NHS providers are warning:

"We must be realistic about what STPs can achieve...and what they can deliver in terms of the £23 billion efficiencies required. It should not be overestimated."

Nigel Edwards, of the Nuffield Trust think-tank, says:

"I've been visiting a lot of STPs and nobody I've spoken to is confident they can reduce the financial gap."

Given the warnings we have already heard, will the Government seriously engage with the health service on the challenges they face, or will they continue to insist on impossible targets and unrealistic timetables?

I am sure the response will be the same one that we hear time and again: that the Government are investing £10 billion more in the NHS. We know, however, that that is an illusion. The Health Committee has confirmed that they are in fact delivering less than half of that, while at the same time chronically underfunding social care. The NHS has just had its biggest deficit in history under the stewardship of this Government, but the Secretary of State is not simply trying to convince us that he will maintain services at their current level, he is telling us that he will somehow do more.

The Government are in denial. It seems that virtually every day somebody is warning us that the NHS is on the brink of collapse. Only this weekend, the chief executive of NHS Providers said that

"we face a stark choice of investing the resources required to keep up with demand or watching the NHS slowly deteriorate".

The Society for Acute Medicine has warned us that the NHS could experience "pockets of meltdown". In the real world, not one serious commentator or senior NHS

[Justin Madders]

manager—not one—believes the NHS can deliver the services that it currently does, function safely, improve quality, move to 24/7 working and be financially sustainable. Let us end this charade; let us open up the debate and get to the truth about the damage being caused to the NHS by this Government. I commend this motion to the House.

6.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): In the six minutes available to me, it will not be possible to respond to the 40 or so speeches that we have heard today. I shall just pick out two contributions for special mention. First, so far as I can see, the shadow Secretary of State genuinely believes that an organisation that provides care to 45 million people on a budget of £100 billion should not do planning. That really appears to be the view of the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). Secondly, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made an excellent speech, in which she used the word “opportunity” in connection with STPs, which is what they provide. She also said usefully that healthcare systems were about “more than buildings.” As we go forward with this process, it is important that we all think about what that means.

The health service is not static. Technology is changing; drugs are changing; expectations are changing; and, as we have heard, demography is changing. It is right to try to make it evolve and help it to change. The STP process is the planning mechanism to do so. It is a planning mechanism to put in place a five-year view—this was in the manifesto—that NHS England has developed. If it is to work, it must have three things: it has to be care driven; it has to be properly funded; and it has to be locally driven. It is all those things.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab) rose—

David Mowat: I shall not take interventions; I now have only five minutes left.

When it comes to funding, we have put in an extra £10 billion, and it is real money. If that money had been available in Wales, some of the points raised in the debate about the interface between us and Wales would have been quite different. This year, the increase in health funding is 4% in real terms—three times the rate of inflation. The real point, however, is not to do with money—however much the Conservatives put in and however much Labour says it might put in, although we have not heard that yet. But however much is put in, it does not detract from the need for the health service to be managed effectively and properly so that it can improve and innovate.

There is a prize from these STPs. At the end of the process, we will have a health service that is more oriented towards primary and community care where people live. The health service will provide better access to GPs, emphasise prevention more than ad hoc responses, properly address long-term conditions such as diabetes and begin to address more quickly our mental health and dementia commitments. I say again that if STPs do not address those things, they will not go forward. Perhaps the most important of all the advantages is that

the unacceptable gap that currently exists between healthcare and social care will be breached. That is at the centre of the whole process.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: No, I will not. I have only four minutes left, but the hon. Lady, who worked with me on the Public Accounts Committee, can come and see me.

It is also true to say that if we achieve all those things, there will be lower hospital admissions and more humane and timely discharges. That might save money, but it is not being driven by the need to save money. It is driven by care needs because that is the right thing to do.

Let me deal quickly with the STP process. We have been told that it is a secret process and a Trojan horse for privatisation, and we have heard that we are not going to consult. Well, let us talk about consultation first. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) made some good points about the difficulties involved in change programmes on which proper consultation does not take place. However, we must have something on which to consult that is reasonably agreed and reasonably stable, because if we do not, we shall give rise to expectations that cannot necessarily be fulfilled—in both directions, positive and negative.

When the STPs come back in October after being signed off, they will be consulted on. A document that will be in the House of Commons Library by the end of the week will describe in detail how all the stakeholders will be consulted and what we will do, but in any event—this point was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns)—no consultation and no engagement will take away the statutory commitments, the need for configurations to be looked at properly, and the requirement for nothing to proceed that has not been locally agreed.

We were told that the plans were secret. In fact, they were so secret that they were announced in December 2015, in the NHS planning guidelines. They were so secret that 38 Degrees, which was responsible for the principal leak, obtained its information from the websites of the organisations that were keeping it all secret. If we ever do something in secret in future, it really will be done better than this.

The STP process is complex. It will not work equally well in all the locations, and there will be issues to resolve. Some plans, if they are not adequate, will not be proceeded with in the same way as others. I say this to Members, however: we need you to engage with the process—

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith. That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 195, Noes 280.

Division No. 67]

[6.37 pm]

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi

Anderson, Mr David
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian

Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Champion, Sarah
 Coaker, Vernon
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 Danczuk, Simon
 David, Wayne
 De Piero, Gloria
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Elliott, Tom
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Farrelly, Paul
 Farron, Tim
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Ffello, Robert
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Glass, Pat
 Glindon, Mary
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew

Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hoey, Kate
 Hollern, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, rh Alan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lamb, rh Norman
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McMahon, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Onn, Melanie
 Osamor, Kate
 Owen, Albert
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, Bridget

Pound, Stephen
 Pugh, John
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Emma
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin

Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Jeff Smith and
 Jessica Morden**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo

Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger

Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, rh Ben
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian

Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Leadsom, rh Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire

Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir
 Eric
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Sturdy, Julian

Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Symms, Mr Robert
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr
 John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Christopher Pincher and
Graham Stuart

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 (Consequential Provisions and Modifications) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 11 July, be approved.—(*David Mundell.*)

Question agreed to.

Nottingham Express Transit Extension

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

6.51 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I note the rush as everybody wants to join in this debate. They all seem to be leaving—what a surprise! I warmly welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who is sitting on the Front Bench—and rightly so. Who better than the hon. Member who represents Blackpool to deal with and respond to this debate about the extension of the tram system through my constituency and onwards to Toton.

I want to make it clear that this short debate is not about the rights and wrongs of trams or about funding. This debate is about looking at what happened as the tram works took over two years to be completed—an undoubted nightmare for residents and my business community. It is about learning lessons to ensure that we never get a repeat of an unfortunate and wholly unacceptable tale of woe over two years and eight months. I lived in Nottingham for about 25 years until I was elected in 2010 and I use the tram. It is a pleasant and modern form of public transport. I am not anti-tram, but I am anti the experiences of so many of my constituents.

The tram network cost £570 million. It was unfortunately eight months late. It has been a sorry tale. A photograph speaks a million words, so I have been asking people to look at my website and to follow the photographs that I have been tweeting because they really show what has been a nightmare for my constituents. We have to learn the lessons. We must also be aware that often when we undertake these huge pieces of infrastructure, many people feel that they have suffered incredible pain and have not actually gained much themselves.

I want to start with what is a big problem in our society. A huge swathe of our society feels that they have no voice post-referendum. They feel disconnected and unrepresented; in short, they feel powerless. A large number of my constituents in the affected area feel the same. I want to congratulate a Facebook page called the “NET Tram Extension Ranting Room”. It was created by one of my constituents, a man called Tony Smith. He will forgive me if I say that he was a completely ordinary person—in fact, he is a rather remarkable person. He set up the Facebook page in real frustration in the face of these tram works. As events have taken place, it has emerged that since about the 1990s people have, understandably, felt in favour of the tram. They want better transport—“We like it; it’s a good idea.” However, what we do not like is when people use aliases; they do things online and offline in their campaigning that create an atmosphere in which people feel, “I don’t agree with that, but I have no voice. I have no say. I can’t get involved in this. When I go to a public meeting, I am howled down.” People feel powerless, as happened in this case in the run-up to the public inquiry in about 2007.

I urge the Minister to examine public inquiries. I will write to him in more detail about how I feel we can ensure that ordinary people’s voices are genuinely heard. I am very concerned about some of these online questionnaires, which are very prescriptive, and about

the fact that people can organise in campaign groups and then misuse social media to make out that they have more supporters and followers than they have. In public inquiries, there is no genuine equality of arms. We were left dealing with this barrage of local authorities—the city council, the borough council and the county council—and the people who wanted to build the tram. They have the ability and the resources to employ experts, counsel and sometimes Queen’s counsel, although I make no complaint about any of these things. Often the campaign groups can do that, if they are well organised and have some money together, whereas an ordinary citizen often relies on their borough councillor. They are well meaning, good people, but they are nothing like as well prepared and do not have all the resources that others have. What has come out of the experience in my constituency is that ordinary people living on the very streets that were about to be dug up felt that they had no voice and no say. We must make sure that we have real equality of arms in public inquiries, so that everybody can be heard and everybody can be represented.

The “ranting room”, as it is now called, has almost 1,950 members. It is not always pretty, as the language is often fruity and I would completely dissociate myself from some of the comments. But this is a place where genuine, ordinary people came together to protest as they saw their community being dug up. They felt completely disfranchised and saw their lives being turned over. Out of this has come much good: a community has been formed; there have been a few romances, and lots of friendships have been made; and there has been a continuing desire to hold people to account and make sure that the lessons are learned.

What are those lessons? First, we must make sure there is proper consultation and that ordinary people feel that they have a voice and it is heard. We also must ensure that we plan properly for these huge pieces of infrastructure. We are looking towards some of the work that the Government have, quite properly embarked on, such as HS2. I am a great fan of HS2 and I stood on a clear platform of supporting it; the East Midlands Hub is coming to Toton, and that is extremely good news. I believe it is supported by the majority of people in my constituency. I believe the Minister has also had a project in his constituency, so he knows that these pieces of infrastructure must be done properly. Let us learn from these various experiences.

On proper planning, we must make clear the benefits that we seek to achieve. Obviously, if the tram system in Nottingham is extended into a place such as Toton—the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) is here and I know that the other line went to Clifton—the fundamental benefit will be to provide good public transport, not only for all those people who live along the line but for commuters who use the park-and-rides at the terminuses. We know that we want to get cars off the road, to get people into the city more quickly and to reduce emissions—those are all laudable things. I have no difficulty with making sure that people can catch the tram and go to the Queen’s Medical Centre, the Central College in my constituency or Nottingham University. These are all good things.

We should be looking with more care at the business cases often attached to these projects, and ensuring that some of the big claims that are made are accurate. The 2011 business case said that 10,000 jobs would be

[Anna Soubry]

created by the extension of the Nottingham tram system. Indeed, it said that the town of Beeston, which sits in my constituency, would be regenerated and transformed.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Anna Soubry: I think that there may be some hollow laughter from people in Beeston, which is a great town and a wonderful place with great independent shops, cafés, bars and fabulous pubs, as they are yet to see this regeneration and transformation. This is a town that was effectively strangled by the works. The works were meant to last for two years; in fact, they went on for an extra eight months. Yes, we do have a shiny new tram, and Beeston High Road, where my constituency office sits, looks good. Unfortunately, it is bereft of shoppers, and the town centre needs urgent and radical improvement. All of those things could have been done when the town was being dug up, but, sadly, they were not, and that was a really big and serious failure.

If we are creating huge pieces of infrastructure, we must look at the full picture so that when the infrastructure is completed in these residential, urban and suburban areas, everything is there that we want—the place is sorted out and the new transport is in place. Then the town can recover from what has been an extraordinary and damaging experience for people.

I have been talking about businesses, but residents too have been affected. I am thinking of the residents on Lower Road and Fletcher Road, two lovely, quiet cul-de-sacs, who suddenly found a major infrastructure project and power drills literally by their front doors. They were affected not just for a few weeks, but month after month. Indeed, it became year after year, and they had to live through it all—the photographs really do say it all. The issues still go on, because now we have problems with the drains. It is as if everything has been dug up and started again.

In that planning, it is also very important that tiny things are considered. They may seem very minor, but they are in fact hugely important. I am talking about the small details, the stuff of life that really makes a difference to the quality of people's lives. It makes a difference as to whether people feel engaged with something or totally alienated by it. Apparently, Sky News used to look at my email newsletter when I was raging on about these works and the inconvenience and upset that they were causing to my constituents. This may seem a small point, but it was incredibly important that my constituents could not get the fencing that they said they had been promised to screen the track. These were people who had enjoyed a green vista, either over the allotments or over a piece of green open space. The tram comes along, and they have all the disruption and then they find that they cannot get the right height of fence. I know it sounds small, but for people living on Brookland Drive, Lime Grove Avenue or Holkham Avenue, it meant an awful lot and we had to fight like tigers to get the right fence.

I pay tribute to the City Council in Nottingham, and, essentially, I understand what was happening. In effect, the tram benefits the citizens of Nottingham. It goes

through my constituency, and it does benefit those people who choose to use it, but the pain that it has caused has been extraordinary. We have a democratic gap in accountability. It is the people of Beeston and Chilwell who have suffered all this disruption, but the accountable authority was not their local council, but the city council. With great respect to John Collins, the leader of the city council and a man I like—he is not from the same political party but that does not matter; he would always meet me and try to help—this sounds harsh, but it was never in the city council's interests to sort it all out, because its members were not going to take the hit at the ballot box when the next set of elections came along. We need to ensure that there is some better way of doing things, so that there is genuine accountability when things do not go right.

Construction was a nightmare. We need good, responsible and efficient construction and proper communications with people. One of the things that drove wonderful community champions—a lot of good came out of this for the community, including wonderful people such as Allison Dobbs, who suddenly stepped up and almost devoted her life to representing people—was this terrible lack of communication. People were literally being told, "Oh, by the way, in two days' time you're moving out of your home for a week or so because we're going to work through the night." Carole Wall stepped forward as well. I also have to mention Lloyd Wildish, a man who had lived on Lower Road all his life, but who was ignored when he talked about the state of what was under the roads—his local knowledge was ignored. Obviously, construction has to be done on time, but we have to make sure that the works are done in a reasonably civilised way so that people's lives are not as blighted as they were when this huge piece of infrastructure was being built on their road.

I have a photograph of somebody on High Road. Her front room is almost on the pavement, and there is a man with an enormous drill leaning against a board that is leaning against her front window. That was the reality of life for people throughout the tram works. There must be a better way of doing things so that we take much more care about the lives of people living near these major pieces of infrastructure.

On working times, I accept that we have to crack a lot of eggs when we are doing these sorts of projects. Obviously, they can be hugely beneficial, but there must be better ways of organising things so that we reduce the dust, the noise and even the rats. As I say, it was a terrible experience for the residents, and, for many of them, it is one they will not forget. By way of example, we were told that High Road, which is where my constituency office is, would be closed in one direction for six months and then in the other direction for another six months. In the event, the whole road was closed for a year. Indeed, I brought my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) to see, and I do not think he could believe it. I brought my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) down, and I do not think our former Chancellor could believe the scale of the works and the incredible adverse impact they were having on business and the lives of ordinary people. Again, when it comes to construction, there has to be better organisation. When we promise people, by way of example, that there will be good communication, we should make sure that we deliver.

Literally putting a leaflet through a letterbox the night before some huge disruption takes place is simply not acceptable.

Let me turn to compensation. Part of the public inquiry talked about how businesses would be compensated, and plans were put in place. In the event, the area in which businesses could claim was far too restrictive. Then, as the whole of High Road was closed down and businesses were on the brink, frankly, of going under, it took a campaign to get funds, but we did it: we had a petition, we went to the city, we went to the county council and we got extra funds for, effectively, an emergency hardship fund. Again, I pay credit to the officials at Broxtowe Borough Council, at the city and at the county who did everything they could to speed that up, but it took an awful lot of aggravation from their Member of Parliament to achieve that. It should not take that; it should not need me to have to fire off emails, and go to the press and so on to make sure that businesses are properly compensated and properly taken care of.

It could be argued that that compensation should continue as businesses try to make good the damage that has been caused to the town of Beeston. For two years, as I said, the town was in the stranglehold of these construction works. We all know how we shop; most of us are creatures of habit. Of course, what has happened is that a large number of people have simply gone elsewhere and formed new shopping habits. I do not mean any disrespect to Long Eaton in Derbyshire—it is a very nice place—but people have undoubtedly gone off to Long Eaton to go shopping. They have formed new shopping habits, and now we have to drag them back—well, I do not want to drag them back; I want to encourage them back—to their previous habit of shopping in Beeston, but that takes a lot of effort. Again, it needs proper planning, and we need to do that before the event, not while the nightmare is unfolding.

For residents, however, there was no compensation at all. There was no compensation for the dust, the noise and the piledrivers, day after day, month after month, with people walking on duckboards with their shopping, their car parked further down the road, slipping in the dark with no streetlights. There was no compensation for that loss of amenity and that destruction of the quality of life. I urge the Minister to look at this when we go on to other big pieces of infrastructure projects, to make sure that we do not just dismiss residents and think, “Oh, they’ll put up with it. We’re cracking these few eggs to create this glorious omelette, and when the tram”—or the road, or HS2, or whatever it is—“comes, they’ll see that it was all worth it.” I have to tell the House that many of my constituents do not believe it has been worth it, by any means—and it still goes on. This is such a small thing, but I really hope that as a result of this debate somebody could go and put in the flowerbed that was promised, cut the grass, as was promised, and make the entrance to the lovely cul-de-sac that has been ripped up on Lower Road, going on to Fletcher Road, look good. That would give the residents just something back after everything that they have been through.

I do not want to sound overly negative, but there are those—some of whom have not always covered themselves with much glory in the way they have campaigned in favour of a further extension of the tram—who now

seek to persuade the city council to extend the route up into Kimberley and onwards into Eastwood. I do not represent Eastwood, but I do represent Kimberley. The good people of Kimberley have looked at what has happened in Beeston and share my concern that they will find that the works will not be worth it. I certainly will not support any extension of the tram works to anywhere else until such time as we have learned the lessons.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The right hon. Lady rightly asks the Minister to look at the lessons that can be learned from this important infrastructure project, which created real hardship for many of my constituents—residents and businesses—as it did for hers. Does she agree, however, that Nottingham City Council is to be congratulated on creating a world-class public transport system, such that the Campaign for Better Transport has recognised Nottingham as the least car-dependent city? The tram is reducing congestion, not just for those who use it but for those who drive on our city’s roads, cutting carbon emissions, and tackling air quality, which must be an issue in her constituency as it is in the centre of Nottingham.

Anna Soubry: Nottingham is not alone in having a tram system. Many other great cities in our country have tram systems, and many of the lessons to be learned will apply to them too. There is nothing new in it.

I like the tram, but, my goodness, we are going to need to have more debates in this place about the cost of trams, and the fact that they have to connect with other types of transport. That is absolutely critical. It is a crying shame that cyclists have found that the tram tracks are dangerous. I do not think there is any doubt about that, but if there is, we will have another debate about it, and I look forward to that. We have to connect up transport. Another thing that has come out of this is that there are now parts of my constituency where people cannot use their bicycle because of the narrowness of the route. This also applies to HS2. It is critical that we get the routes right so that we do not have a situation where a tram track, as in my constituency, is winding around when there was no doubt a better route that would have far better delivered people along the transport system and reduced the amount of disruption.

As I say, there are lessons to be learned. I look forward to my hon. Friend the Minister coming to Beeston, seeing the tram system, and speaking to my brilliant constituents. I know that he will take up these lessons and, I hope, apply them to all infrastructure projects as they go forward.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It was a pleasure to listen to the speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who spoke with her customary vim and vigour. It is fair to say that she and I share a great deal of experience of major tram works in our constituencies. They are not always plain sailing, particularly when they happen to cross the borough boundary of the sponsoring authority. That can cause problems and I recognise in what she has said a lot of my own past seven years as a Member of Parliament.

[Paul Maynard]

The Government are supportive of light rail in the right place. It is clear that it is a mode of transport that is convenient, reliable and increasingly popular. It also has considerable scope for innovation, particularly where it offers an alternative to expensive heavy rail solutions to potential transport problems. More people are travelling by tram and light rail than at any time since records began in 1983, with a 5.8% increase in the past year alone. The improvements being made to services are creating not just transport systems that people can rely on, but jobs, growth and opportunity—and the fly that seems to have taken an overly close interest in my head as I speak—as part of building an economy that works for everybody.

Recent analysis of six light rail networks by Transport Focus shows that overall journey satisfaction increased to 92% in 2015, and the figure is an incredible 98% in Nottingham. Those are the types of satisfaction figures that every politician dreams of—if we could but get them. That is why the Government have committed £371 million to the overall phase 2 of the Nottingham tram system.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend does not need me to highlight the importance of Greater Nottingham's economy, which is worth approximately £10.7 billion and supports about 300,000 locally based jobs. Nottingham is a regional capital and an important industrial and commercial centre. It is vital that it has a transport system that is reliable and can support customers, shoppers, commuters and visitors.

The light rail system is a key element in Greater Nottingham's transport strategy. Since phase 1 opened, it has served more than 10 million passengers a year, taking approximately 3 million car journeys off the local roads and improving accessibility for local communities. Phase 2 has been open for just over a year, and it is already clear that it is boosting the local economy and improving employment levels and supply chain expenditure in the local area.

There are an immense number of positives that I could list at great length in the time available, but I acknowledge my right hon. Friend's point that it has not all been plain sailing. Work on the extension presented a number of challenges, which affected the local community. Closing two main roads for six months for safety reasons had an immense impact on local communities, affecting trade for local businesses. During the Blackpool upgrade the centre of Cleveleys was cut off for a while and many of the businesses on Lord Street in the neighbouring town of Fleetwood also had to shut down, so I have seen for myself the impact that can have on a local community.

Although it is inevitable that any such project is going to cause disruption to third parties, including local residents and businesses, that needs to be properly and effectively managed and planned, in co-operation with the local community. I know that efforts were made by the promoters to help minimise the impact, but it is always clear that more can be done. I know that the promoters undertook a number of additional measures to help deal with the problems encountered along the way, including a discretionary financial package for small businesses and logistic support for traders and visitors during the particularly intrusive works. I suspect that my right hon. Friend herself had a significant hand

in the development of much of that. I think that such measures need to be put in place much earlier in the development of such schemes, so that businesses and residents have greater certainty about what help will come their way.

I know that there were particular concerns about communication with stakeholders and local people, and I agree entirely that engagement with businesses and residents must be undertaken, both at the time of the scheme's original development and throughout its construction, and in a timely fashion so that no one is taken unawares.

I am convinced that more can always be done in such situations. Uncertainty about both the timescale and the timeliness of works can harm small businesses and the decisions that people make about how they spend their lives, where they live and what they do with their properties. With that in mind, I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend that it is vital that lessons are learned in the construction of all major local infrastructure projects. I understand that, in this particular case, a lessons learned report is due to be published shortly. It will have to focus on issues such as project programming; delivery planning; how utility diversions can be managed better; the nature and extent of disruption to third parties; and the implementation of traffic management measures.

Both the Department and I will want to study the outcomes and conclusions of that report as we consider what further steps are required. I agree that we need to apply these lessons to future infrastructure projects to do all we can to minimise negative impacts, and we will work with UK Tram which represents the wider light rail sector to disseminate these findings.

I will be delighted to come to Beeston when we can fit a visit into our diaries and I look forward to meeting my right hon. Friend's constituents. I take note of her points about cycling safety. I have seen for myself in Blackpool that what appears to be a cycle path can be all too inviting, when in fact it is not a cycle path at all—it is a tram track, and cycles have no place on tram tracks. I entirely support the points that she makes on that.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for raising important points about taking care during infrastructure construction, but my constituents use the tram, they love it and they would like it to extend eventually to the east side of the city.

Paul Maynard: I note the hon. Gentleman's comments. I hope I have made it clear that I think there are immense benefits from light rail, both in Nottingham and around the country, but those positive aspects should not minimise the impact on those who live immediately adjacent to the tram tracks, who may encounter disruption. In my constituency the tram track has been there for 100 years, so when it was upgraded the disruption was no surprise to anyone. When we are planning new tram routes, that may come as more of a surprise to people, who were not expecting the route to appear on a particular road. It will always be a case, I suppose, of horses for courses.

Anna Soubry: Does my hon. Friend agree that we might have an interesting debate in this place about the safety of tram tracks and bicycles? There are many

examples in Sheffield and Edinburgh, I believe, and not just in Nottingham, of people who have suffered. I have a constituent who nearly died as a result of their wheels getting stuck in tram tracks. Does my hon. Friend share my concern? I can assure him that in a large part of the scheme in Nottingham, including in my constituency, the tram track and cycle routes are coterminous.

Paul Maynard: My right hon. Friend tempts me into what risks becoming a specialist subject of mine—the safety of the tram tracks in my own constituency. Whenever the road and the tram occupy the same space, it can be very difficult, particularly for visitors who are not familiar with the road layout. For Blackpool, being a tourist town, that is a particular concern. People do not realise that the tram track is in fact the tram track. I will be delighted to have that debate at some point. My frustration might be that I have to be the replying Minister, who therefore cannot take part in it.

I noted my right hon. Friend's important points about the public inquiry system. The process has to be collaborative from the beginning. As she noted, the project had to follow proper planning approval processes prior to construction, leading to a public inquiry. These inquiries are overseen by an independent inspector and the process allows both supporters and objectors to raise concerns, including consideration of the route alignment, whether alternative modes could be considered, and the anticipated transport, regeneration, environmental and socio-economic impact and benefits of such a scheme. As she knows, just such a public inquiry was held for Nottingham express transit phase 2, which would have considered views of all parties. However, I genuinely hear the points that she makes about the need for a balanced approach to ensure that everybody who

has an interest gets a fair chance to have their say, and that those contributions are considered in the round, rather than it being a case of he who shouts loudest. I look forward to hearing her views when she writes to me and we will look closely at them.

I note why the issue is important, with HS2 potentially coming to Toton. I know that the Secretary of State is yet to make an official decision, but I gather that no alternative location is currently being considered. That may well mean a serious application to extend the tramway to Toton, which would raise all these concerns yet again. We have to learn from what we did the first time around and ensure that, if the tramway is extended, those mistakes are not made again.

In conclusion, we will continue to work with the light rail and tram sector to help to bring down costs, but the decision over which schemes to develop will continue to rest with local areas. That said, it is vital that lessons are learned about minimising disruption with all sorts of infrastructure projects, allowing more communities around the country a say in how light rail—or, indeed, other solutions—is developed to benefit their communities.

I am a Minister with responsibility for light rail who is not unacquainted with trams. Light rail as a whole will have an important role to play, but it has to happen with communities and not simply to them. That will be my watchword as we move forward. I hope that we will see the growth of light rail across the country where it is most appropriate, working with the communities who will be affected, not against them.

Question put and agreed to.

7.25 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 14 September 2016

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

Social Fund Funeral Payments

9.30 am

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I beg to move,
That this House has considered Social Fund funeral payments.

May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David? I look forward to what I hope will be another constructive debate on this topic. Before commencing, it is appropriate to place on record my appreciation to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), and the hon. Members for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) and for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who have all campaigned on the huge disparity between people's profound need at a sincere time of grief and the support that Government are prepared to offer them.

I am also greatly indebted to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who as Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions compiled an important report on this subject, "Support for the Bereaved", which was published in March this year. I know that he wished to be here this morning but, due to scheduling, the Committee is taking evidence for an inquiry this morning, so its members are unable to do so. May I also welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery, the hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), to her place? I have not thus far engaged with her as a Minister, but I know her to be a compassionate Conservative. I know she is well placed to respond appropriately, and I trust that when she does, this debate will have a tangible outcome.

When the Select Committee's report was published, Citizens Advice in Northern Ireland commenced its work, motivated by a desire to assist those in society who often struggle to find the right information, let alone access the help they require. I believe that its quest should be ours today. While we should always strive to provide dignity in life, we must also ensure that people have dignity in death.

The problem can be summed up as curtly as this. SunLife's cost of dying survey puts the average cost of a funeral at £3,700. The average payment for the preceding year from the social fund was £1,347. That is a shortfall of 62%. We know that eligibility for the payment is confined to those in receipt of income support, housing benefit, tax credit, universal credit, pension credit, jobseeker's allowance or employment and support allowance. We therefore recognise as a society that any recipient of this payment is already in need of Government support to make ends meet. Starkly, we are forcing individuals for whom every penny counts to accept a financial burden of £2,300.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am listening very carefully indeed to the hon. Gentleman's speech, as ever. I invite him to take this opportunity to put on the record his appreciation for the contribution made by

armed services charities. In Northern Ireland, and I expect throughout the United Kingdom, those charities have been very good at helping the families of veterans when they fall on hard times and are unable to meet their funeral expenses.

Gavin Robinson: I am indebted to the hon. Lady. She is entirely right. At a time of grief and sorrow, pride sometimes gets in the way of people seeking the support they most earnestly need. While quietly and under the surface there are many membership organisations that, through benevolence, step in to support, they should not have to.

We are burdening those in receipt of benefits with a 62% deficit of £2,300. I know that the Government's position—indeed, it was accepted by the Select Committee—is that in all these instances people have a choice to make. They have a choice as to what type of funeral they have, whether they engage the services of a funeral director and whether they assume additional costs. We accept that people have choices.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He talks about choices. Does he agree that one of the invidious choices that some families have to make is going into considerable debt from a variety of sources in order to pay for a funeral? At a time when immediate relatives and next of kin are grieving tremendously and finding it very difficult to make ends meet, this added burden sometimes leads them to go to money lenders or other sources to get the resources.

Gavin Robinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When the Government talk about choices, they also express a desire for the ideal situation that people make provision for their own end of life. Ideally, that is what we should do. Ideally, it should come from our estate and from our savings, but those who are most in need are recipients of benefits from this society because we recognise that they cannot pay for themselves.

I ask this question of the Minister—I do not do so glibly, but it starkly illustrates the difficulty we have. Take JSA as one example. A recipient of JSA gets £73.10 per week. How much of that £73.10 do Government believe should be set aside for funeral provision? I do not wish to be facetious: that is the serious concern of many people who struggle by themselves and do not get enough from Government. We are saying, "Really, you should be saving for after life as well."

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining this debate. Does he agree that there is a degree of humility when it comes to folk who cannot afford to pay for a funeral? They also need more help when it comes to the form filling and the process itself.

Gavin Robinson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come on to some of those issues later in my speech, as well as recognising the particular difficulties we have in Northern Ireland when it comes to those choices. The Select Committee did a good bit of work on the application process and the SF200 form, which I will refer to later as well.

[Gavin Robinson]

The Minister will know that the social fund payment is broken into two categories: what is considered to be a non-discretionary award and what is considered to be a discretionary spend. The Committee has canvassed this issue. The Members I mentioned previously—the hon. Member for South Shields and others—have recognised that the £700 award, which was formulated at a time when it met discretionary spend needs, was frozen in 2003. The Bank of England's calculator suggests that that £700 is now worth £495.68, yet the costs have not frozen; they have risen exponentially. That figure was set at a time when Government said they would meet the costs, but I am afraid this policy is now compounding the debt and the pressure on families who look to Government for support. That is 13 years of diminished spend, and the cost of discretionary items has risen exponentially, at more than three times the rate of inflation year on year since 2003.

Let us consider what is discretionary. I do not find it comfortable that the provision of a representative of the clergy or an officiant at a ceremony is a discretionary spend. I know that people have different views on faith, but for me it is not a choice. I recognise that there are many in our country who do not live a faithful life but who, when they approach the end, build that relationship for what is to come. I do not believe that that spend—whether it is a faith-based clergyman or someone who will simply officiate at an ordinary funeral—should be discretionary, nor do I believe that the hiring of a place of worship should be. We cannot expect it to be a discretionary cost for people at a time of grief and sorrow to sort out a place aside from their home to welcome family and friends who want to pay their respects to their loved one.

Discretionary cost is also associated with a cremated remains plot or storage space. Cremation is a non-discretionary spend, so its cost is covered; burial is also a non-discretionary spend and interment is covered. Burials cost substantially more than cremations and the Government will cover the cost of interment of a body in a burial, yet providing a plot for ashes or a safe place for them to be kept is non-discretionary. Given that there is a huge saving for the Government in the discretionary element of cremation, the provision of a cremated remains plot or storage space should be moved from non-discretionary to discretionary.

Embalming is a discretionary spend. The Government say a family choose whether a body will be embalmed. It is not required scientifically, but is most important, should a family choose to have an open coffin or to spend time with their deceased loved one. As part of that categorisation of non-discretionary spend, the Government are making the choice more difficult for those in receipt of benefits or who can ill afford it. They are saying, "We will pay £700"—which in no way represents the cost of the non-discretionary items added together; indeed, it has been frozen since 2003 and is now worth less than £500—"but you choose: are you going to use it to have an officiant at a ceremony, to have a place to put the ashes of your loved one, to embalm the body before disposal or to mark their final resting place with a memorial?" It is appropriate to spell out these aspects of the end of life sincerely and earnestly, to illustrate some of the choices that the policy is asking people without sufficient means to make.

In an evidence session during the Select Committee's inquiry, an official from the Department for Work and Pensions said that, ideally, eligible claimants should know what their entitlement is before a funeral. It is sensible and plausible that people do not go to a funeral director and ask for these discretionary items, amassing a substantial cost that they can ill afford. That is sensible and, when I consider the delay in having a funeral in England and Wales, it is also practical. People may wait two, three or four weeks for a funeral. That is not so in Northern Ireland, where traditionally people are buried two or three days after death. So at a time of sorrow and grief, we not only ask people to come to terms with loss and their inability to provide for their loved one and to make arrangements, contact family and friends, but to contact DWP's advice line to see whether support is available. Three weeks sounds practical, but three days is less so, yet the constraints are the same across the country. Colleagues from other parts of the country may wish to add their experience, but in Northern Ireland the short time frame does not allow people to do what the DWP official described as ideal.

All this—the question of discretionary or non-discretionary and the cap in 2003—has led to a crisis of funeral poverty in this country. The Local Government Association has highlighted its concern. In 2009-10, there were 2,200 public health funerals, at a cost of £1.5 million to local authorities. In 2010-11, there were 2,900, at a cost of £2.1 million. The BBC survey of all local authorities in this country had a response rate of three quarters. It is estimated that there will be 3,500 public health funerals this year.

We know what they are. Paupers' funerals have been described as funerals for which there is simply no one to pay, no family support and no ability to give someone a send-off from a loved one, so the state steps in. The number of such funerals has risen exponentially to 3,500 this year. That has led the National Association of Funeral Directors to ask why, if funeral poverty is rising, social fund funeral payments have decreased. The social fund payments of £40 million in 2016 represent a 10.9% decrease from £44 million in the previous year. The number of public health funerals is rising and funeral poverty is rising, yet Government support is falling. With a fall of £4 million between last year and this year, we are returning to 1993 in real terms, when the Government spent £90 million on social fund funeral payments.

Last year, the social fund proudly stated that it had reduced outstanding debt and returned more than £150 million to the Treasury. The number of public health funerals is rising, spend is decreasing and the cost to local authorities and funeral poverty are rising; rather than proudly stating that they are handing £150 million back to the Treasury, the Government have the choice to use the money more appropriately and to provide the support that is needed.

To be fair, the Government gave a timely response to the Select Committee's report. The Minister has had the chance to consider some of her narrow brief—DWP is not a narrow Department and has many considerations—and today gives her the opportunity to add some meat to the skeletal response and skeletal commitments that were offered.

The Government have talked about dialogue between funeral directors, interested third parties and stakeholders. I will be interested to hear what the Minister says to

update the discussions that have been taking place since 2015. We should have an appropriate response from the Government today on how those discussions are progressing without just placing the onus on funeral directors.

There was much in the Select Committee's report about funeral directors doing this and that. The Government could define what a simple funeral is. There are choices, as I have outlined, about what is discretionary and what is non-discretionary. I will be interested to hear not just what stakeholders, funeral directors and their association are prepared to do, but what the Government are prepared to do.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on initiating this debate and on how comprehensively and eloquently he has introduced it. In my experience as an MP, people do not necessarily want to talk about funerals, but as they get older the issue becomes more of a burden and a worry. We have a new Prime Minister and a new direction in a Government who are not for the privileged few but for the many. This is an opportunity for the Government to take a new approach and relieve this burden from many elderly people—often widows living alone—who are worried about passing on debt to their families. This is a real opportunity, as my hon. Friend said, to have a new, fresh start.

Gavin Robinson: I agree entirely. In 2004, six years before I was elected, I was assisting in one of our advice centres. A lady came in and said she had nothing, but that she had been turned down for pension credit. When we looked at the reasons why, we saw she did have something. She had very few savings, but she had a lump sum of £4,000, which brought her total savings above the threshold for pension credit.

I asked her about the £4,000 and her response was, "That's not mine. That's Wilton's." Wilton is a funeral director in my constituency. For her in 2004, the consequence of doing what the Government asked of her—to take responsibility for herself and to take pride at the end of her life knowing that no one else would have to step in—was to be ineligible for the Government's pension credit when she needed it most.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate my hon. Friend's relaying that story to the Chamber; I am sure that many of us have similar stories. Just a few weeks ago, I dealt with a constituent who, to get out of that predicament, has paid for their funeral in advance so that the money cannot be held against them in their benefit claim. That is an awful situation in which to put constituents, especially elderly and vulnerable people living alone.

Gavin Robinson: Absolutely right. I am grateful for that intervention. It is also important, when someone makes that choice, that they tell their family or loved ones that they have done so; if they do not, it is perfectly plausible that a family member, doing their best for their loved one, will go off and engage someone else, not knowing that that financial provision had been made. The period of three days makes that a more likely proposition in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom.

We are talking about simple funeral costs and simple funerals. The Select Committee report considers what a simple funeral is. I believe—I hope that the Government will listen to this earnestly—that the £700 at which the amount was capped in 2003 not only needs to be increased to reflect the cost today, but should be indexed. It should rise with inflation so that we are today taking a decision that will not just change the situation for people in this financial year, but have a long-lasting positive impact for anyone who finds themselves in the position that we are discussing.

The Minister will know that one consideration was about the SF200 application form. Having had a chance to consider the matter following the Government response in May, can the Government say whether they will accept the recommendation and ensure that the form indicates clearly the conditions associated with who pays and who applies? That is very simple, but it means that when someone gets to the end of the process, either before or after the funeral, they do not find that Government support is not there for them and they are left with a debt.

The Government said that they were conducting their own direct research with users. I am keen to know where that is at and what it has uncovered. Additionally—I am sure that Scottish colleagues will raise this—there was a proposal that we should follow the Scottish model of indexing funeral payments with inflation. There was some criticism of that model in the Government response, but I would be keen to hear about that.

A particular issue that arose during the Committee's consideration was the situation in Northern Ireland with bereavement benefits. The Government have considered bereavement benefits and decided that it is inappropriate for cohabiting couples with children to be eligible. That is the Government's position. They have considered the Committee's report and decided to stick with that position, but in Northern Ireland we cannot, because the High Court found against the Northern Ireland Executive, so in Northern Ireland there is eligibility for cohabiting couples with dependent children.

Given that we administer what is a Government scheme in Northern Ireland—it is not a Northern Ireland Executive scheme, but the wider social fund of this country—I am keen to find out from the Minister, who may need to write to me, whether the money required to meet the additional burden in relation to bereavement benefit comes out of the Northern Ireland Executive's money or whether the Government are making up that shortfall even though they are unprepared to do so in the rest of the United Kingdom. We have found ourselves in this position because of the judiciary, and the courts may well step in in England as well.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate and on the very effective way in which he is putting across his case. Does he agree that in the interest of compassion at a time of bereavement, that judgment is actually right and the Government ought to look at the matter again in England and throughout the United Kingdom?

Gavin Robinson: I do agree, although the Government flag up what I think are important associated considerations. Could we see two individuals, one a married spouse out of the home and one a cohabiting spouse in the home,

[Gavin Robinson]

applying and have the difficulty of deciding who is entitled and who is not? The Government have flagged that up. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the matter needs further consideration. There is the particular issue for Northern Ireland, and I think that the wider impacts are worth further reflection.

There are a number of issues on which the Government hold no information, and I will go through them quickly. The Minister may or may not get a chance to take them down, but I know that many hon. Members wish to contribute to the debate. The Government hold no data on the number of people unable to afford a funeral, on the average cost of a funeral or on the types of funeral chosen. The Government have no idea of the number of people plunged into debt. The Government hold no data on the number of local authority or public health funerals and have no proportional breakdown in their accounts as to how the £40 million paid out of the social fund breaks down into discretionary and non-discretionary payments.

I refer to all that because those are the answers that hon. Members who have doggedly pursued this issue over many years have received. Having highlighted all that has been highlighted in this opening part of the debate, and in expectation of what is to come from colleagues, I think that answers to those questions must be the starting point for a Government who wish to deal appropriately with the disparity that people face and the debt that people are plunged into.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to introduce the debate and, as I said at the start, I commend all those who have done much more work on this issue than I have. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) said, with a new Government, a new Minister and the stated ideal of standing for those who need it most, this is one good opportunity for the Government to deliver.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Order. Seven hon. Members wish to speak. By my maths, that means between four and five minutes each. I hope that colleagues will be fair to one another and not squeeze anyone out.

9.56 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) on securing the debate. It is a pleasure to serve with you as our Chair, Sir David. I am privileged to follow the eloquence of the hon. Gentleman. I completely agree with all the points that he made, but I would like to bring my own perspective to this matter. I welcome the debate and feel that the fact that I unfortunately had to arrange my husband's funeral a few months ago has given me a close insight into the issues raised here today.

The death of a close family member or friend always comes as a terrible shock. Whether it was expected or unexpected, the emotions and feelings that immediately come to the surface are grief at the loss of the loved one and the knowledge that one's life has changed for ever. It should not be a time to have to worry about finances; it should be a time to grieve and come to terms with

that loss. However, in the society we live in today, we find that in many people's lives finances are uppermost in their minds as they struggle to make sense of the situation that they find themselves in.

My first point is that the necessary practicalities of arranging a funeral have to start almost immediately and the impact of that is that poorer families may quickly fall into debt. Although there may be some support for those on low incomes, it is becoming apparent that the grant of £700, which has been frozen for the last 13 years, can no longer cover the cost of a basic funeral. Those on low incomes may be able to claim the grant, but they still need to find the additional funds. As evidenced by the Work and Pensions Committee, many can run up huge credit card bills that spiral out of control or fall into the hands of payday loan companies or, even worse, loan sharks, causing long-term financial hardship that will be very difficult for some ever to get out of.

My second point is on the lack of openness about the cost of funerals. In my own case, it never occurred to me to shop around or do a price comparison. In the aftermath of a death, people are vulnerable and not always thinking straight. I just contacted the funeral director who I knew was very local, and I must add that they were extremely helpful, kind and respectful throughout the process, but it does seem to me that we should give this issue more thought and seek to persuade funeral directors to be open about their costs and make them available online, so that we can all make better informed choices. When I return to my constituency, I will be contacting the funeral directors in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough and urging them to do that.

Thirdly, I am exercised by the various tragic situations in which vulnerable low-income people, some found in my constituency, may find themselves following the death of a family member who they may have cared for. As we all know, an estimated 6.5 million people in this country are taking on the absolutely important job of looking after, and caring for, someone in their family or friendship circles. It is possible that during that time such a carer may be eligible to claim a carer's allowance, but following the death of that relative they will find, obviously, that the carer's allowance will cease to be paid to them. That may put them in a position where they need to claim for employment and support allowance. If they are found eligible, their income will be significantly reduced.

Even worse—I have to bring this up—some three months later, that person, perhaps one I have spoken to in my constituency, may have to pay the bedroom tax. That has the knock-on effect of their suddenly seeing their life, income and quality of life completely reduced. How many of us in this Chamber would be able to live on less than £50 a week? I hope the Minister will take that on board when she looks at the wider issues of bereavement in low-income families. The Government would have us believe that moving to a smaller property will deal with that issue, but we already know that we do not have enough properties anywhere to put people who are paying the bedroom tax into—we certainly have not got enough available.

I heard the hon. Member for Belfast East tell us that the Minister is a "compassionate Conservative"—not a phrase we often hear up in the north. I urge the Minister to take heed of the recent findings of the Work and

Pensions Committee and launch an urgent inquiry into the industry, to tackle the causes of funeral cost inflation and to address rising funeral poverty. Everyone, whatever their means, should be able to say goodbye to their loved ones with respect and dignity.

10.1 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for bringing this very important debate forward. I recall speaking on funeral poverty around this time last year, and was deeply encouraged by the consensus around the Chamber that the current situation was simply not sustainable. It is a sad and inescapable fact that far too many people struggle to put food on the table and keep body and soul together. They cannot afford to live and now we learn that they simply cannot afford to die. It is a very cruel fact and a cause of deep shame for all of us; it is a burden for too many families.

I was moved last year, following the debate, to support the Fair Funerals campaign. I wrote to every single undertaker in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran to ask that, as a matter of course, grieving families are offered the cheapest and most affordable option when they come to bury their loved ones. One would think that this might be offered automatically, but apparently, sadly, it is not. I simply cannot understand why it is not automatically offered.

Let us not forget that the families in question who are grieving are only thinking, naturally enough, of giving their loved ones the best and most fitting send off. Cost is not the first thought in their minds. For too many families, it is only after the event that the practicalities of payment truly hit home and leave so many struggling to pay off very high costs, saddling them with debt for many years in the future.

Social fund funeral payments vary depending on the particular circumstances of those seeking to bury their loved ones. However, for those already on benefits or low incomes, the payments are simply inadequate in the face of rising costs for even very modest funerals. They are simply not keeping pace with costs. The average award from the UK Government for help with a funeral in 2014-15 was £1,375, less than 40% of the estimated average cost of a funeral. Alongside that, burial and cremation charges continue to rise—80% over the last decade. This leaves grieving families struggling with grief, but unfortunately also struggling with debt. There is also some evidence to suggest that often people on benefits or low incomes do not even know that they qualify for the modest help that is available.

Of course, as has already been mentioned, we could encourage those who are able to afford them to take out monthly funeral payment plans. To those thinking of doing so, I urge caution. I suggest they either take careful advice or read the small print extremely closely, because over time many individuals end up paying much more than the cost of the funeral itself and the balance is not refunded to grieving families.

I say to the Minister that, to protect the public, the time has come for an official regulatory body to investigate capping the costs of funerals and, importantly, to compel funeral directors to inform clients of their lowest-cost options. That is so those who are grieving and will

struggle to pay back the high costs can make a more informed decision about the cost of funerals, with all the relevant information available to them.

The Scottish Government are doing much work on this and have commissioned a report in preparation for the devolution of funeral payments to the Scottish Government, but I think much more needs to be done. This issue confronts those on low incomes in Scotland and across the United Kingdom. I know that there is a level of consensus in this Chamber and I am interested to hear the Minister's response. I will finish where I began: it is to our shame that too many people cannot afford to live, and now simply cannot afford to die.

10.6 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) on setting the scene so movingly and thoughtfully. His speech was easy for us all to follow and appreciate and, more importantly, for the Minister to respond to. The funeral payment scheme that is currently in place is complex and certainly does not adequately cover the associated costs of a funeral. I am also pleased to see the Minister in her place and congratulate her on her elevation to the position she now holds. I understand that in the past the Minister has had a similar debate in Westminster Hall on this subject. I think I came along to support her and added a contribution at some point—which was uncharacteristic—and I very much look forward to her response.

I have had a number of cases in my office regarding funeral payments. One of the main problems is that people have to commit to the funeral without knowing whether their claim will be upheld. I have had people in my office who have had to take out payday loans—I would not recommend it—believing that the funeral will be paid for, only to be refused or given an amount of money well under what was needed to carry out the actual funeral. They are then left with truly massive bills and debts, because they believed they were eligible and wanted to respect the memory of their loved ones. The scheme was set up to prevent families from having to allow their loved ones to go through a pauper's funeral service, which is not a nice thing for a loved one.

I also commend what the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) referred to. In many cases when people come to my office I say, "Were they members of the services or any of the army regimental associations? Because there is help available through the Royal British Legion and the army associations as well." In some cases they can step in, but not always.

I was a councillor for 26 years and can well remember the odd time when a note was brought to the council saying that someone was to be given a pauper's funeral in that section of the graveyard. It is unbelievably sad to sit in a chamber when a name comes up and to think, "There must be some family or someone who knows them." All of a sudden, they are in the paupers' section. It is a very cheap funeral, but it is unbelievably sad that there is no one to claim the body and, worst still, that no one can afford to claim it.

My office regularly fills in forms, as lots of people come along for help and assistance. They are asked who their next of kin is, and there may be three or four

[*Jim Shannon*]

children. Who is on benefits? If three are and one is not, that means they will not get any help. The person who passed away may have four children or two children, whatever the case may be, and then somebody will come along and say they are estranged from their mum and have not spoken to her for many years, but they have to prove that. It is a very complex system. This is not something that any compassionate person would like to see.

In my opinion, unless there is reform of the scheme, as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East has referred to, we will see many more people put into the unmarked sections of council graveyards, as it used to be in days gone by. There will be even more people getting themselves into massive debt using extortionate lenders, and then the desperation takes over. I am not being dramatic in saying this. The cost to councils and health trusts of paupers' funerals in Northern Ireland has risen by almost 50% between 2010 and 2015. More than £180,000 has been spent in Northern Ireland since 2008 on funerals for people who die alone or without relatives able or willing to pay. Health trusts and councils have carried out about 90 funerals since 2008, and in 2013-14—the most recent period with the most complete statistics—around £32,600 was spent. The figure is about 46% more than the £22,200 recorded in 2008-09. However, spending fell a wee bit, to £25,500, in 2014-15.

Across the UK, the cost to councils of paupers' funerals has risen, as the Minister will know, by almost 30% to £1.7 million in the past four years, whereas the number of funerals has also risen by 11%. It shows the dire situation that people are in that they would allow a loved one's body to remain unclaimed for two weeks in a morgue and then allow them to be cremated or buried in the paupers' section. My hon. Friend referred to the £700 of state help available, but a no-frills funeral today costs £3,700.

I will conclude with these comments. A quick browse online on the likes of Macmillan Cancer Support, CLIC Sargent or other websites makes it very clear that people cannot rely on a grant to help them with the cost of a funeral. CLIC Sargent's website says:

"We can't give full details and exclusions here, so please don't take it for granted that you will get everything listed above", and refers to "necessary" or "reasonable" costs. It also states:

"Many people find that the Funeral Payment doesn't cover all the costs"—

that is very clear—and that it

"can also be reduced by the value of some of your child's estate...It is important to remember that if you do receive a funeral payment, it may not cover all the funeral costs."

That is aimed at grieving parents. Surely there is a better way that we can handle this. Therefore, I support a simplified approach, as my hon. Friend and colleague said. I also believe that the amount available must be uplifted to recognise the changing times we live in.

10.11 am

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I give thanks to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for bringing this debate to the Chamber and for his kind comments towards me.

Members will know that back in 2014, I introduced the Funeral Services Bill. This Bill called for the Government to carry out an overarching review of funeral affordability. At that time, more than 100,000 people were estimated to be suffering from funeral poverty. That means, simply, that they were unable to afford to bury their loved ones or had incurred significant debts in doing so. Since 2004, funeral costs have risen by a staggering 80%, with the average funeral generally costing just under £4,000. In this climate of rising costs, the only payments that have not increased are the Government-administered social fund funeral payments, for which, between 2014 and 2015, the Government turned down 24,000 applicants.

I am really proud that my Bill started a national conversation and gave this issue the prominence it needed. I have continued to campaign on behalf not just of those we know about who are struggling with funeral poverty, but of all those who have stayed silent, or who have stopped me in the street, written to me or sent me deeply personal messages stating that they would never want anyone to ever have to go through what they have—the stress, shame and indignity of not being able to offer their loved ones the one final goodbye they wanted. The pressure of that while trying to grieve is immensely distressing for so many people. In a country where we do not readily talk about death and dying, I have been heartened to see in the past few years a diminishing of the last great taboos of discussing dying and death.

I am not going to spend the time I have today going over how the social fund operates; I think hon. Members have done that justice already. I would like to use the short time I have to share my efforts, and those of other interested organisations since December 2014, in trying to seek some long-needed reform to the social fund payments through the introduction of an eligibility checker, as proposed in my Bill.

In late 2015, I, along with the National Association of Funeral Directors, Citizens Advice and others, attended a roundtable with the then Pensions Minister, Baroness Altmann. There was broad agreement that the introduction of an eligibility check would stem the tide of people committing to costs before they knew of any award, thus avoiding debt. At that roundtable, the Minister gave a cast-iron assurance that she would explore the eligibility-check option.

Correspondence between myself and the Minister continued. She advised me that research into the issues raised was ongoing, as were discussions with stakeholders. In April this year, I wrote to her dismayed that she had not mentioned the eligibility check in her recent correspondence. I pressed her for an update on the research and discussions with stakeholders that the Department had undertaken. I also asked for clarification that, as a wealth of research had already been conducted in this area, her Department were not simply duplicating existing work.

Two months later, I needed to remind the Minister that she had failed to respond to my letter. In that reminder, I also asked that the Government's response to the Work and Pensions Committee report on bereavement benefits, which also asked for an eligibility check, was corrected, as the Government falsely said in their response that an eligibility checker already exists. It does not and the record has still not been corrected.

I then received a letter simply dated July 2016 from the Minister. It said that:

“we are looking to see if a checker is the best solution”,

and that I would receive an update this summer. The Minister then resigned, saying:

“Unfortunately over the past year, short-term political considerations, exacerbated by the EU referendum, have inhibited good policy-making.”

Well, no shock there.

Although I am always keen to debate these issues, I am totally fed up with the Government's poor response and incompetence on this issue, and the way in which this Minister's predecessors have messed me and all these other organisations around. I welcome the new Minister to her place and have read her letter to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who chairs the Work and Pensions Committee. In it, she also writes of conversations with stakeholders. I imagine that stakeholders can only say the same thing so many times without getting completely fed up.

My questions to the Minister today are really simple: what research has been done by her Department? Where on earth can any of us find it? Who are these mystery stakeholders? I want to make it very clear to all those suffering from funeral poverty that even if this Government continue to let them down, I and my colleagues never will.

10.16 am

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) not only on securing and initiating this debate, but on his in-depth analysis of the situation regarding social fund payments for funerals and its background. He said that payments in this area have been frozen for years and discussed the issue of working with the funeral industry. In such circumstances, perhaps capitalism takes over, rather than the needs of the individual.

I am particularly struck by the fact that many people on low incomes who face end-of-life issues, whether abruptly or as a result of a serious illness, are provided with additional stress because of their low income. It is something they could do without, and I immediately think of those I have been involved with. There are people on a low income as a result of their illness—for example, those with contaminated bloods—and have all the associated problems from that. It means they have no ability to work. People may have hepatitis C or HIV, which can bring on death much more quickly; as a result, their relations perhaps cannot pay for funerals. We have to be particularly compassionate and we are looking for a compassionate response today from the Minister. Above all, we are looking for actions.

It is appropriate that we are debating the social fund funeral payments and associated funeral poverty. As the hon. Gentleman and others across the House today have highlighted, although payments may be a devolved matter, the DWP is responsible for the level of payment, which has been frozen at £700 for the past 13 years.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the report published by the Work and Pensions Committee earlier this year. It identified and characterised the crux of the problem as the rising cost of funerals and the decreased value of

state funeral payments, which are pushing families into debt and distress. The Minister should take that on board in her response today, in her further interrogation of the matter before a final response is made to the Work and Pensions Committee report and in her further actions, but she should also realise that the changing nature of welfare reform has had impacts that have placed low-income families into greater poverty.

The falling value of state support is exacerbated by the rising cost of funerals. The Fair Funerals Campaign estimates that the social fund now covers, on average, only 37% of an overall funeral bill. At this time of great sadness, and maybe remorse in some cases, high funeral costs are not only an added financial burden. Funeral poverty can cause great distress, and perhaps feelings of shame and stigma, as people struggle to carry out a basic human ritual. The grief and stress caused by the death of a loved one are prolonged and added to by financial worry and hardship. Those in the funeral industry try to delay sending out bills because they recognise that there are particular problems, but there is a need for greater conversation and, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) suggested, a cap on funeral charges, which could assist people on low incomes.

I support the calls from the Northern Ireland Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux, and from others in the independent sector in Northern Ireland who have given so much support to people, that the Department for Work and Pensions should follow the lead of the Scottish Government, who plan to increase the payments once they obtain these devolved powers.

Funeral poverty is a problem not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the regions of the UK. The DWP should increase the level of social fund funeral payments to reflect that, and I hope the Minister will today indicate that the Department wishes to move towards a certain path or trajectory that will allow the unfreezing of funeral payments and a corresponding increase in order to relate funeral payments to the cost of living out there. Indexing the payment is much fairer than the current system, in which we have seen a 13-year freeze as funeral costs soar.

We are discussing a sensitive, sad and regretful situation for many people, and it is important that the DWP engages with the funeral industry, responds to the Select Committee report and introduces a legislative amendment to increase funeral payments whereby those on low incomes who in some instances face the abrupt death of a loved one, or a death following a long period of sickness and inability to work, are given the due solace that they urgently demand and very much deserve.

10.23 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. Like others, I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) on securing a debate on this delicate and emotive subject.

It appears that even the dead are subject to austerity. Real-terms spending from the funeral fund has decreased over the years whereas, as we have heard, the cost of funerals has increased and a £700 cap on particular costs has remained in place since 2003—that has been a

[Alan Brown]

failure of successive Governments. We have heard that the average payment covers only 40% of the average cost of a funeral.

The House has had wider debates about dignity in dying. It seems that the poorest in our society might not get the chance of dignity in death, but the reality is that they are not the ones who suffer. It is their dependants who have the stress of trying to find the money and the stress, and possibly even the feeling of shame, of not being able to send off their loved one as they see fit. Under the current system, dependants also have to live with the stress of signing up for funeral costs, then applying for a grant and then waiting to see what money they might get back.

The processing timescales can also be an issue. Earlier this year I was contacted by a distressed constituent who was advised that the average processing time was five to six weeks. In 2015-16 some 30% of applications took longer to process than the 15-day turnaround target. Such performance is almost commendable given that answers to my written questions have confirmed that the number of staff working in the social fund section of the DWP has halved from 798 in 2013-14 to 349 in 2015-16, which is shocking.

Even after the award of a grant, a family might have to suffer the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions trying to recover the costs from the deceased's estate. With a static budget of £40 million, I question the value of pursuing estates, which last year returned a yield of only £200,000, or just 0.5%. Will the Minister advise us on the merits of pursuing such estates? What costs are associated with the recovery? The administration probably outweighs the costs recovered.

The only thing worse for families than the stress of waiting to hear how much they might be awarded is the stress of outright rejection. In 2014-15, the rejection rate was 37%, despite a massive decrease in the number of applications since 2010-11. Coincidentally, 2010-11 was the year that budget loans became eligible for funeral expenses, too—that is something else on which the Government hold no data. The Government clearly need to streamline the system to make eligibility easier to understand.

Changing tack slightly, Oxfam's recent report found that the richest 10% of the UK population own more than half of the country's total wealth. The top 1% own nearly a quarter, whereas the poorest 20% share just 0.8%. What have the Government done about the widening inequality in both life and death? In their most recent Budget, the Tories introduced a measure to help the families of the deceased: inheritance tax relief of some £2.6 billion. There was also a reduction in capital gains tax of some £3.4 billion. That is £6 billion of giveaways to the rich, yet the funeral payment fund stays static at £40 million. The Government could easily double funeral payments to cover 100% of average funeral costs without materially affecting the UK budget. For me, that would be the real face of compassionate conservatism.

I am glad that the transfer of powers means that the Scottish Government have already stated that they plan a 10-day turnaround for applications and a more streamlined and dignified system—they are currently consulting on such matters—but the reality is that they have to manage that within an ever-tightening budget.

As we have heard, the UK Government have no real data to give the Scottish Government a good starting point.

This issue is about doing the right thing, even though many people will not know the importance of such payments until they reach this point in life. The Scottish Government's attitude in their consultation exercise is to do the right thing, and hopefully the UK Government will learn from that. We certainly do not want to see the return of paupers' graves. We can afford greater dignity for families suffering bereavement.

10.28 am

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) for securing this debate on such an important matter. Like many hon. Members here, I participated in last year's debate on funeral poverty and am pleased to see that the Work and Pensions Committee has since conducted an inquiry into the matter. I agree with the Committee's recommendation that the price of a basic funeral should be agreed with the industry and that social fund funeral payments should be set at that level.

As others have noted, the level of state support via social fund funeral payments has been frozen since 2003. According to research by the Fair Funerals campaign, the average award of £1,225 covers only 35% of the cost of a funeral. For those who do not meet the qualifications to receive the payment, finding the money to cover the difference is incredibly difficult—many Members mentioned that in this debate and in previous debates.

As indicated by research conducted by the Fair Funerals campaign and others, for various reasons many do not shop around for funeral quotes. Oft times, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, they are initially offered higher-priced services by funeral directors rather than being given lower-priced services.

I have recently been made aware of a case in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill about a local funeral home that, notably, had not signed on to the fair funerals pledge. My constituent had requested that a non-essential component of the funeral not be included. However, they were billed for it and later told that they owed the money, because that non-essential service was standard. Furthermore, they were significantly overcharged for services that, because of the circumstances of the death, would have been impossible for the funeral home to provide at all. I do not have time to go into the detail, but when a family member of the deceased attempted to discuss the discrepancies in the bill with the funeral home, they were ignored and forced to pay the bill.

In the light of that case and others that have been reported, I welcome the Work and Pensions Committee's recommendation that an index of local funeral directors and their comparative costs for a fair funeral should be publicised. I further suggest that the industry-agreed price of a basic funeral—the price at which the social fund funeral payment is to be set—should also be publicised, with a breakdown of the services included in it, as other hon. Members touched on. Easy access to that information would be most helpful, and I would welcome the introduction of an eligibility checker.

In North Lanarkshire, the council area in which my constituency falls, funeral costs rose by 13% between 2014 and 2015 alone. According to Citizens Advice Scotland, the total cost of a funeral for those living in my constituency falls somewhere between £2,600 and £8,000. As more than half of households in North Lanarkshire have an annual household income of under £20,000, the cost of a funeral in my constituency can represent more than a third of annual household income.

The cost is particularly acute since a third of the UK population have savings of £250 or less. Recent reports have found that not only are many unable to pay for the cost of a funeral, but 40% of people find themselves forced to incur high-interest credit card debt or forced to take out a high-interest short-term loan to cover the shortfall. According to a finding published in *The Guardian* on 20 October 2014, Jobcentre staff have actively been encouraging individuals to take on such debt to pay for funeral costs.

A defence that funeral providers often use is that users have a choice of services. But, given the urgency of the situation, the lack of transparency in the options and costs that many funeral services provide, the cultural and social pressures to provide a good send-off and the difficulty of dealing with any administrative issue while in grief and often shock, some funeral providers are clearly taking advantage.

Given the rising cost of funerals and the number of people forced to take on short-term high-interest debts such as payday loans to pay for them, I suggest that an extension of the eligibility requirements for receiving a social fund funeral payment should be taken into consideration, to limit the number of individuals forced to take on debt to cover the shortfall. The social fund funeral payment is essential for those on lower incomes. However, it is set too low, the administration is bureaucratic and cumbersome for people at their most vulnerable, and the current qualifications for receiving it are too strict. I therefore urge the Minister to work to eradicate funeral poverty through amending the funeral payment; to take those providing funeral services to task; and to consider the recommendations of the Work and Pensions Committee and the points made by hon. Members today.

10.33 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) on securing the debate and introducing it in a very effective and compassionate way.

For the sake of those watching the debate, let me start by explaining some of the issues. Social fund funeral payments cover the actual expenses of a funeral, such as the burial plot, grave-digging, cremation fees, reasonable transport costs to move the body and reasonable expenses for one return journey within the UK for a responsible person to arrange or attend the funeral. In addition, as we have heard from other hon. Members, up to £700 can be paid for such things as funeral directors' fees, flowers, church fees and so on. The payments have been capped at that level since April 2003.

The Welfare Reform Act 2012 extended the scope of budgeting loans to include funeral costs, allowing claimants to top up the payment via loans deducted from their

future benefit payments. In our view, that has allowed the UK Government to dodge the responsibility of increasing the cap in line with inflation; the grant today would be £1,027.66 if it had been increased in line with the retail prices index.

The funeral payment form can be obtained by going to a Jobcentre Plus office, by downloading it from gov.uk, or with a call to the 0345 Department for Work and Pensions bereavement service helpline, which costs up to 55p a minute from a mobile phone. I put it to the Minister that such helplines should be free to the consumer; they should not have to pay 55p a minute for them. Payments can be, and normally are, recovered from the deceased by the Department. Funeral expenses are legally the first charge on the estate.

The social fund will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament with other social security powers. Separately and in advance, after the scandals about the disposal of infant remains by hospitals and local authorities, the Scottish Government legislated to update the law around burials, cremations and funerals with an Act that was passed unanimously by the Scottish Parliament. The key relevant points are that it gives the Scottish Government the power to regulate funeral directors, issue a code of practice for them—although there are two voluntary trade bodies for funeral directors, around 20% are not members of either—and issue guidance on the costs of funeral expenses, and that it allows local authorities to provide travelling expenses to relevant people in case of the death of a looked-after child or adult.

The DWP social fund funeral payment application form is 23 pages long, with 12 pages of accompanying notes—a lengthy form by normal standards, but particularly strenuous when filled in by someone dealing with death of a close relative or friend. In 2014-15, 59% of applications were successful in gaining an award. The time taken to process the forms, along with the DWP policy to pay only invoices for actual incurred expenses, rather than advancing cash to pay expenses, can mean real problems for those organising funerals and reluctance from funeral directors to allow terms on tick. In contrast to the DWP policy on universal credit, for example, the form can only be posted or handed in to a Jobcentre Plus office; it cannot be done online. That leads to many extra days' delay through posting and processing. I ask the Minister to look specifically at that issue.

The Scottish Government have highlighted the disparity between the process for paying benefit to a terminally ill claimant and the process for paying for their funeral. Claims based on the DS1500 form take an average of six days to process—one of the few parts of the DWP system that appear to work extremely effectively and efficiently. But when death is, unfortunately, inevitable in the near future, no cognisance is taken in regard to funeral payments. The Scottish Government are examining whether DS1500 applicants or their proxies can apply for the funeral payment and receive a decision in principle before they die, allowing them and their families to plan more effectively and decrease the stress and confusion following their death.

The UK Government cannot go on ignoring the needs of people on low incomes. Funeral costs are, sadly, an inevitable part of people's lives. Forcing people already on benefits to pick up the enormous cost of a funeral is heartless and cruel. Citizens Advice Scotland states:

[Chris Stephens]

“The UK Government’s funeral payments fund has failed to keep up with the real cost of funerals in the last few years leaving some families saddled with debt to bury or cremate their loved ones.”

The average award from the UK Government for help with a funeral in 2014-15 was £1,375—less than 40% of the estimated cost of an average funeral in the UK, which is £3,702. We ask the UK Government to commit to increasing spending and increasing the uptake of their social fund funeral payments, to ensure that payment meets the essential cost of a funeral and to further increase the package available in Scotland.

My hon. Friends the Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) have already made the point that the UK Government must urgently consider tightening regulation of the funeral industry to ensure that the continuous rising cost of funerals is stopped in its tracks, so that lower-income families are not left with a huge financial burden at their time of grief.

Citizens Advice Scotland said in 2015 that there had been an increase of 35% in the number of advice sessions with clients about funeral costs, taking such sessions to their highest level ever. Within the industry itself, there is also a worrying trend for encouraging people to enrol in what are sometimes cost-inefficient funeral plans, as we have already heard from hon. Members in this debate, in the belief that it will save their loved ones money when the time comes. In many cases, it can mean that the individual ends up paying thousands of pounds more than the actual cost of a funeral.

The Scottish Government’s new powers over funeral payments provide an opportunity to set up a new benefit that is more streamlined, more predictable and better integrated with Scottish policy, as part of a wider focus on funeral costs and funeral planning. The Scottish Government have recognised the impact of rising funeral costs on families on low incomes.

We believe that a new system could help to combat funeral poverty in Scotland. Therefore, the Scottish Government have commissioned a report and recommendations by John Birrell, chair of the Scottish working group on funeral poverty, to consider what action can be taken in a number of sectors. We need to look at speeding up the time it takes for a decision to be made about funeral payments, and we also need to put in place monitoring arrangements to track funeral poverty, alongside plans to evaluate funeral payments.

In closing, I will say that this Parliament had a great debate last year on assisted dying and the consensus of all hon. Members across the House was that people were entitled to a good death. I would like the Government to consider that people are not only entitled to a good death but to a good funeral.

10.41 am

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As always, Sir David, it is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), not only on securing this debate but on the compassionate, sensitive and very eloquent way in which he put his case across. In particular, his

comments about the importance of ensuring that there is dignity in death as well as in life really resonated with me, as I am sure they did with all Members here in Westminster Hall today and beyond.

There have been a number of memorable speeches in this debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), in memory of her husband—our dear colleague, Harry—and the personal experience that she went through. She made a point very sensitively, in a speech that was very moving as a whole, about the worry that people experience regarding finances as well as having to come to terms with their grief. Almost across the board today, the point was strongly made that the issues around debt that people face as a result of funeral costs compound their grief. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), following in the wake of her ten-minute rule Bill, very eloquently described the issues that arise.

The Government are facing some confusion around the eligibility checker for the social fund. Does it exist, or not? Will it be used, or not? Progress in this area has been disappointing and I know that the Minister will address that in her response to the debate.

There is an issue about fair funerals. An important point was made about the need for us to consider looking at regulation of funeral services, in light of some of the overcharging that has occurred.

Although the point that the social fund for funeral payments just has not kept pace with inflation is very important, I will not labour it. The hon. Member for Belfast East has already made the important point that the figure for payments is the equivalent of £495 today; it has remained static since 2003 and it does not cover the cost of the average funeral. I would be grateful if the Minister told us what plans the Government have to update that figure and said whether any such uprating would be index-linked and continue in the future.

In addition to the adequacy—or not—of the social fund funeral payments, there is also an issue about people’s eligibility for support; again, that point has already been made this morning. That issue must be looked at.

We heard about the approach being taken in Northern Ireland about cohabiting couples. I will cite one of my own constituency cases, involving the father of a constituent. Sadly, my constituent’s father passed away in the summer. He was given a funeral. My constituent’s dad had been living with his partner, but for various reasons his partner did not want to get involved in the funeral and was unable to pay for it. So it fell on my constituent to organise the funeral himself, at a cost of more than £2,000.

My constituent is in a low-paid job and is supported by universal credit, so he could not afford the cost of the funeral. He tried to apply for a social fund payment, but because his father had been living with his partner he was told that he was not eligible. His father’s partner had not applied for a social fund payment, but he was still told that he was not eligible for such a payment. Obviously, my constituent will appeal that decision and he has my support for that appeal.

The eligibility issue has been raised a number of times today and consideration of it was also included in a report by the University of Bath. That report said that

the Department for Work and Pensions rules take no account of the status of relationships and particularly the quality of relationships. Once again, if the Minister could examine that issue I would be very grateful to her.

The other point made consistently throughout the debate is about the issue of debt, particularly for those already on low incomes. A very valid point was made—I cannot remember who made it—about the context of all the welfare reforms that are currently going through. How on earth are people meant to save for funerals given that someone might die unexpectedly? That is a real issue. There is a scandal here. We had hoped that we had put these stories behind us. We are not in Victorian days—we are the fifth richest country in the world, and there is this increase in paupers' funerals. As I say, this is not Victorian Britain; this is 21st century Britain and the situation is quite scandalous.

There was a report in *The Guardian* earlier this year that a Liverpool credit union had been inundated with requests for help, as people tried to acquire cheaper credit; the alternatives were payday loans or, even worse, going to loan sharks. Meeting funeral costs is a real worry for people. Similarly, the UK Cards Association says that payment of funeral costs is the single most placed payment that people make using credit cards. I am also worried that the Government are not collecting any data on this issue and that we cannot monitor the worsening state of affairs. Again, I would be very grateful if the Minister said exactly how she intends to address these issues.

There is a silent epidemic of funeral poverty, which, as I say, has been adding to the grief of losing a loved one. Given the Prime Minister's very welcome words about tackling the injustices in this country, could this be an area where the Government take action? We need action and not just words.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): It is, of course, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir David.

I add my congratulations to those that have already been offered to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), not only on securing this important debate but on the sincere and thoughtful way that he has addressed a really difficult and emotional subject. Many Members have already paid tribute to him for how he has tackled this issue, but I also thank him for the particular way that he has addressed it.

Of course, a period of bereavement is a very difficult time; bereavement is one of the toughest experiences that any individual or family will ever face. This debate has raised many very important issues and asked important questions about how the Government can best support the bereaved and vulnerable people who are going through that experience, including the practical challenges that bereavement causes.

I fully understand the importance of providing the right support at the right time. The hon. Member for Belfast East has caused me to consider the real cultural differences in different parts of the United Kingdom. His example from Northern Ireland, where a funeral will usually be conducted within just a few days, highlights that the issue is about ensuring that the support is there in a timely fashion. There is a big contrast with other parts

of the UK, such as England, where the period before the funeral might be as long as three weeks. I thank him for making me think about that this morning.

An awful lot of work has been taking place on funeral payments and support for the bereaved. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck), even if she asked me some challenging questions this morning. She has been most robust in how she has tackled my Department on this matter. She had a private Member's Bill last year, and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) raised the matter in a Westminster Hall debate last year.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) mentioned that debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for mentioning the fact that I raised this issue in a Westminster Hall debate, albeit at somewhat of a tangent to this morning's debate; I think that was two years ago. Perhaps this is an annual occasion in Westminster Hall, where we have the opportunity to raise these serious issues and to discuss—for me, from a very different position—the challenges that remain within bereavement services and how the Government and the funeral industry can help. If I remember correctly, when I raised the issue, I was particularly tackling the relationship between funeral directors and hospitals.

More recently, members of the Work and Pensions Committee—I thank them for their work; they are not here today because they are serving on the Committee—have looked in detail at the support the Government provide for the bereaved. I thank them for their insight and recommendations. In particular, I thank the Chairman for the correspondence we have shared since I came into this post.

Quite rightly, the debate has focused on the costs of funerals and on the application process for funeral expenses payments. I will respond to those points and to many of the other points that have been raised, but first, it is important to set on the record the support that the Department provides for vulnerable people at a difficult time. We continue to make a significant contribution towards the cost of a simple, respectful funeral for applicants on qualifying income-related benefits. We meet the full necessary costs of a burial or cremation, which we know can vary. Before I came to this place, I was the cabinet member in my local authority with responsibility for cemeteries and graveyards. I can remember that we constantly reviewed the costs of burial plots and compared how they varied across even one county. Those costs vary enormously across an entire country.

The cost of any medical references or the removal of active implanted medical devices will be covered for cremations, as well as reasonable costs if a body has to be moved more than 50 miles. Travel costs are covered for the applicant to arrange and attend the funeral. In addition, as many Members have said, the Department also meets other costs up to a maximum of £700. In 2014-15, funeral expenses payments were paid for around 6% of deaths in Great Britain. The average payment made has increased in value over the past 10 years by about 27%—from £1,081 in 2005-06 to £1,375 in 2014-15—as necessary costs have increased.

Despite the current economic uncertainty and pressures for savings, we have protected the £700 limit for other costs people face. However, we know that in the majority

[Caroline Nokes]

of claims the other funeral costs exceed the £700 limit. In 2012, we made interest-free social fund budgeting loans available for funeral costs in addition to the funeral expenses payment. Last year the average award for budgeting loans was £413.

The loans can be crucial in supporting people at a difficult time by ensuring that they do not face financial pressures caused by turning to high-cost lenders or credit cards. We have heard from Members about payday loans and the use of credit cards for paying funeral costs. It is important to emphasise that we made those payments available in 2012 and that they are interest-free. It is worth noting that this country provides the most generous support, after Norway, for funeral expenses compared with other European countries. However, we know that there is more we can do, and I want to turn to the specific issues raised during the debate.

The hon. Member for Belfast East spoke eloquently and with a great amount of detail, much of which pertained specifically to Northern Ireland. He will know that the Northern Ireland Executive are responsible for the funeral expenses payment scheme in Northern Ireland. He raised a very specific matter about bereavement benefits and cohabiting couples. He mentioned the recent court case, which indicated that the Northern Ireland Executive would have to treat cohabiting couples the same as married couples. I am aware that the Executive are appealing the case, and we understand that a date for the appeal hearing has been set for 24 October this year. The Government are watching that matter closely and will consider the implications of the outcome of that appeal.

The hon. Gentleman and many other Members have mentioned the issue of eligibility checkers. We have considered the merits of an online checker, but that can cause additional confusion to bereaved people. The research we have done with service users indicates that the bereaved often prefer to talk to someone in person. That was something I discovered when talking to the banking industry.

When the next of kin has to report a bereavement to the bank, they often prefer to do it in person or by talking to someone, rather than doing it online. That is why we have a dedicated bereavement telephony service, where staff are incredibly highly trained. They are specialists in what they do. At the end of the day, we are determined to provide the best service and the service that people want in their time of need.

We are investigating other solutions, including giving claimants an earlier decision on eligibility before they commit to funeral arrangements, but we want to test that with users. Via the social fund, the Department collects and publishes comprehensive data on applicants,

application and award volumes, expenditure and processing time. That allows the Department to monitor the operation of the scheme. Extra data could be generated, but that would come at a significant cost, both in money and time. Although the £700 is not index-linked, there is no cap on the necessary costs category, which is where we have seen much of the inflationary pressure. Inflation in funeral costs has been reflected in the year-on-year rise in average payment amounts. As I said earlier, the average payment has increased in value by about 27%.

In the short time I have left, I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). She adds a very personal dimension to this issue, and I thank her for sharing her experiences with us. We are considering a systematic review with the industry on the causes of funeral cost inflation. The hon. Member for South Shields talked about round tables and discussions with the industry and stakeholders. I assure her that if Twitter is anything to go by, there is absolutely no reluctance on their part to meet me and discuss these important issues. I have meetings scheduled for next month, when we return after the conference recess.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned the consultation with the Scottish Government. As she might expect, we are watching that closely. We are having ongoing discussions with the funeral industry, academics and bereavement services to ensure that we continue to look at this important issue. We believe that the best approach is to work with the industry, rather than dictating a cap on costs, but we want to see absolute transparency on costs and the provision of price lists that people can take away from funeral directors. Through that, the bereaved will have greater knowledge of what they are paying for and how much things will cost them.

When considering the level of support for funeral costs, a balance needs to be struck. We do not want to see the funeral expenses scheme influence or inflate the prices charged by the industry for a simple funeral. The scheme cannot undermine personal and family responsibility for meeting funeral costs. I take on board the point that the hon. Lady made about payment schemes. If nothing else, the debate has caused me to think carefully about how we can best encourage people to find responsible schemes, should they wish to take out some sort of insurance policy.

I am conscious that I am very tight on time. I will draw my speech to a close simply by thanking Members for a very constructive and informative debate. The points made will certainly help my discussions with the industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Social Fund funeral payments.

Airguns (Under-18s)

11 am

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of airguns by under-18s.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David, and to have the opportunity to raise this issue so that the Minister can deal with it. The genesis of this debate commences with the tragic death of George Atkinson at the age of 13 as a result of an airgun accident. It is the wish of George's parents, John and Jayne Atkinson, my constituents, to support action to help prevent such a tragedy from happening again. Although the events of George's death happened 17 years ago, I do not need to remind the House that the pain of that loss remains strong for the family. The wish to help to prevent further such tragedies remains strong. Sadly, the circumstances of George's death could be repeated today unless further action is taken, which I hope the Minister will consider.

I will explain what happened to George on that day in July 1999. George died when a pellet from an airgun hit his head following the gun going off accidentally in the home of his cousin, aged 10, who was with him at the time. The boys were in the garden of the property with at least five other children when the incident occurred. George and his cousin had got access to the gun from the property. In handling the weapon, the trigger was inadvertently pressed, resulting in an injury to George that led to his death. It was an accident and a terrible loss of life. I had met George at his school previously. He was a lovely bright boy with a promising future. His parents, Jayne and John, were obviously distraught at his death, but they have been resolute in their determination to get measures in place to help to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

The family recognise that George's death was an accident. Both then and now, they have been steadfast in the demands that they want to be considered. At the time of the accident, Mr Atkinson, George's father, was quoted in a newspaper:

"We don't blame anyone and we are not calling for changes to the law to ban air weapons—all I would say is that air weapons should be kept in a locked cabinet of suitable quality."

Sadly, George's death is not the only case where a child has been killed. There have been 17 deaths in the last 27 years, including one earlier this year. There have been 21 incidents of injury to persons between March 2015 and March 2016. I met Jayne again recently at my surgery. Her concerns remain and it is my duty, as her Member of Parliament, to bring them before the House today.

The family have asked me to raise two specific issues, which I hope the Minister will look at. First, they have asked for air weapons and ammunition to be securely locked away in properties, on the same principles as section 1 firearms. That is a simple issue that I will return to in a moment. Secondly, they want the UK Government in England and Wales to review the policy on the licensing of airguns to be adopted in Scotland at the end of this year. The family simply want me to ask a question: if it is positive and good enough for Scotland, what is the position in relation to England and Wales? I will take each issue in turn.

First, on secure control, as the Minister knows, airguns of low power are not subject to firearms legislation and can be held without firearms or shotgun certificates. There is a comprehensive list of legislative requirements that cover airguns, which I support and do not want changed, but for the purposes of this debate it is worth reminding ourselves of those regulations. Low-powered airguns—the most common type of airgun, usually used for target shooting or vermin control—are not subject to licensing under the Firearms Act 1968 and can therefore be held without a firearms or shotgun certificate. High-powered airguns with self-contained gas cartridge systems require the requisite licence or authority issued under the 1968 Act. There are a range of other measures in place that I support, which are strong and are recognised as necessary.

It is an offence for a person under 18 to purchase or hire an air weapon or ammunition for an air weapon; an offence to sell, let on hire or make a gift of an air weapon to people under the age of 18; and an offence for anyone under the age of 18 to have with them an air weapon or ammunition for an air weapon, unless they are supervised by a person aged 21 or over, are part of an approved shooting club or are shooting at a shooting gallery and the only firearms being used are air weapons or miniature rifles not exceeding .23 inch calibre, or unless the person is 14 years old or above and is on private premises with the consent of the occupier.

It is an offence to part with possession of an air weapon, or ammunition for an air weapon, to a person under the age of 18; an offence for a person shooting on private land, regardless of age, to use an air weapon for the firing of a pellet beyond the boundaries of the premises; an offence for a supervising adult to allow a person under the age of 18 to fire a pellet beyond the boundaries of premises; an offence for any person to have an air weapon in a public place without a reasonable excuse; an offence to trespass with an air weapon, whether in a building or on land; an offence to have an air weapon if prohibited from possessing a firearm; an offence to fire an air weapon without lawful authority within 50 feet—15 metres—of the centre of a public road; an offence to recklessly kill wild animals, birds or live quarry with an air weapon; an offence to cause a pet or animal to suffer unnecessarily; and an offence to use an air weapon with intent to damage or destroy property. Those are strict conditions. No one would deny that they are right and proper. I am not attempting to change those conditions or to water them down. My focus is elsewhere.

Although my focus is on injury to under-18s and their potential access to air weapons, I have also had a briefing from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which has indicated that, despite the strict conditions, there has been an increase of 49% in complaints about airgun attacks on animals over the past two years compared with 2010 to 2012. The RSPCA has asked for licensing to be looked at and for the age of unsupervised use of airguns to be raised from 14 to 17. I hope the Minister will reflect on that; it requires a response.

However, I want to focus on the key point that the family have raised with me: the definition of what happens. The incident that led to George's death happened despite all the conditions in place for keeping airguns safe in a property, and they could still lead to potentially dangerous activity today. The law currently states:

[*Mr David Hanson*]

“It is an offence for a person in possession of an air weapon to fail to take reasonable precautions to prevent someone under the age of 18 from gaining unauthorised access to it. A defence is provided where a person can show that they had reasonable grounds for believing the other person to be aged 18 or over. The maximum penalty for someone convicted of this new offence is £1,000.”

I want to ask the Minister, on behalf of my constituents, what a reasonable precaution is. If the air weapon was a proper firearm—I say that pejoratively; it still has the ability to kill—it would be required to be kept locked in a metal cabinet with access denied to anyone but the keyholder. It would be under the control of the keyholder under the regulations that I have referred to.

I want the Government to consider a simple, small change on behalf of my constituents—a small, but important change that would bring the current legislation on air weapon ownership into line with the ownership of other weapons. The wording of the current legislation should be tightened to clarify that air weapons must be stored and locked in a metal gun cabinet. If that were the case and we had greater controls, we might prevent further tragic incidents, such as that which happened to my constituent, George Atkinson. At the moment, it could happen tomorrow, to anybody who has airguns in their property.

Although clarifying the legislation might not stop an incident occurring—because people can leave cabinets unlocked—it will ensure that if an incident does occur, there is clarity about who is responsible, why it has occurred and where there has been a failing. I do not believe there is sufficient clarity in the current definition of “reasonable precautions”. The phrase does not mean anything—it is open to judicial discretion. It does not mean a locked metal cabinet. This is a small but significant change, which would deter unauthorised access, particularly among individuals under the age of 17. In this case, they were as young as 13, and George’s cousin was 10. They explored the use of that weapon and had access to it because of the lack of secure protection.

The family have not asked for this, but it is an important issue for me: there should also be a requirement for all new air weapons to be sold with a trigger lock. In my constituent’s case, access to the weapon was possible because it was not in a locked cabinet, but the accident that resulted in my constituent’s death happened because they touched the trigger and did not expect the trigger to be used. It was an accident. With not just a locked cabinet but a trigger lock on the airgun, authorised use is controlled. This is not about banning airguns; it is about providing an additional safeguard. George’s death exemplified how a trigger can accidentally be pulled and result in death. The purchase of trigger locks with air weapons would greatly improve the safety of those weapons and militate against George’s case being repeated.

The family has also looked over the border and asked that I seek clarity on the Government’s position on licensing arrangements, given what is happening in Scotland. I have sat where the Minister sits, in that Department, doing that job. I know how difficult the challenges are. I am not today arguing for a licensing system, but it is important that we get clarity on the Government’s view, given that from 31 December there will be a licensing system in Scotland. Those wanting to buy an air weapon will have to apply for a licence as if it were for a normal

firearm. Although there are already conditions in place, the licensing regime will provide further elements of control over access to those weapons.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way—I did seek his permission to speak before the debate, Sir David. There are 34 items of legislation in place in relation to firearms. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation has put forward some recommendations, including that no one under the age of 18 should have an air rifle except under supervision. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the legislation in place is fairly thorough? Does he feel that enforcing supervision more rigorously might be a way of moving forward?

Mr Hanson: If the hon. Gentleman had been here at the start of the debate, he would have heard me list most of those 34 items of legislation, because I recognise that those are important pieces of legislation. I am asking the Minister to look at two simple things: a lockable cabinet, so there is no access by children and young people who do not realise that this is a weapon that can kill, even though there are regular controls; and the issue of trigger locks. I entirely concur with the hon. Gentleman—the next portion of my speech covers this point—that it is important, as part of general understanding, that those who have weapons are encouraged to look at the good husbandry of those weapons. I spoke to a number of shooting organisations and individuals prior to the debate. They are very keen to ensure that we have proper training and proper use of gun clubs, with people getting involved in air gun clubs, so that they understand the complexities of the weapon and the fact that they can still be weapons that can cause danger and death if misused, despite all the legislation I have mentioned.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman has not yet mentioned the storage of ammunition and I wonder if he is coming to that. With shotguns and other firearms there are quite strict regulations about separate storage, so that even if kids get into the gun cabinet, they do not find the ammunition alongside the gun.

Mr Hanson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. It is another central point about lockable cabinets—perhaps I should have made it clear that I mean separate, lockable cabinets for a weapon and for ammunition.

Given the time left now in the debate, the purpose is not to raise wider airgun issues; it is to focus on those two issues. It would not be damaging to responsible airgun owners, or to those whom the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) wishes to support and defend, to have lockable cabinets for ammunition and for the gun. That would not be to the detriment of all of those users. The second issue is for trigger locks to be looked at as an additional protection, because all of us have been children, interested in exploring and looking at what our parents do. The management of those issues is extremely important to ensure the safety not of the responsible users, but of those who do not know the capacity of the weapon that might be available to them. In George’s case, that led to his tragic death.

Jayne and John Atkinson have continued to press this issue over many years, including through me. I hope that I have now put it on the Minister's agenda. I would welcome his view on the three main points and his response on the issue of licensing.

11.16 am

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir David. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) on securing the debate, as it is on not just an important subject but one that I know he cares passionately about. He has been concerned about and has been working on the issue for some time following the tragic death of his young constituent, as well as during his time at the Home Office. It is worth noting that, sadly, only this month a young man aged just 19 died from injuries sustained from an air weapon, which again brings home to us the seriousness of any kind of weapon.

The right hon. Gentleman outlined some very important points. We can all agree that gun controls are needed to minimise the risk of harm to the public. The regulation of air weapons has long been a matter of passionate debate, with lawful users arguing that they should be allowed to enjoy their property without unnecessary restrictions, and those who argue for tougher regulation to improve public safety. Public safety is naturally at the top of my agenda as a Home Office Minister, but I am also keenly aware of the need to strike the right balance—and there is a balance to be struck, particularly on weapons that present less risk and that are used in well regulated environments such as shooting clubs.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, this country has some of the most robust firearms regulations in the world. The statistics show that those regulations work and are effective. The number of firearms offences recorded by the police fell by 40% between 2009-10 and 2014-15, including a 40% fall in offences involving air weapons. There were fatalities as a result of those offences in 2014-15, but in that year they were at the lowest level since records began back in 1969. That shows that the regulations are working, but any injury, let alone a fatality, is one that none of us wants to see.

Although offences involving air weapons are often less serious offences, we have to be very clear and make sure that the public are aware that these weapons can cause death or serious injury. In 2014-15, there were no fatalities but there were 37 serious injuries as a result of offences. However, there were small rises in the number of offences involving both air weapons and other weapons last year, and as we have heard this morning, deaths can occur due to both offences and accidents. We must not and cannot be complacent, and that is why we are currently strengthening the legislation further in the Policing and Crime Bill and targeting loopholes often used by criminals. I will return to that point in a moment.

The law recognises that some air weapons are more dangerous than others. Only lower powered air weapons can be held without a licence or certificate. More dangerous air weapons are classed as either civilian section 1 firearms or prohibited section 5 firearms. A licence or certificate is required for section 1 or section 5 firearms and is issued only to suitable persons by the police or

the Home Office. The Scotland Act 2012 devolved responsibility for lower powered weapons to the Scottish Government who, as the right hon. Gentleman stated, introduced a licensing regime under the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015. He asked us to bring in a similar scheme here, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the way things are monitored in people's homes. We have to recognise that Scotland has a different framework of offences, so we are not necessarily comparing like with like.

The misuse of air weapons in this country is caught by the criminal law, and the restrictions in place on the sale and possession of air guns are a proportionate way of protecting public safety. Although no licence is required to possess low-powered air weapons, they are still tightly regulated. As we have discussed, the sale of air weapons, which are firearms, is prohibited to those under 18. Except in special circumstances, under-18s cannot possess them; the exceptions include the use of the weapon as a member of an approved shooting club and being under the supervision of a person who is at least 21. That supervision is important, and we need to ensure we are all educated about it.

It is an offence for a person to trespass with an air weapon or to have one in a public place without a reasonable reason to be there. As well as the criminal use of air weapons, there have been tragic accidents, as the right hon. Member for Delyn outlined, which have sometimes involved young children or teenagers with unsupervised access to air weapons. We are all responsible, if we are in that position, to make sure unsupervised access does not happen.

We recognise that it is important that those who lawfully possess air weapons store and handle them securely and safely. The Home Office provides guidance on the sort of practical steps that can and should be taken to secure air weapons, and on how to handle them. It is an offence for a person to fail to take reasonable steps to prevent unauthorised access to their airguns by those under 18.

Mr Hanson: I accept that point, but what are reasonable precautions? For clarity, we should say that air guns should be locked in a secure metal cabinet. That is a reasonable precaution in my view, but there is no definition in the current legislation.

Brandon Lewis: It may be necessary to take a higher level of precaution, for example, when an air gun is stored in a house with children. That is a good example of the right hon. Gentleman's point. We need to recognise what is reasonable. The whole point of having a check of reasonableness is that what is reasonable can vary according to the circumstances. For example, although locking away an airgun when not in use is reasonable for many people in many circumstances, the use of a trigger lock might be sufficient. The right hon. Gentleman and I had a brief conversation about that before this debate. I will take away that point and look at it further, and I will come back to him in writing shortly. We need to get the balance right between reasonableness and ensuring people are safe.

As I said earlier, the Policing and Crime Bill contains a number of provisions to strengthen the regulation of firearms, including a new definition of lethality, which

[Brandon Lewis]

will clarify the law relating to firearms, including air weapons. The Firearms Act 1968 defines a firearm as “a lethal barrelled weapon of any description from which any shot, bullet or other missile can be discharged.”

That makes lethality integral to knowing whether something is a firearm, yet the law does not define what lethality is. That raises a number of problems, which the Bill will resolve by defining lethality as a muzzle kinetic energy of 1 joule. That follows a recommendation by the Firearms Consultative Committee.

We recognise that there are legitimate uses of air weapons, such as shooting sports, so we need to strike a balance, but I am cognisant of the fact that we must keep firearms control under review to ensure that we always do everything we can in a reasonable way to protect public safety. That is why, as I said a few moments ago, I will look at the specific point that the right hon. Gentleman raised about security and the locking away of firearms and weapons as part of a reasonable approach to ensuring we have a safe and secure environment.

Mr Hanson: Before the Minister sits down, will he give me a commitment to look at the issue of compulsory trigger locks? The current legislation mentions reasonable precautions, but there is no definition of “reasonable”, no requirement to have a trigger lock and no requirement to have a locked cabinet. I want the Minister to look at those issues seriously and reflect on them.

Brandon Lewis: The outline is there for a reasonable approach that will allow flexibility for the authorities and individuals. If somebody owns a gun, they have a responsibility to ensure they are acting in a safe and appropriate manner. What is reasonable in one place can differ from what is reasonable in another. For example, a household that has children is different from a household that does not. The law reflects the need for flexibility. I take the right hon. Gentleman’s point on board, and I will look at it and the point about trigger locks. I will write to him shortly.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Cross-departmental Strategy on Social Justice

[NADINE DORRIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cross-departmental strategy on social justice.

I am delighted to have secured this vital debate, which I applied for with my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), on the importance of joined-up thinking on social justice. I am delighted, too, that we have obtained it so early in our new Prime Minister’s tenure, because my right hon. Friend has already made it abundantly clear that she is personally interested in social reform and in continuing the one nation tradition that has been a consistent and defining strand of 21st-century conservatism.

I propose to use family policy as an example of an area in which greater cross-departmental strategy, involving several Ministers and one Cabinet-level Minister with overall responsibility as a primary element of his or her portfolio—not only as an adjunct—could reap exponential benefits, in particular for the poorest families in our society. That is crucial, because as many Members present today know—I thank those attending for their support, in particular those on the Government Benches—family breakdown is a key driver of poverty. It causes so many problems, not least financial ones, but also problems in health, including mental health, educational difficulties—leading to employment disadvantages—addiction and housing pressures.

In taking charge of the newly minted Social Reform Cabinet Committee, the Prime Minister has put social justice right up there on her list of priorities, alongside Brexit and the economy. The message could not be clearer. She stood on the steps of No. 10 and talked about governing for everyone:

“That means fighting against the burning injustice that, if you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others”.

She also highlighted the fact that

“If you’re a white, working-class boy, you’re less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university.”

She has indicated that she intends to take personal responsibility for changing such unacceptable realities. To my mind, that is not only encouraging, but exciting.

Moreover, I applaud the Prime Minister’s stated ambition, a

“mission to make Britain a country that works for everyone”.

Most, if not all constituency MPs must have completely agreed with her when she said:

“If you’re from an ordinary working class family, life is much harder than many people in Westminster realise.”

We all very much want to work in harness with a Government who see it as their duty to deliver success on behalf of everyone in the UK, not only the privileged few, and who also have social justice explicitly at their heart.

Let me explain what I mean by using the example of family policy. I am sure that other hon. Members will have other policy areas to share. For too long, there has been a view in Government that an aspiration to help

families struggling to nurture their children and to hold down stable relationships was indefensibly interventionist and intrusive. Before my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) laid bare the social, financial and emotional costs of family breakdown in our poorest communities in his paradigm-shifting reports, “Breakdown Britain” and “Breakthrough Britain”, fractured families were simply not considered policy-relevant. He punctured the myth that relationship breakdown was none of the state’s business by pointing out that the public purse was picking up the tab and by exposing the easy complacency of those who are better placed in our society.

I accept that no social stratum is immune to family difficulties. I know that from almost 30 years of leading a law firm specialising in family law. Many people in this House, for example, come from broken homes or have seen their own marriages falter, and no one judges them. However, the social justice narrative articulated so eloquently by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green and the Centre for Social Justice highlights how more advantaged people tend to experience family breakdown somewhat differently from people in our poorest communities—although I have to say from my own experience that children can suffer grief from relationship breakdowns however affluent their background.

When the family relationships of those from better-off backgrounds experience shipwreck, they or their parents can deploy reserves of social and other capital to soften the potentially harmful effects on them and the children involved. For example, in good schools, staff are less embattled than in deprived areas and have more time for each individual pupil; or the family might have enough cash that a split does not plunge the people involved into poverty or they can pay for counselling.

All that stands in stark contrast to what happens for the poorest 20% of society, where debt, educational failure, addictions to substances, and under or unemployment often conspire together to compound the damage of broken relationships. Such pressures make relationships hard to maintain, or for parents to spend time with their child to encourage interaction between them. As a result, half of all children in communities of the 20% least advantaged no longer live with both parents by the time they start school—seven times as many as those in the richest 20%.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Her words are important and resonate with those in a recent speech by the noble Lord Sacks, who referred to the “two nations” we now have—those, perhaps the preserve of the rich, who benefit from the association of children with two parents, and those who do not, the 1 million children who have no contact whatever with their father.

Fiona Bruce: Yes, Jonathan Sacks, who is so respected and speaks from a heart of compassion, indeed said that. I very much support those words, because we know that about 1 million children have little or no contact with their fathers, and they are vastly over-represented in our poorest communities.

What I said about the poorest 20% on the income spectrum holds true for those who have a bit, but not a lot more. The Institute for Social and Economic Research

found that, on average, women’s incomes dropped by more than 10% after a marital split, and that family breakdown is a route into poverty for many. The single fact of family breakdown can tip people out of a degree of financial security and into a much more precarious and uncertain set of circumstances, in which they are also far more dependent on the state.

As I always state in such debates, I make no criticism or condemnation of single parents. So many of them strive so valiantly to support their children and to do their very best for their family, often in challenging circumstances. However, the fact is that lone-parent households are twice as likely to be in poverty as couple families. In 2015, 44% of children from lone-parent families were in households living on less than 60% of median income, as compared with 24% of children from two-parent families. Inevitably, single parents struggling to juggle their time will face greater challenges to spending time with their children.

Some might suggest that parents raising children on their own should simply receive more support from the state, but single parenthood is a risk factor for poverty internationally. Swedish statistics show that parental separation is the biggest driver into child poverty, by a large margin, and that is in the country with the most generous welfare regime in the world. The state does not and cannot protect a child against the absence of a relationship missed with one parent or another. As this Government’s emphasis on life chances has made clear, however, we cannot look only to the effects on income. Poverty is not only about income, but about many other things in life, not least, particularly in a child’s life, poverty of relationships. How are the nation’s children and young people faring in terms of their mental health and wellbeing?

Research commissioned by the previous Labour Government shows that children who experience family breakdown are more likely to experience behavioural problems, to perform less well in school, to need more medical treatment, to leave school and home earlier, to become sexually active, pregnant or a parent at an early age, and to report more depressive symptoms and higher levels of smoking, drinking and other drug use during adolescence. The most up-to-date research also demonstrates those associations. The recently published “Longitudinal Study of Young People in England” found that young people in single-parent families had greater mental health challenges than those with two parents, and there was a greater likelihood of them being above the “caseness” threshold, which means that someone is suffering from such psychological distress that they need clinical help.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s comment that social injustice is based not just on financial poverty but, in effect, on social poverty—things such as bereavement, family breakdown and children’s time being consumed by them acting as carers. Does she agree that we should look at how things such as the pupil premium are calculated to ensure that they take into account the whole range of social injustices that children in this country face?

Fiona Bruce: We certainly need to look at a range of solutions for supporting such children more, and that could be one. My hon. Friend raises the concerning

[Fiona Bruce]

issue of young carers, who are certainly under-supported and under-resourced and whose number is underestimated, as I know from my own area.

I am patron of a young persons' mental health charity, Visyon, which cannot cope with all the requests for help that it receives, including from children as young as four years old. I recently asked how many of those children have mental health issues because of relationship difficulties, and the answer was virtually all of them. Similarly, young people in step-families were reported by the longitudinal study that I referred to as being significantly more likely to be above the caseness threshold than those living with two parents. We are often reminded of the need for more and better mental health services, but the role of family breakdown in fuelling that need is almost never mentioned. Would it not be wonderful if we could start to look earlier in the chain of difficulties and challenges that such children experience at how we can prevent family breakdown from occurring, as it does in so many cases?

When the study that I referred to was publicised, digital media received the lion's share of the blame for driving poor outcomes. I have no doubt that over-exposure to screens and the online world does children and adolescents no favours—I and many other Members spoke about that only yesterday during the debate on the Digital Economy Bill—but digital media are here to stay, and we must be ruthlessly honest that family background can make children more likely to get less help than they need to navigate the challenges of the digital world. That is why I said in that debate that

“whatever protections the Government devise, they cannot be comprehensive. Parents need to be given as much information and support as possible to enable them to engage with and protect their children from harmful behaviour online in what is a very challenging environment for many parents.”—[*Official Report*, 13 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 841.]

That might not be the responsibility of the Ministers promoting that Bill, but I believe that it should be grasped by someone in government.

Families with two super-invested parents who have time and motivation to supervise their children's internet use and coach them to be savvy digital natives are at a distinct advantage over others in helping to protect their children from self or other, abusive sexual experimentation. My main point is simply that when it comes to social harms, there is still a tendency to emphasise factors external to families and to look for solutions at a safe distance. However, the report of the Government-commissioned “Longitudinal Study of Young People in England” stated:

“Schools would seem ideally placed to cut through to all young people in year 10 and provide them with the support that they need around wellbeing”.

I accept that schools have an important role to play—many do so and support children with difficulties and disadvantages well—but the challenges are huge. We should surely also equip and educate parents so they can help their children. I commend Keith Simpson, headmaster of Middlewich High School in my constituency. When he seeks to support children with challenges in his school, he seeks to work with their parents, too.

The Institute for Public Policy Research, in its report “A long division”, found that no less than 80% of the factors influencing pupil achievement come from outside school, and family influence is particularly strong. Equipping and educating parents must include helping them when their own relationships are under strain and being honest about the effects that a culture of family breakdown has on the next generation.

The Government has a self-interested responsibility in this area, given that young people with poor mental health and wellbeing often grow up into adults who struggle, with implications for employers, national productivity and health services. University College London's research department of epidemiology and public health has shown that 60-year-olds still suffer the long-term effects of childhood stress linked to the trauma of family breakdown. As someone who has been involved in a law firm that has undertaken family work for three decades, I can confirm that the bereavement and grief that young people feel from missing relationships can be profound and last a long time.

Members will be pleased to hear that that brings me back to the title of the debate, “A cross-departmental approach on social justice”, which has clear implications for the Prime Minister's broader social reform goal. I have touched on just some of the social problems that restrict a child's life chances and make life in Britain much less fulfilling and prosperous for so many than we in this place want it to be. If we are to cut through and make a lasting difference to those problems, a much more concerted and co-ordinated effort has to be made from the very top of the Government to address family breakdown than has been made to date.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Children's experience of school demonstrates perfectly how their experiences transcend departmental lines. You—she, rather—will not be surprised that when I spoke to colleagues in my constituency who work in the education sector, their primary concern was not curriculum reform, exam success, assessment or even funding, but children's mental health. That has an impact not only on health policy but on children's education—and their life chances, for which the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Ms Ansell, I am more concerned about the length of your intervention than your use of the word “you”.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend puts that point very succinctly, and better than I have in my prepared speech. She speaks not only from long experience but from the heart. Her commitment to family concerns has become well recognised since she entered the House, and I thank her for that.

There are examples of good practice in the form of joined-up governmental thinking. The previous Social Justice Cabinet Committee found that when Departments took a strategic approach to working together on issues such as the dreadful outcomes for care leavers, on which the DWP's work was backed up by the work of the Department for Education, the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Department of Health, the Department for Communities and Local

Government, and the Ministry of Justice and others, they could generate a wave of reform, not just a few isolated initiatives. For example, Jobcentre Plus advisers now know that when they have a care leaver in front of them, they will get extra support or flexibility, including early access to the Work programme; there are more funds for housing for those people and help for them to save through the junior ISA; and there is a care leavers champion in the criminal justice system. The list of co-ordinated Government action is long and should make us and our former coalition partners proud.

I and many others were deeply encouraged when Lord Freud explained during the Report stage of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill in the House of Lords that the life chances strategy would cover measures relating to

“family breakdown, problem debt, and drug and alcohol addiction.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1084.]

I welcome that. It would be wonderful for the kind of cross-departmental work and ministerial leadership that we have seen on support for care leavers to be applied to family life. When it comes to the knotty problem of family breakdown, I am an incurable optimist, despite my law firm background, but I doubt our ability to successfully reverse the epidemically high rates of divorce, separation and family dysfunction in our society unless there are clear accountabilities across the full range of Government Departments represented in the Social Reform Cabinet Committee.

I pay tribute to my noble Friend Lord Farmer for his commitment to promoting and strengthening family life and all he has done in this place. I also pay tribute to Dr Samantha Callan, who works with him, for the many years of work research and advice she has dedicated to this field, particularly but not exclusively with the Centre for Social Justice. She has laboured for years to emphasise the concern we should all have about the impact of family life on children in particular. At times she may have wondered whether anyone from Government was really listening, but I am optimistic that those years are behind us and that now there are people in the top levels of Government who are listening. My noble Friend Lord Farmer recently wrote in *The Times* that we need a Minister in every Department who is explicitly responsible for leading a strand of family-strengthening policy. I agree and would add that we also need a Cabinet Minister with overall responsibility for the family.

Better support for marriage by beefing up our slender tax allowance that recognises enduring aspirations to make a commitment in the teeth of the many financial pressures that can make marriage seem so unattainable would be good, as would be community-based support in family hubs for people to get advice when they are struggling with parenting and relationships. I hope the Minister has seen the report I recently produced as chair of the all-party group on children's centres entitled “Family Hubs: The Future of Children's Centres”, which proposed that and a number of other actions to strengthen family relationships in our local communities.

Support for action to ensure that prisoners maintain the family ties that can boost rehabilitation efforts and make jails safer would also benefit from a co-ordinated approach. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous),

our previous Prisons Minister, for all he has done to emphasise the importance of strengthening prisoners' family relationships. Mental health services that work with all the family dynamics underlying children's problems could be better co-ordinated, but without a level of steely-eyed determination I fear our life chances indicators in these areas will put us to shame.

As I said, I am incurably hopeful, particularly as our new Prime Minister is the only person ever to have had the title Secretary of State for the Family—albeit that was preceded by the word “shadow”, when we were in opposition. It is now time for family policy to come out of the shadows, take its rightful place in her new Cabinet Committee along with many other important areas of social justice—I am look forward to hearing about those from colleagues over the course of the debate—and be tackled unflinchingly with the energy and talent of all those around the Cabinet table.

2.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries, and an absolute pleasure, as it always is, to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), whom I see not just as an hon. Member but as a friend. We share many issues of importance and it is rare for there to be a debate on which we are not on the same side, as we are today. She set the scene well and comprehensively, very much along lines that I will espouse.

I see the Minister in her place. It is the second time that she has been in Westminster Hall today—it is my second time as well. It is nice to see her in her place and I look forward to her response. The response she gave us this morning on funeral payments was excellent.

The hon. Member for Congleton has brought an important issue to the Chamber. “Social Justice: transforming lives”, published by the coalition Government in March 2012, emphasised tackling poverty in all its forms. That was the theme of the document, which gave the following definition of social justice:

“Social Justice is about making society function better—providing the support and tools to help turn lives around.”

It is about how we can help people help themselves and how we as a society can help them. I will give some examples from my constituency of self-help programmes and how society comes together to help those who are less well-off. The document continues:

“This is a challenging new approach to tackling poverty in all its forms. It is not a narrative about income poverty alone: this Government believes that the focus on income over the last decades has ignored the root causes of poverty, and in doing so has allowed social problems to deepen and become entrenched.”

That is my opinion of what Government have done, and they brought the document forward to address that issue.

I remember being impressed with the big society. Indeed, we could not fail to be impressed by its theme. Whether it achieved or not was the issue, but what it set out to try to achieve is something we all like. I was excited and happy to be part of the ideal of a society in which we help each other. This is our motivation for being in this House: we are here to help others, whether that be in the House or more directly back in constituencies with constituency issues.

[Jim Shannon]

Despite the failures of the House to make any substantial effort on the big society, I have seen communities rallying round and helping each other out. In the main town in my constituency, Newtownards, the community groups work hard together and individually in their estates to make lives better. That same theme of communities rallying round permeates all the way down the Ards peninsula and further over on the other side of Strangford lough down towards Comber, Ballygowan, Saintfield and Ballynahinch. People are coming together to work on behalf of those who need help.

I have had calls in my office from young people who go to their local campaigner group in the Newtownards Elim church—this is an example of how they play a small role and how communities can interact socially and do something. When the bus was parked in a car park, they noticed that there were weeds and rubbish lying all around. The campaigners—they are like a boy's brigade or girl's brigade—discussed that in their planned meeting and contacted the local council to offer to clean up the area as part of their programme. That is a small example of social justice at work in communities: young people recognising what the issue was and responding. Those who are fit to do, do for the benefit of the community.

There is a thriving food bank in my area that does tremendous work, but that comes down to people buying and donating food for those around them who are unable to provide for themselves. That is the big society in action—exactly what the hon. Lady was referring to. I have never seen food banks as a negative; I see them as a positive that delivers when communities, Government bodies and the Churches come together in a true, ecumenical sense, and they can then deliver for those who are less well off. The theme in relation to compassion is “your pain in my heart” and the members of the thriving food bank feel that.

Local churches take turns on Christmas day either to deliver Christmas dinners to the elderly and those who are alone or to open church halls so that people can come and be together even if they do not have a family they can call their own. That again is big society in action. Christmas, as we all know, can be one of the happiest days of the year but it can also be one of the saddest. It is sad if someone has died or for those who are alone. It can be happy when we have family around us, but not everyone has that possibility.

What have we done in this place to help see social justice in action? Tax credits were cut—I am glad to see the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), in his place—and other benefits tackled in welfare reform. Savings could have been used to help in other ways, but young mothers are having all sorts of problems due to the Concentrix palaver; I use that as an Ulster Scots word.

As a rule I do not make complaints, but I had to complain about Concentrix to the Government because it was carrying out a policy of changing tax credits without doing its homework. Apart from that, for almost four hours one day we could not even get through to the company, which is a problem. I know there was a question about the issue in the main Chamber but I could not stay for it, but that is an example of what we

went through. It targeted young mothers in an horrific manner, which is a debate for another day—I know you will bring me into line for that shortly, Ms Dorries.

Constituents came to use my office phone to try to get things sorted out, having used all of the credit on their phones. The ordinary person cannot be expected to phone Concentrix for 35 to 40 minutes, which has sometimes happened. They are people whose benefits have been stopped and, as one of the suppliers of food bank vouchers, I am helping them wherever I can with food parcels. They do not have enough money to put in their electricity meters and some have moved their family in with their parents because they need some respite. Is that the big society ideal, with social justice at its heart? That was the hon. Member for Congleton's question and it is also mine.

We need Departments to work together on ways to help people and not hinder them. Welfare reform has not only targeted young families and single parents; it has eradicated the need for child poverty targets to be met. Again, that is a topic for another day, but it is one that massively impacts on today's debate on social justice. All those issues are linked and so must our response be. That is what this debate is about: linking it all together and responding.

Housing benefits and tax credits administrators work closely together to cut off claims when investigating allegations. I have become immensely frustrated with the process at times; why can those partners not work that closely to help people who are in tough situations? When somebody changes their working hours their tax credits and housing benefit changes. Everything goes on hold and it takes some five to six weeks to process, which is a difficulty.

Why can jobs and benefit offices not help somebody in receipt of a benefit to receive all they are entitled to, instead of referring them to third parties? Many people are embarrassed about claiming and will not go to someone else. Why can that not be handled in a cross-departmental way? If we look constructively at the hon. Member for Congleton's contribution, in which she set the scene, we can see that that is what she is asking for. It is also what I am asking for, and I believe it is what the debate is asking for as well. We should help those who need help more constructively, positively, effectively and quickly, and not drag the system on.

We have read about the people who abuse the benefits system and live a life of luxury. There is an idea that some of those who claim are lazy and cheat. That is simply not true and there is no evidence for it that I am aware of in my constituency. I look at young single mothers who work and try to provide for their children and I feel compassion; in many cases, my heart aches for them as well. I look at men in their 50s who are unemployed after a factory closes. They have worked all their life and do not know anything apart from that work. They wonder who will employ them and have compassion for them, but compassion is not enough—there must be action. That can only come when this House puts in place a strategy that allows us to do what the welfare state was designed to do: to help those in need.

I am confident that the Minister will give us a positive response; I have great faith in that. I urge her to stop looking at numbers and forgetting that they are attached to people who have lives and who need help. She should do what people around the UK are doing—seeing a

need and meeting that need. There is a great need for change in the way compassion is dealt with in this place. We can, and must, be compassionate and effective. That is what needs to happen. I leave everyone with the words of Nelson Mandela, who was important for all of us in the House because he was such a colossus:

“Our human compassion binds us the one to the other—not in pity or patronisingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Allowing 30 minutes for the Minister, the Opposition spokesperson and the hon. Member for Congleton to wind up, there are 25 minutes left for the remaining four Members to speak. I will let Members do the maths and work that one out for themselves.

3.4 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Dorries—my constituency neighbour—and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing the debate. I, too, will talk mainly about family policy, but I think it important to look at all of the five pathways to poverty so ably identified by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), whom it is an enormous pleasure to see with us today.

We still have an issue with worklessness, despite the British jobs miracle, when this country created more jobs than the rest of Europe put together. We need to remember that there are 843,000 young people who are not in education, employment or training, which is why we have to keep on creating jobs, as we have over the last few years—the job is not fully done yet. Speaking on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister specifically identified those in work, but often work that is insecure, does not pay well and leaves them worried about their mortgage. That is where we need what I would call an “ABC” approach, by which I mean a job, a better job and a career. We need to think more about training for people in entry-level jobs to increase their skills and give them the opportunities to progress up the work ladder, perhaps by re-engaging them with local further education colleges and so on, if we are going to deal with that cohort of people whom our new Prime Minister quite rightly identified.

It is also really important that we roll out the universal support offer alongside universal credit. Universal support delivered locally has been rolled out, but as I understand it universal support across the country as a whole would give responsibility to work coaches for things such as addiction and debt. Rather than just passing over a leaflet on addiction, that work coach would take responsibility and perhaps try to get an unemployed person into a drug rehabilitation programme or link them up with someone who could deal with their debt issues.

Educational failure is absolutely key to social justice. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), among others, has pointed out that there is a 19-month gap between the brightest children and those who are the furthest behind when they start school—a gap from which many children fail to recover throughout their

time at school. One thing we could do is to get outstanding primary schools in the poorest areas to set up early years provision to try to narrow that gap.

Drug taking is a huge issue across our country, not least in the criminal justice system. It is concerning that a third of recovering addicts are still unable to become fully abstinent. I, for one, do not think it right that we just maintain people for years on methadone and other substitutes. We need a higher ambition for our fellow citizens. We need to raise our gaze around the world to countries we can learn from, such as Germany and Sweden. I have already mentioned serious debt, but it is a huge issue for those it affects. I think universal support will be a part of the solution when it is fully rolled out, but I pay tribute to organisations such as Christians Against Poverty, The Salvation Army, which does great work in my constituency, and the citizens advice bureau, which also does great work locally. They come alongside people to manage their debts so they do not get overburdened by them.

As the prisons and probation Minister, I had the good fortune to come across a small charity in Blackpool called Jobs, Friends & Houses. I say to the Minister that that small local charity is an example of cross-departmental working in the voluntary sector at the local level that the national Government could do very well to learn from. It is funded by Blackpool police and Blackpool Council, with some support from Public Health England, and it took recovering drug addicts who were coming out of prison, trained them in construction skills and had them doing up run-down houses in Blackpool. It also enabled them to live in good quality housing, which the ex-offenders themselves had often done up, and provided a support network for them at weekends. It ticked every box. Although the charity did not receive any support from the probation service, it set a really good example. The Minister will probably know that 22% of benefit recipients are ex-offenders, and this is precisely the type of project we need to see working cross-departmentally at the local level. Indeed, I would like to see it spread across the UK as a whole.

When I was at the Ministry of Justice, I was delighted that the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), when talking about families and prisoners, said:

“Critically, education should also help prisoners to acquire the social skills and virtues which will make them better fathers, better husbands and better brothers. Ensuring that prisoners can re-integrate into family life and maintain positive relationships is crucial to effective rehabilitation. Families are one of our most effective crime-fighting institutions. And we should strengthen them at every turn.”

Those are wise words, not least because if someone’s family relationship breaks down while they are in prison, they will probably not have anywhere to live or a family to go back to, and families are helpful in helping prisoners to find work.

I have a quotation from the other side of the Atlantic. It is from President Obama’s speech on father’s day on 21 June 2010. He said:

“So we can talk all we want here in Washington about issues like education and health care and crime; we can build good schools; we can put money into creating good jobs; we can do everything we can to keep our streets safe—but government can’t keep our kids from looking for trouble on those streets. Government can’t force a kid to pick up a book or make sure that the homework gets done. Government can’t be there day in, day out,

[Andrew Selous]

to provide discipline and guidance and the love that it takes to raise a child. That's our job as fathers, as mothers, as guardians for our children."

That was powerfully put and brings me on to the final area of family.

I will not reiterate the excellent points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, but I want to encourage the Minister to go back to her Department and ask her officials to look around the world at what works well. I note that the Americans set up the National Fatherhood Initiative in 1994. Since then they have had the fatherhood, marriage and families innovation fund, which looks at job training, parenting, domestic violence prevention—a key priority of the Prime Minister—and relationship support. They have also had the fatherhood and mentoring initiative, which looks at raising awareness of responsible fatherhood and works to re-engage absent fathers with their families.

In Australia there is a network of family relationship centres, which the Minister's officials might want to look at. In my experience of Whitehall, officials and Ministers are sometimes not quite good enough at looking at best practice around the world that the United Kingdom could localise, fit to our own conditions and usefully learn from.

I want to be quick to allow colleagues to speak, but I have four proposals that I want the Minister to raise across Whitehall for what we could do to strengthen family life in this country. First, improving access to psychological therapies is a really good thing that the NHS does for our constituents. Therapy for couples, which has proved to be really useful and helpful, has been virtually squeezed out. This was an issue before I became a Minister two years ago. I am concerned to find that no progress has been made in the intervening time.

Secondly, during the antenatal stage—the one time when dads turn up with mothers to go to programmes in big numbers—we are missing a trick if we do not try to strengthen the relationship between mum and dad before the child is born. The fathers are there. It is an open goal. Some hospitals are doing it under the wire at the moment. Why do we not do it everywhere?

Thirdly, the family hub is an idea whose time has come. Perhaps the Minister will look at what they do on a bipartisan basis in America and at the family relationship centres in Australia and learn from them. We can localise such initiatives and make them appropriate to the UK. Fourthly, my final request is that the Cabinet Office should make sure that its What Works centre looks at this area of strengthening family policy. It is not acceptable that the Cabinet Office does not extend its work to this area. There have been studies by the Department for Education showing that relationship support is extremely effective. The last one was in 2014. The Cabinet Office needs to keep that work going.

3.13 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this debate on an important matter that has such wide-reaching consequences that I

feel a debate in this Chamber simply does not do it justice. I am sure there will be another opportunity to have this debate on the Floor of the House.

When the hon. Lady speaks of "these families", she speaks of my family. After losing a parent to mental health, I grew up in a one-parent family before living with my aunt and uncle and my foster sister. I was the first to go to university. I grew up in damp council houses with hard-working parents who struggled to make ends meet. My sister, now a graduate, and my brother going to university are testament to the hard work and ambition in my family. But my story is not unusual. Where I start is sadly where many people end. So when each of us speaks about this in this Chamber, I expect us to show more sympathy and respect, because we are talking about real people's lives. I know the hon. Member for Congleton understands that.

In the UK, the social justice strategy stated that from the outset its approach was to aim to tackle poverty in all its forms. I am not being political when I say this, because I grew up under a Labour Administration; however, a quick glance at my constituency casework brings up many examples of where, sadly, policy is adding to the hardship faced by many people across my constituency of Lanark and Hamilton East. I am under no illusions that we are somehow the exception to the rule. The strategy is failing people up and down the UK, and pushing people further into poverty.

The initial changes to universal credit have left many families without money for periods of four to six weeks. In one part of my constituency, I have been informed that the universal credit rollout, which was targeted towards single males, many of whom are vulnerable and without the safety net of families, were the targeted group who already rely on food banks—not a sign of the big society, but a sign that the system is failing. For many, the lump sum payment is not easy to manage and the lack of budgeting experience will not allow them to manage a large lump sum in one go. Does the Minister have any solutions that will alleviate some of this burden?

Another universal credit concern was raised with me by Women's Aid South Lanarkshire: the fact that universal credit is paid to only one person in a couple. Vulnerable women who find themselves in controlling relationships could find themselves even less able to financially support themselves. But perhaps the worst aspect of the social justice strategy that is failing my constituents is the harsh application of sanctions being enforced on claimants across the country. We need only look at our constituency casework to find such issues. If a Member does not find such issues, they are blessed. I spend a lot of my time concentrating my office's efforts on supporting these people.

Perhaps worst of all, I have heard many examples of constituents being sanctioned for the most basic of reasons—including being five minutes late to an appointment and not attending a meeting at the jobcentre owing to attending a job interview—and there have been many instances of admin errors. Another form of sanctions imposed by the UK Government concerns those executed by Concentrix. I welcome the news that Concentrix will no longer have the contract with HMRC. However, as part of the apparent fishing exercise to stop tax credit payments, Concentrix has blanket-lettered many single-parent claimants asking for evidence that they are not co-habiting. It seems abhorrent to me that

nobody seems to have any consideration or empathy for the devastating effect that receiving such a letter from Concentrix can have on a person. One constituent of mine ended up homeless. I do not want to go into the wherewithal of it, but these are the consequences of the Government's actions when they contract with an American company that is not accountable. How will Concentrix be held to account for its failure and a series of administrative errors—we will call it that—that resulted from this exercise?

Many vulnerable families have been left with no money as a result of a Government contract. Who will hold Concentrix to account? I hope the Minister will be able to indulge me in answering that. I have yet to receive a response, despite the fact that I asked this question in November 2015. When I asked on behalf of several constituents what evidence was being used to trigger the letter, I received no response from Concentrix and no response from any Government Department that could justify such actions.

Despite the UK Government's social justice strategy's apparent aim to tackle poverty in all its forms, current statistics show that around one in five children in my constituency are still growing up in poverty. That is simply unacceptable in a modern, thriving society like ours. We need to take urgent action to help children who are living in poverty now and to prevent children from living in poverty in future. That means there must be more focus on the work being done across Governments, therefore I welcome the news that the Government will look at that in more detail. I say that not because I want to be partisan, but because the issues are serious and fundamental and must be addressed. I am sure that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) will agree with me about that.

The Scottish Government propose in the consultation that their new approach will build and refine a framework that supports children growing up in poverty and their families. In addition to the ambitious target of eradicating child poverty, the Scottish Government are preparing for new powers to be devolved to them as part of the Scotland Act 2016. They will have control of only 15% of social security responsibilities in Scotland. The sad fact is that the other 85% will remain here with the Minister, so I rely on her to respond to my concerns and give them deep and serious consideration.

The Scottish Government have pledged to increase carer's allowance to the same level as jobseeker's allowance, to abolish the bedroom tax, to scrap the 84-day rule, which removes income from the families of disabled children, to abolish employment tribunal fees, and to replace the Sure Start maternity grant with an expanded maternity early years allowance, restoring payments for children beyond the first two years. There are also plans in place to block the sanctions regimes when Holyrood takes control over the welfare and social security powers that they will then have.

Those measures constitute a fairer, more equal society and a better Scotland, but it should not be the role of Scotland to eradicate poverty on its own. The Government have a responsibility to do their job and assist the Scottish Government and other parts of the UK in making sure that the issue is tackled. We cannot be glib and sit in one room talking and sounding off. We must do more to tackle the matter seriously. As the hon. Member for Congleton has said and as I have reinforced,

families are affected, and we should not diminish the importance of their lives. Social justice should be at the heart of what the Government, and all Governments, do. We have the privilege of representing our constituents, and the responsibility to do so.

3.22 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing a debate on such an important issue.

I am sure that many of us were very encouraged to hear the new Prime Minister state clearly that social justice will be at the heart of her Government, continuing the excellent work of the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, and that the Government's agenda will be focused clearly on addressing not just the symptoms but the causes of poverty. In its report, "Breakthrough Britain", the Centre for Social Justice identified five pathways or causes of poverty in the UK. Those were family breakdown, educational failure, addiction, debt and worklessness. I am delighted at the way the Government have for some time now sought to address those issues by, as we have heard, creating jobs and getting more people into jobs than ever before—there are far fewer workless households—and by reforming education and raising standards of education in schools.

I particularly want to focus on the place of family. Unless we address the matter of family breakdown, we will never truly address the issue of poverty and social justice. We need to put family at the heart of any agenda.

3.23 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.31 pm

On resuming—

Steve Double: To pick up where I left off, there is clear evidence that we will never truly deal with the issue of social justice and social mobility if we do not put family at the heart of any agenda. Research conducted by the Centre for Social Justice has shown that children who experience family breakdown perform less well at school, gain fewer qualifications and are more likely to be expelled. Helping families to stay together is the ultimate social mobility agenda.

While it is not just about money—we must remember that these are real people's lives at the heart of this—we cannot ignore the cost of family breakdown. Family breakdown is estimated to cost the country £48 billion a year, with £7 billion on the health service, £4.5 billion on the police and £13.1 billion on increased tax credits. That is in addition to the pressure it puts on our housing stock and social services. Despite that massive cost to the taxpayer and the pressure that family breakdown places on our national services, next year the Government will spend more on repairing cathedrals than they will on supporting relationships and families staying together. If this Government are really to build a one nation Britain, their social reforms will have to work to close the family gap, because the benefits of a stable family life are not shared equally and are becoming a middle-class preserve.

[Steve Double]

I know these are generalisations, and people will always point to exceptions, but the latest Government data show that 76% of children in middle to high-income households are living with both parents, compared with only 48% of those in low-income families. It is clear that family breakdown is damaging the life chances of the poorest children in our country, and it should be a matter of social justice. I am aware that social justice is easy to talk about and much more difficult to achieve, but we do need to talk about it. I say that as someone who has learned the hard way how important family is. We should not shy away from saying that strong families, strong marriages and couple relationships are a good thing, because the evidence is there to clearly demonstrate that that is the case.

Too often, successive Governments have kicked this issue into the long grass or put in the “too difficult to deal with” pile. I do not believe we can afford to do that any longer. If we do not take steps and put measures in place that will actively support couples and families and reverse the trend of family breakdown in this country, we will fail future generations of our poorest children.

The title of this debate is “Cross-departmental strategy on social justice”. If we are to have such a strategy, we will need a cross-departmental strategy on the family. In my time in this House, it has struck me that family policy is not really owned by any Department or Minister. While it is true that family matters cut across many Departments, they are too vital to the life chances of millions of children across our country to not be owned by anyone in government. Because family matters are often seen as difficult, intangible and hard to address, there is a real danger that they end up falling between all the stools.

I believe that the Government need to do more. I support the proposal by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton that children’s centres be converted to family hubs as a first step. I also call on the Government to extend the married couples transferable tax allowance further and to continue to eradicate the couple penalty in the welfare system, so that it is no longer a disincentive for couples to stay together.

We need someone in the Cabinet who will champion the family. We need cross-departmental co-operation to develop family-friendly policies and a family test with real teeth that shapes policy. We need the Government to not be afraid to boldly say that strong families, marriages and couple relationships are good. They are good for our children and for our national wellbeing, and they will play a key role in dealing with the causes of poverty across our country.

3.35 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). It is noticeable that speeches from my hon. Friends have centred on the family. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Cameron), to whom I pay tribute—he has a new title now, which I forget; is it sheriff of Northstead?—quite rightly said, family is

“the best anti-poverty measure ever invented”.

I am sure that that will be endorsed by the new Minister, whom I welcome, and our new Prime Minister, who has made it clear that her focus continues to be fighting against “burning” social injustices. At the root and heart of injustice is the lack of opportunity to have the care of two parents and, indeed, to be part of a commitment of marriage.

The point of this debate, which I was involved in seeking to secure, is for the Minister to do a very straightforward thing: to confirm, as we hope is the case, that there is a cross-departmental strategy on social justice and that the Government will publish a life chances strategy. We look forward to the Minister telling us the date of publication of that strategy, which was mentioned in the Queen’s Speech:

“To tackle poverty and the causes of deprivation, including family instability, addiction and debt, my government will introduce new indicators for measuring life chances.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 18 May 2016; Vol. 773, c. 3.]

I hope the Minister will reaffirm that commitment.

The House authorities struggled when they saw the title of the debate. Who is the Minister responsible for this cross-departmental strategy? The title of the debate was deliberately designed to raise that question, because we need a clear answer on who is leading the way. Traditionally, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), to whom I pay tribute, led that charge, given his background with the CSJ and all the hard work done, not least in opposition. We need to know clearly that this strategy is owned across Government and that not only will a life chances strategy be delivered, but it will have real meaning—that it will not consist of good soundbites and a good press release and then gather dust on civil service shelves. That is important.

While I respect the Minister for responding to this debate—no doubt a lot of concerns focus on the Department for Work and Pensions—this issue goes beyond specific departmental responsibilities and affects all parts of Government. We know the family has to be at the heart of that, because it is in stable families that we can have social justice across Departments. When the life chances strategy is published, I will be doing a word search not only for “family” but for “marriage”. I want to see hits on both those words, because they are key determinants.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned Jobs, Friends & Houses, a cross-departmental approach with the charitable sector. May I take that a stage further? Although there is a question mark about who is responding to the cross-departmental strategy on social justice, we can be in no doubt about the impact of a lack of such a strategy. While there are great opportunities through local charities that bring things together, the impact is on those like Lucy. My test of the Government’s cross-departmental strategy is a “Lucy” test.

Lucy was a child who was sexually abused and placed in care. She later went on to suffer from depression, which caused educational failure. She began shoplifting to pay for a drug habit following a short spell in prison, and she lost touch with her grandmother, her remaining relative. The spiral of complex needs led to injustice for Lucy. She was able to buck the trend, but sadly there are all too many Lucys—58,000 are homeless with substance misuse and criminal justice issues. We must tackle this

problem. Lucy is an example of the way forward. We must bring things together properly with a national strategy that enables the Lucys of this world to have joint commissioning from their council to avoid the silos between the Probation Service and the NHS, and to have a dedicated, named mentor and advocate. Lucy is now back in contact with her grandmother, out of contact with the police and on the road to recovery.

I appreciate, Ms Dorries, that you want me to conclude. Those individuals with complex needs do not understand cross-departmental strategies, but they understand when they fall into the gaps between departmental silos, funding streams and statutory responsibilities. We have to ensure that the strategy goes to the root causes of poverty and into entrenched areas so that we do much better for such people. We know we need more residential rehab, which has had 50% cuts. Areas such as Birmingham are not making any referrals to abstinence-based residential rehab. We have to ensure that the Lucys of this world get a better deal. To pay homage to the old Heineken adverts, this life chances strategy has to reach the parts that other strategies do not reach and the lives of the Lucys of this world.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): I will call the Minister at 15.58, so perhaps the Opposition Front Benchers will work out the timing for themselves.

3.41 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Thank you, Ms Dorries. I will try to do the maths on the timing.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this debate and on her thoughtful speech. Let me say at the outset that Scottish National party Members share the desire to support families, to promote social justice and to improve the prospects of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. We recognise that that will require cross-departmental action that cuts across a range of policy areas and Government functions, including areas of devolved responsibility—a point that may be reflected this afternoon in the fact that only Back-Bench Members from Scotland and Northern Ireland are in the Chamber today.

Where we part company with the UK Government is in our analysis of the underlying drivers of poverty and deprivation and in the prescriptions we offer to address it.

Andrew Selous: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dr Whiteford: I will not give way because I am very short of time.

The hon. Member for Congleton put great emphasis on family policy, and clearly families are at the heart of a stable society. We have heard from other speakers today and from the Government in recent months about life chances. That is an innocuous enough term. Who could take issue with improving life chances? The problem is that the shift in the Government's rhetoric has masked a sharp move away in policy terms from consideration of the economic drivers of disadvantage, particularly low income, towards social phenomena such as family breakdown and addiction, which we have heard a lot about today but which actually affect children in families across the income spectrum.

Don't get me wrong—children are often very badly affected by parental separation or a parent's problematic use of alcohol or drugs, but that will not necessarily push them into poverty. Likewise, problematic levels of debt are by no means the preserve of low-income households. I agree with the hon. Member for Congleton that support for all families who are coping with these issues is important regardless of their income level, but if we want to achieve greater social justice and to close the gaps in educational attainment, job prospects, and long-term health and life expectancy between the wealthiest and the poorest, it is intellectually dishonest to pretend that low income is anything other than the core driver of poverty. It is a distraction to think we can tackle child poverty without recognising that material deprivation, lack of money in a household and chronic financial insecurity—symptoms of a labour market that is increasingly characterised by low-paid, temporary jobs with fluctuating hours of work—and excessive housing costs lie at the heart of the gulf in prospects. We cannot tackle these glaring inequalities if we are not prepared to bite the bullet of these gross disparities in income.

The reality is that the Government's austerity agenda continues to reduce the incomes of families in lower paid jobs and those unable to work because of serious illness or disability. Austerity has hit the incomes of women and disabled people disproportionately. The four-year freeze on working-age benefits, including child tax credits, working tax credits and jobseeker's allowance, will see families lose an estimated 12% of the value of their support by 2020. Two thirds of children growing up in poverty in the UK live in working families, so cuts to tax credits have an enormously detrimental effect on parents in low-paid jobs. That undoubtedly puts pressure on families and strains relationships.

The cuts to the work allowance will also hit low-paid working parents, including single parents, some of whom could lose as much as £2,600 a year. The cuts to the work allowance also remove from universal credit one of the cornerstone benefits of the system, namely that it was supposed to remove the work disincentives—the so-called benefit trap inherent in the previous system. Universal credit now replicates that flaw so that for many low-paid parents there is now no incentive to take promotion or increase their working hours because their family will be worse off. According to the Resolution Foundation, work will pay on average £1,000 a year less for working families in receipt of universal credit.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) talked about the Concentrix fiasco, which we debated in the main Chamber today. All I can say is that it has caused extreme financial distress and hardship. I know of at least two families who have lost their home because of that. The Government really must take responsibility.

Another key issue in addressing life chances is housing costs. There is a chronic shortage of affordable housing across the UK, a consequence partly of grossly inflated house prices and partly of the failure of successive Governments to build enough affordable homes. I am glad to say that in Scotland we have taken a very different approach and have started to reverse that situation. We are committed to building 50,000 more affordable homes in the next five years, which will go some way to meeting need, but we cannot avoid the fact

[*Dr Eilidh Whiteford*]

that children who grow up in a warm, dry, decent and stable home will have better life chances than those who do not. That is a good example of why we need cross-departmental efforts to tackle child poverty. Again, it goes without saying that poor housing puts terrible pressure on families and relationships.

Last week, I attended the launch of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's "Solve UK Poverty" report. One of the most important messages that comes out of that is about the dynamic nature of poverty. In this place, we often trade in lazy stereotypes about entrenched poverty, and there is no doubt that some parts of the country are affected by that because of deindustrialisation and so on. Nevertheless, for most people it is unexpected life events that push them into poverty, whether it be redundancy, relationship breakdown or long-term illness and serious health problems. One of the most important things that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation highlighted is families' level of resilience. Clearly, when unpredictable events that could happen to any of us strike, poorer families have less of a cushion. They are much less able to cushion themselves against such events that can have long-term, far-reaching consequences.

I will finish by talking about how we measure child poverty and pick up some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 removed the statutory child poverty targets that were to be met by 2020. A cynic might assume that that is because the Government know that the Institute for Fiscal Studies is correct in its projection that the rate of child poverty in the UK is set to increase to over 18%—affecting almost one in five—by 2020 as a direct result of austerity reforms.

Life chances indicators may provide some useful insights, but given that two thirds of children living in poverty have working parents, focusing on worklessness will not take us much further forward and misses the big picture of widening inequality eroding young people's life chances. I am glad to say that in Scotland we are taking an alternative approach to child poverty which focuses on maximising household resources, investing heavily in high-quality early-years education, including 30 hours a week free childcare for all nursery-age children and for the most disadvantaged two-year-olds, and renewing the focus on closing the attainment gap in schools between those from the lowest income groups and their better-off peers.

The Scottish Government are also consulting on legislation to measure child poverty with proposals for ambitious statutory income targets and duties on Ministers to report every year on published delivery plans. We have also protected the education maintenance allowance, which has helped young people from low income families to stay on at school or college so that they get the qualifications they are capable of achieving, and ensured that those who get the grades they need to go to university can study on the basis of their ability to learn, not their ability to pay tuition fees.

We should not dodge the big issue about income, but should recognise that it is at the heart of families and their ability to sustain the normal shocks and events that most people go through at some point in their lives.

3.48 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I congratulate the hon. Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing this important debate.

I welcome the genuine concern focused on the poorest families by the hon. Member for Congleton. However, as she said, while family breakdown is a key driver of poverty—the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made much the same point—poverty is a key driver of family breakdown, and it is important that that remains in the frame. There are almost 1 million zero-hours contracts in our society, as well as high housing costs, insecure rental contracts and insecure work, all of which create a great deal of instability in the home and for families. A Government who are focusing on tackling social justice should take note of that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke compellingly of the community groups in his constituency, which work hard to make lives better. He did say that he had never seen food banks as a negative. I have to disagree with him on that: I see the sharp rise in food banks in our country, one of the richest nations on earth, as a stain on the reputation of this Government.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) spoke very clearly and importantly on the role of education in helping people in prison—helping them to become better fathers, mothers and so on and aiding their rehabilitation. He also spoke about the importance of improving access to psychological therapies.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) raised the important issue that universal credit is paid only to one person in a couple. That raises the problems that particularly women in abusive relationships can face, and I ask the Minister in particular to address that point.

The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay also called for family hubs, but I have to say that in my constituency Government cuts are putting our family hubs in jeopardy. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), whom I absolutely agree with, pointed out that low income is a core driver of deprivation.

The hon. Member for Congleton spoke with pride about the social justice narrative of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith). I have to take exception to that, because we of course have to bear in mind the record of what he achieved while in office. We saw the slashing of social security support and a failure to ensure the levels of high-quality, well-paid and secure jobs that would prevent an additional 800,000 children from being in poverty by 2020.

The hon. Lady and I can agree on one thing: the need for an interdepartmental approach to enable social justice to thrive, and to counter social injustice. Where we may disagree is on the interpretation of how to achieve that. I would point to whole swathes of Government policies and previous coalition Government policies as drivers of deprivation. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the Budget has left people on low and middle incomes proportionately worse off as a result of tax and social security changes. Regressive economic policies whereby the total tax burdens fall predominantly

on the poorest, combined with low levels of public spending, especially on social security, are key to establishing and perpetuating inequalities. Is that really social justice?

Fiona Bruce: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I will not, because I am very short of time; I am sorry.

Is it socially just that 3.7 million sick and disabled people will have approximately £28 billion-worth of cuts in social security support from the Welfare Reform Act 2012? That does not include the cuts to employment and support allowance work-related activity group support due to start next, or cuts to social care. Is it socially just that in addition to facing the misery and hardship of poverty, the children affected have greater risks to their future health and wellbeing? One witness to the recent inquiry by the all-party parliamentary group on health in all policies into the effects of the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Bill on child health told us that

“as children’s lives unfold, the poor health associated with poverty limits their potential and development across a whole range of areas, leading to poor health and life chances in adulthood, which then has knock-on effects on future generations.”

There is even increasing evidence that poverty directly impacts on how neural connections develop in the brain. In particular, the hippocampus, which is key to learning, memory and stress regulation, and the amygdala, which is linked to stress and emotion, have weaker connections to other areas of the brain in children living in poverty compared with children from more affluent homes. Those changes in connectivity are related to poorer cognitive and educational outcomes and increased risk of psychiatric illness for nine to 10-year-olds; that includes depression and antisocial behaviours.

The inequalities that the people of our country face at the moment are reminiscent of the Victorian age. The International Monetary Fund has described income inequalities as

“the most defining challenge of our time”.

In the UK, 40 years ago, 5% of income went to the highest 1% of earners; today it is 15%. Unless we address that, we cannot get to grips with all the other issues talked about in this debate. Of course, this is not just about income. The Panama papers revealed the shocking extent to which the assets of the richest are kept in offshore tax havens, where tax is avoided and evaded. According to the Equality Trust, in the last year alone the wealth of the richest 1,000 households in the UK increased by more than £28.5 billion. Today, their combined wealth is more than that of 40% of the population. While the wealth of the richest 1% has increased by 21%, the poorest half of households saw their wealth increase by less than one third of that amount. I could go on.

Of course, social injustices are not confined to tax and social security policies. There is inadequate funding for nursery schools, so we are seeing them struggle to provide the expertise that can make a real difference in early-years development—something very pertinent in my own constituency. What about the impact of the Government’s decision to bring forward the equalisation of the state pension age for women born in the 1950s, the so-called WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality? What about the restrictions in access

to justice through legal aid and the fees charged for employment tribunals? What about the reducing of access to education by trebling tuition fees and scrapping the education maintenance allowance? What about the cuts to local authority budgets—they have been very high indeed in my constituency—leading to cuts to Sure Start and threatening vital adult social care?

Cuts to the police authorities mean that we are seeing increased problems with social cohesion, creating real anxiety at all levels of society, with people in certain areas afraid to go out of their house. There is the threat to the social housing sector, such that people do not feel that they have a secure home to live in, through the Government’s right to buy, bedroom tax and 1% annual cut to social rents. Those are all combining to threaten the social housing sector.

This Government and the previous coalition have facilitated exploitative labour markets with poor-quality jobs and zero-hours contracts, the number of which is heading towards 1 million, and have further contributed to maintaining power within an elite. Where is the social justice in that?

Governing is about choices. The amount of revenue lost to the Exchequer each year as a result of tax fraud is £16 billion—the same as we spend on disabled people through the disability living allowance and personal independence payment. If the Government truly believe in social justice and fairness, they need to reflect that in their policies across the board. They need to clamp down on tax fraud and ensure that the most vulnerable in society are looked after properly and not plunged into poverty or worse, and that opportunities are there for all.

3.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): It is, of course, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. Like other hon. Members, I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on securing this important debate on social justice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton in particular is a very committed and diligent campaigner on these issues, and I thank her for the work that she has done to raise the profile of social justice matters. I also thank hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions to this discussion. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who unfortunately has had to leave the Chamber, but whose commitment to these issues is indeed incredibly well known.

The Government, too, are committed to building a country that works for everyone. That means taking action to help the most disadvantaged. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street, we will fight against the injustices we see in our society and, in doing that, we will do everything we can to give people more control over their lives. However, we know that, as many hon. Members have said today, our strategies need to be joined up across Government so that we can effectively support and transform the lives of the most vulnerable. That is why the Prime Minister has established a new Social Reform Cabinet Committee—to bring Departments

[*Caroline Nokes*]

together to deliver social reform. In addition to the Prime Minister, that Committee includes the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; in total, nine Departments are involved.

The Prime Minister has been clear that tackling poverty and disadvantage and delivering social reform will be a priority for this Government, but I would like to take this opportunity to respond to the many issues that hon. Members have raised and to set out the ways we are currently tackling disadvantage, removing barriers for people and ensuring that everyone has the right opportunities to fulfil their potential.

This afternoon there has been a focus on relationships and families, and rightly so. Good-quality relationships are the basis of a strong and stable society, and we are committed to strengthening and supporting family life for our children and for future generations. The evidence is clear: what matters most is the quality of family relationships and not necessarily whether parents are part of a couple, cohabiting, married or separated. It is important to acknowledge that families come in many different shapes and sizes and we need to be able to support them all.

Over the last four years, we have invested £30 million in relationship support services, allowing 160,000 people to access preventive support. More than 48,000 couples participated in counselling, and more than 17,000 practitioners have been trained to help families in difficulty. We are developing new programmes of relationship support services to help couples with relationship issues, and those focus particularly on the most disadvantaged in society. They are aimed at helping parents to manage and resolve couple conflict.

What we know more clearly than anything else is that conflict has the most impact on children. We want to support parents to stay together where they want to and can, but also support parents, when they have separated, to continue working together in the best interests of their children. My officials are actively working with a range of Departments. Given the prevalence of relationship distress in disadvantaged groups, we are working with Department for Communities and Local Government colleagues, who are responsible for the troubled families programme, on strengthening the focus of that programme on relationship support and parenting.

We recognise that relationships come to an end and it is important that those parents get the support they need to keep conflict to a minimum and to agree on what is best for their children. Over the last two years we have funded 17 projects to help test which services work best in helping separated parents. These have been up and down the country in very different and varied areas, including the constituencies of some of my honourable colleagues.

What I found particularly interesting from one project was the evidence that the involvement of grandparents could be incredibly useful and constructive when couples are separating, to help them work in the best interests of their grandchildren. We have learned a great deal from these projects and are now deciding how best to invest in the help for separated families and single parents in the future.

I was delighted to hear my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton refer to the Government's work on care leavers. As a former member of the Education Committee, I was but one small part of the work looking at the impact that Government and agencies can have on care leavers. It is absolutely right that these young people, some of the most vulnerable in our society, whose educational, health and employment outcomes are significantly poorer than those of their peers, are made one of our priorities. We are committed to giving them the support they need as they make the difficult transition to adulthood, independent living and, of course, work.

Since the first cross-Government care leaver strategy was published in October 2013, the Department for Work and Pensions has continued to take action to improve the employment support we provide for care leavers. In July this year, the Government published a new, more ambitious strategy to improve care leaver support across this Parliament. This includes setting out in law, for the first time, what it means for a local authority to be a good corporate parent, and creating a new care leaver covenant, which will be launched shortly.

Offender rehabilitation was spoken about by my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton and the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who has a great deal of experience and expertise in that important area. We are committed to offender rehabilitation and prison reform. Helping offenders to get into work and make a positive contribution is in the best interests of the individual and wider society.

We know that ex-offenders who find work are significantly less likely to return to prison. Reoffending rates are around 20% lower for prison leavers who go into a job. Work is the best route out of poverty, and for offenders work is essential to rebuild their lives and achieve independence and stability for themselves and their families. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire referenced Jobs, Friends & Houses, which is working in the Blackpool area. Close to my own constituency, I have seen some of the work done at Winchester prison that has seen the prison working with both education providers and local businesses to help prisoners acquire employment placements.

We also recognise what an important stabilising and motivating influence families can be in prisoner rehabilitation. Family engagement in prisons across England and Wales helps increase wellbeing and reduce reoffending. At Winchester I saw the work done by the charity Spurgeons, which is one of many partners delivering this support across the prison estate. Spurgeons supports imprisoned fathers to help them with their parenting skills, and to help their families handle the stresses associated with having a parent in custody. Classes are run on parenting skills and the impact that custodial sentences have on families. Family days are then held to support building better relationships during custody and after release.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised a number of very important issues, including a discussion of the big society, which I too have seen working in my constituency. We might have a discussion about the role that food banks play, but he is absolutely right to point out the role that the Church has in both establishing food banks and supporting people who use them. In Southampton just last week, I was at the 20th anniversary of the Basics Bank, which operates in

a network of churches across the city. It is based at Above Bar Church, but also operates in Swaythling Methodist Church in my constituency.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about universal credit, and of course this is an important part of the Government's welfare reforms. During the summer recess, I visited the Newcastle jobcentre where UC is operating in the full service. I saw the commitment and determination of the work coaches, who play an absolutely critical role in encouraging and supporting people—not just into work, but once they are in work, in that journey to better employment, longer hours and higher wages. Actually seeing it in operation was an incredible experience. The support and encouragement the work coaches were giving to the individual jobseekers coming in was really motivating to me. I saw the commitment they had and their enthusiasm for the transformational difference universal credit has, where nobody is penalised for taking on more hours.

It is an important change and one that we need to emphasise: to explain clearly that this is a route where there are no cliff edges and where work coaches can make sure they give budgetary advice. That is an important part of the transformation that we can make to people's lives. They can give support and, importantly, build relationships with those jobseekers.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) also spoke about universal credit. She raised a very important point, which I must address, about Concentrix and the contract; HMRC has confirmed it will not extend that and also that those who have had their tax credits stopped will be made priorities, to make sure that their cases are looked at.

I pay tribute to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire. He gave me a great long list of questions, which I fear I am not going to have enough time to answer in full. I reassure him that we do look at the work being done overseas and learn from best practice in places such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the Netherlands. I am absolutely open to suggestions of what works to help build and strengthen family relationships wherever it happens in

the world. In this country we are not isolated from the impacts of what other countries have learnt before, and we should be willing to learn from our neighbours.

In conclusion, let me reassure hon. Members that this Government are absolutely committed to fighting against the injustices of society and to ensuring that everybody has the right opportunities to fulfil their potential. Our priorities remain making work pay and supporting families into work and out of poverty, by tackling the root causes of poverty and not just the symptoms.

In his moving explanation of Lucy and the Lucy test, my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate was absolutely right to point out that these are individuals who are impacted. We must do our utmost to make sure that that Lucy test is used to ensure that the policies the Government have across a broad range of Departments are effective and deliver the outcomes we are looking for.

4.7 pm

Fiona Bruce: I thank colleagues for the many thoughtful and constructive contributions they have made, with practical suggestions for cross-governmental working on promoting social justice—in particular my hon. Friends the Members for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I also thank the Minister for her response. I hope she will take away some of the points made during the debate. May I ask her please to consider writing to answer the points she has been unable to respond to today? I thank her for her response and for referring to a number of projects providing relationship support in different parts of the country. I hope to see them extended more widely right across the country, because that is very much needed, and prioritised, along with other proposals.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered cross-departmental strategy on social justice.

The BBC and Political Impartiality

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

4.8 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the BBC and political impartiality.

Thank you, Mr Davies, for your chairmanship of this debate. May I begin by saying that this debate is about the BBC and impartiality, and the bias that has a tendency to creep in? This is not in any way meant to be a full-scale attack on the BBC, which is an organisation greatly respected by everyone, not least myself. In fact, I think that some of the programmes made by the BBC are absolutely second to none—in particular in the news department, which I am going to talk about in a bit more detail in a minute.

News and current affairs programmes on Radio 4 such as “From Our Own Correspondent” or “The Report” are absolutely excellent. I also pay tribute—as I am sure you would, Mr Davies, if you were able to—to the contribution the BBC has made to the Welsh language in Wales. Nor do I think that there is any argument for privatising the BBC; again, that is not what I am here to suggest. But I do think that unless the BBC is able to deal with the bias that many people have complained about, it is going to be harder and harder for it to justify the licence fee, which is in effect a tax on everyone whether they are supporters of what the BBC says or not. I will come to some examples of that.

Peter Sissons made the point in his book that there is a cultural bias within the BBC because it is a metropolitan organisation that seems to be peopled by employees who have a certain world view. It is always difficult to put people into categories, but in my opinion, one could fairly say—I have been in and out of BBC studios on a more-than-weekly basis for about 17 years now, as you know, Mr Davies—that that world view is somewhat left of centre. I have been in many BBC studios and canteens and I have yet to see anyone sitting there reading a copy of the *Daily Express* or the *Daily Mail*, loudly complaining about immigration, Brussels or suggesting that claims about climate change are somewhat overegged, yet that is a perfectly normal situation in many other places. Anyone trying it in the BBC studios would probably find that their promotion ceiling was hit fairly quickly.

The reality, of course, is that although the BBC goes out of its way to try to be impartial, it is very difficult for it to be when all—or most—of its employees share a particular set of opinions. We see that in several ways: for example, pressure groups are dealt with in different ways by the BBC. One could google its website right away to see what I am talking about. Organisations such as the Institute of Economic Affairs—one might suggest that that is a right-of-centre organisation—will always come with a health warning on a BBC webpage that it is a centre-right think-tank or a centre-right organisation. The situation is similar for the Adam Smith Institute or the Centre for Social Justice, which is always described as a think-tank set up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith).

Meanwhile, other think-tanks that are asked to comment or supply speakers are not given health warnings in the same way. Organisations such as the Institute for Public Policy Research, which is a left-of-centre pressure group, is very rarely described as one. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is a left-of-centre pressure group that supports higher taxes and higher spending. That is a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but it has a left-of-centre view in everything that it suggests. It is never, ever described as that; it is always described as an anti-poverty charity or think-tank, or in some kind of a positive way.

When it comes to climate change, we see the same thing happening. Groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are simply described as that and their spokespeople are given licence to say whatever they want, whereas that is not the case for an organisation that may question some of the so-called consensus about climate change. The Global Warming Policy Foundation, for example, will always be described as an organisation set up by Nigel Lawson that questions the scientific consensus around climate change.

We see that bias creeping in when speakers are interrupted. For example, in November 2013, Evan Davis interviewed two speakers on the European Union, one of whom was Paul Sykes, who obviously took the view that the EU was not a good thing. He was interrupted 11 times a minute. The other speaker, Karel De Gucht, who I think was an EU trade commissioner, was interrupted just twice a minute. We see that bias in the number of speakers and the kind of views that they espouse. Again, in January 2013 when “Newsnight” ran a special on the European Union, the overwhelming majority of speakers—I think 18 out of 19—were pro-EU, with only one alternative voice.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am listening to my hon. Friend’s speech with great interest, and I congratulate him on it. Does he agree that each morning on the business section of the “Today” programme, we still get an unrelenting diet of doom and gloom about Britain’s economic prospects after the Brexit vote? If anybody is trying to talk this country into recession, it is the business section of the “Today” programme. Does he share my concern that it should grow up and accept the result from the British people that we want to leave the European Union, with the positive benefits that that will bring this country?

David T. C. Davies: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. It is not just that programme, but many others and many other aspects of the BBC. I took a few examples of this from the website earlier. I do not want to go through all of them, but an article asked, “Was there a Brexit graduate gap?” to try and perhaps suggest that people voting to leave the EU were not intelligent. Another article said, “PM condemns ‘despicable’ post-EU referendum hate crimes”.

In fact, if I may come to that point, I think the referendum campaign was run in a relatively fair fashion. In Wales, I was in and out of the studios a lot and I will not complain about what happened during the campaign, but what has taken place afterwards has been an absolute disgrace.

The worst aspect is the fact that there have been hate crimes, and we should not shy away from that. There always have been and possibly always will be. Every

single person I know who campaigned for Brexit totally and utterly condemns hate crimes of any sort. Every reasonable and rational person condemns them. I have said to BBC reporters, “Why are we not allowed to go out there and say that we totally and utterly condemn these crimes? Why do we even have to put up with suggestions on BBC websites implying that somehow people who voted for Brexit are responsible for these despicable crimes that have taken place?”

We see headlines such as “Young Muslim women say they’re feeling the Brexit effect”, “Hate crime ‘still far too high’ post-Brexit”, “UN blames UK politicians for Brexit hate crime spike”, and “Brexit: Children hear racist abuse ‘for first time’”. There is one after another, always with the suggestion that somehow those 17 million people who went out and voted for freedom from the European Union are in some way responsible for the actions of a despicable minority who are condemned by absolutely everyone.

To put that in perspective, in the past we have seen despicable crimes by religious extremists. Whenever those crimes have taken place, the BBC has rightly made it absolutely clear that those crimes have been carried out by a tiny minority of people who share those particular religious views and that the vast majority of people sharing that religion do not support any form of violence. The BBC is right to make that point and yet, it is not doing so when dealing with Brexit.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am following the hon. Gentleman’s speech closely. Since the 1999 European elections, a number of independent reports have shown the bias of the BBC on EU matters. The bias that he refers to in terms of climate change and other scientific matters is different. The fact is that the BBC has very few scientifically trained people and they do not understand that “consensus” is not a scientific word. They use that word to censor people who do not agree with the majority of the scientists. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a difference between those two biases within the BBC?

David T. C. Davies: I suppose all biases are different. I accept the point the hon. Gentleman is making, and in fact, I was going to come on to climate change in a moment. Suffice it to say that I agree with what my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) said: the reporting since the referendum has been an absolute disgrace, and the BBC has to remember that a majority of those who voted, who buy their licences, do not support membership of the European Union. The BBC should be out there reflecting that particular opinion instead of putting up people such as Gary Younge to go out and give the impression somehow that Britain has become a dangerous place for eastern Europeans. Having been married to one for 15 years or so, I can say that that is not the case.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Slightly naively, I thought that this would be a general conversation about BBC bias rather than being purely about Brexit. I hope my hon. Friend will forgive me for asking a question that may be unrelated. Sections 4.4.31 and 15.4.18 of the BBC guidelines address all these concerns, so the existing guidelines are there. Has he attempted to engage with the BBC about enforcing them?

David T. C. Davies: I certainly have engaged with the BBC on this matter and others, and I will come back to that in a minute if I have time.

The hon. Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) made a point about climate change, and that involves a different, but important, kind of bias. It is regrettable that the BBC has accepted hook, line and sinker the so-called scientific consensus on climate change and not allowed anyone on to the airwaves who wants to question it.

There may well be a consensus of scientists who can be found, who will say that carbon dioxide emitted by man has created the very small rise in temperature that we have seen over the past 250 years, and that that is the only driver of climate. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, incidentally, would not say that, but let us not go into a debate about climate change. Let me just say that there are certain questions that should be asked—that one can ask—to which the scientists have no answers.

It would be perfectly reasonable for the BBC to allow on air people who are willing at least to put those questions and to allow the public to make their mind up as to whether the scientists had answered those questions. Yet on the rare occasions when the BBC has allowed a dissenting voice, there has been all sorts of trouble. For example, Quentin Letts was recently on a BBC programme asking what is the point of the Met Office and, because he suggested that the Met Office was getting certain things wrong, there was a huge hullabaloo and the whole programme was taken off the internet. Some sort of apology was issued, and I believe that many BBC staff were sent off on some training mission, presumably at taxpayers’ expense.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that even BBC presenters are now saying that the BBC has gone totally in favour of global warming views and that impartiality was abandoned long ago? The BBC spent tens of thousands of pounds fighting a freedom of information request that sought to identify that seminars were held to ensure that its top executives were directed towards the pro-climate change view.

David T. C. Davies: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Top executives have been sent off on training programmes where they are expected to spout the “man-made carbon emissions have caused all sorts of climatic problems” line, which simply is not true. Incidentally, if anyone from the BBC is listening, I will debate this with the best scientists the BBC can find in the country or across the world. Bring them on.

With my heavy goods vehicle licence I could outfox any of those so-called scientists, because they simply do not know the answers to the pertinent questions on this matter. I really hope that the BBC has the courage to do that. Who is going to lose out here? If I am getting this wrong and I do not know what I am talking about, I am the one who will look silly. Please, BBC, put me on a radio programme with the best scientists on climate change and we will see who is looking stupid afterwards.

I want to mention one other, perhaps seemingly minor, matter, which is the way in which the word “conservative” is used. I am fed up to the back teeth of hearing the BBC use the word “conservative” to describe

[David T. C. Davies]

radical Islamic clerics in Iran and Iraq. Anyone googling it will see what I mean. These extremist people who have absolutely ridiculous views about gays and women, believing them all to be second-class citizens, are quite often described as conservative, albeit with a small c, but that does not come over on the radio. I have sat listening to the radio while lunatic clerics have been described time after time as conservative, and then the next news item is something about the Government in which members of the centre-right party who believe in equality and human rights are also described as conservative. That juxtaposition is simply not fair. That use of language would not be tolerated by many other people.

Of course, I could go on for a rather long time about things that have gone on in the BBC, but I have made my point. It matters that the BBC has this inbuilt bias. BBC executives need to do something to address that bias. I want to see the BBC continue. I enjoy listening to most parts of the BBC most of the time, but if the BBC is to justify what is effectively a tax on every single man, woman and child in this country, it has to start reflecting the diversity of views out there, being careful to note that the majority of people in this country have shown that they are opposed to the European Union, that almost certainly a majority of people in this country believe that immigration needs to come down and that a surprisingly large number of people think that the current hysteria over climate change has been somewhat over-egged.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con) *rose*—

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): If you do not have the prior permission of the mover and the Minister, you are not allowed to make a speech. The Minister might take an intervention.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I might take a long intervention.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I hope not.

4.24 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. It is also a pleasure to address this incredibly important issue at an auspicious time, because the new BBC charter for the next period is due to be published tomorrow. The debate is important and timely, and my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) is modest in asking if anybody from the BBC will be watching, because I imagine that the BBC is hanging on his every word. I have no doubt that the BBC will have heard and noted the argument he has put with some vim.

I agree with my hon. Friend on a number of fronts. At the start he briefly mentioned the importance of the Welsh language and the BBC's role in promulgating it. I am passionate about that too. I congratulate the BBC on its work in supporting and sustaining the Welsh language and in allowing people who speak English and Welsh, or just Welsh, to be able to participate fully in our national life.

I also agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of genuine impartiality, which is the nub of his speech and the purpose of this debate. It is worth briefly going through why impartiality is important and what is in place to ensure that it happens. As the charter review has shown, everybody will agree that the BBC is at the heart of British culture. I think the BBC is one of the nation's most treasured institutions, and there is broad agreement that, as a public service broadcaster funded by the licence fee, it is vital that accurate and impartial news is at the centre of the BBC's output. So far, so good.

No one would dispute that this has been a challenging period for the delivery of impartiality and accuracy, and I am now most concerned with how to ensure that the BBC's future is secured in such a way that the objectives of impartiality and accuracy remain at its heart and are effectively delivered.

Sammy Wilson: The partiality of the BBC is no longer in question, because more and more people, when they leave the BBC's employment—from Jeremy Paxman to Robert Aitken to Roger Mosey—have come out to say that there is bias in many different areas. Indeed, one only has to look at the pro-republican bias of BBC Northern Ireland. There is not a single Unionist commentator who would be quoted on BBC Northern Ireland. Nearly all of them come from a republican, pro-left wing background.

Matt Hancock: I certainly acknowledge that some former BBC employees have made that argument. We have all read the cases that they have made, but the question is how to ensure that the charter principles of impartiality and accuracy are best executed.

Simon Hart: I mentioned the editorial guidelines earlier because they are clear on that specific point. Does the Minister accept that there might be a fear among BBC management that taking on a high-profile, popular figure who is a public favourite can be difficult? There are plenty of examples, but are they using the procedures they already have to deal with them? If not, why not?

Matt Hancock: I was going to come on to the editorial guidelines. The White Paper made it clear that impartiality and accuracy are absolutely central to the future role of the BBC. The next charter, to be published tomorrow, will explicitly put impartiality at the core of that role, enshrining it in the BBC's mission and including it in the public purposes. The question is how that is delivered. One argument that is accepted by the BBC—this is important—is that having a diversity of internal opinions and a diversity of people from different backgrounds inside the BBC and working for the BBC is an important way to deliver on that objective. The BBC itself has goals to broaden the diversity—both as interpreted in protected characteristics legislation and in terms of social and geographic background—of those who work in it, to ensure that the internal debate better reflects the country that the BBC broadcasts to and that its employees are drawn from.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I am a former BBC insider myself; I worked there as a journalist on and off for 20 years. The Minister is absolutely right that we need diversity

of background. It is worth noting, just out of interest, that by my calculation there are more former BBC employees on the Conservative side of the House than on the Labour side.

I do not want to take too much time from the Minister, but I will say one other thing briefly, if I may. As a journalist who worked for the BBC for 20 years, I completely agree that we have to ensure that there is no institutional bias. I love the BBC, but I have to say that sustaining a strategy of institutionalised bias would require a level of organisation that, in my experience, is beyond the labyrinthine structure of BBC news and current affairs.

Matt Hancock: My hon. Friend makes a very insightful point. On his point that there are more former BBC employees on the Conservative Benches than on the Labour Benches, I should point out that there are far more Conservative than Labour MPs altogether—long may that be so—so we should look at the proportions rather than the absolute numbers.

Let me move on to how things will be structured in future. Of course, it has to be for BBC to ensure that it provides impartial news and current affairs. It would be improper for that to be a matter for Ministers; the White Paper makes it clear that, under the new charter, it will fall squarely to the new BBC board. However, there is an important and new role for the BBC to be held to account in delivering impartial news under the new charter, because Ofcom will take on the regulation of editorial standards, including ensuring that the BBC meets requirements in impartiality and accuracy.

We have been working closely with the BBC and Ofcom on preparing the draft charter, and the framework agreement that comes with it, for publication tomorrow. Before the new charter comes into effect, there will be the opportunity to debate it in the devolved Assemblies and in both Houses. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth that he will have the opportunity to raise these issues then, and that the House will be able to debate them further.

There is no doubt that impartiality is one of the most important functions of the BBC. Getting it right is vital to its long-term future, to its support among the populace and to its ability to do its job as the national broadcaster. The BBC Trust commissions research on the trustworthiness of news, and its 2015 survey showed that 53% of people said the BBC was the one source that they turned to for impartial news coverage. That demonstrates how important it is to get this right, but it also shows us that more than half of people trust the BBC most for impartiality, so the statistic works both ways. It underlines the importance of this debate and demonstrates that, as we implement the charter, as the BBC board takes effect and as Ofcom puts in place its regulatory regime, it is very important to take into account all views on the matter.

Sammy Wilson: Does the Minister accept that that is a rather circular argument? The BBC's monopoly and

the huge amount of resources it gets from public finances have allowed it to become the main news organisation in the United Kingdom. If the bias with which it presents the news becomes mainstream, of course it is going to be accepted as a trustworthy organisation, but only because it has been able to use its power to mould the views of the population. That is why the question of the licence fee and impartiality is important.

Matt Hancock: I accept the logic of that argument. The fact that the BBC is the single most trustworthy source for impartial news for the majority of the population—some 53%—demonstrates both its success, in that many people regard it as impartial, and how important it is that it gets the impartiality balance right. But impartiality is not just about dividing straight down the middle between two arguments. Impartiality and accuracy are both important. A national broadcaster ought to be able, if anyone can, to bring a sense of objectivity to our national debate and challenge it with facts, if that balance is delivered correctly.

Sammy Wilson: I am sure, then, that the Minister will not be too pleased about the way in which the BBC described the last autumn statement by the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne). It referred to public expenditure being slashed to levels of the 19th century, taking us back to the Dickensian era. That is how it reported it. I am sure the Minister does not accept that that was an impartial way to report it, or that that reporting does not demonstrate a left-wing bias within the organisation.

Matt Hancock: I do not think it behoves me, as Minister responsible for broadcasting and media, to pick up on particular episodes, because the debate has to be seen in the round. The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but I will not be drawn into a line-by-line analysis.

Graham Stringer: Does the Minister agree that nobody in this debate is conspiring to do anything? The fact is that there is a cultural bias: most BBC presenters would probably be able to define the subjunctive, but would not know the second law of thermodynamics. Until the BBC gets scientifically trained people, there is bound to be an inherent bias.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman makes his point forcefully. I am sure the BBC's human resources department has been watching and has noted it too.

I hope that the new charter set out tomorrow, with the new BBC board and with ultimate editorial recourse to Ofcom, will help us to seek what we are all looking for: an impartial and accurate BBC news service, which can inform and entertain the population of the UK according to its public service broadcasting principles. I strongly support the BBC in achieving that goal.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Universal Basic Income

4.38 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered universal basic income.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate.

If I asked people what a universal basic income is, I would get many and varied answers. It is even referred to with different titles, as universal, unconditional, basic or citizen's income. That is not a bad thing, because it highlights the fact that we do not have one clear-cut, complete, top-to-bottom definition. Until we do, we cannot decide if universal basic income is a solution or not, but I hope we can agree that the current welfare system has failed.

If we were all given a blank sheet of paper and asked to design a welfare system, nobody—but nobody—would come up with the system we have now. They would need thousands of sheets of paper and would end up with a mishmash of abandoned projects, badly implemented and half-hearted ideas and a system so complicated that it lets down those who need it the most. We need only look at the personal independence payment and at tax credits to see recent examples of people being punished by a system that is supposed to support them. At the same time, the current system allows those who would abuse it to do just that. The expected expenditure on UK social security and tax credits in 2016-17 is forecast to be more than £218 billion. We are spending 28% of our total public expenditure on social security, but it is still not clear whether our welfare system is helping or hindering the most vulnerable people in our society.

Inequality in the UK continues to get worse as we tinker around the edges of our welfare system. The richest 10% of households in the UK hold 45% of the nation's wealth; by contrast, the poorest 50% own just 8.7% of that wealth. We have seen that inequality manifest itself in different ways, across gender, age and nationality. For instance, the average household in the south-east of England has almost twice the amount of wealth as the average household in Scotland.

Despite attempts to improve the current system, in-work poverty has vastly increased, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimating that two thirds of children living in poverty in the UK are in working families. The rapid increase in food bank usage also reflects the failure of our system. In 2008-09, the Trussell Trust issued almost 26,000 three-day emergency food supplies; by 2015-2016, that figure had grown to more than 1.1 million, with almost one in three of recipients being referred to food banks because of a delay in their benefit payment.

Unfortunately, my constituency has some of the worst rates of deprivation in Scotland. Of the thousands of cases that my office has handled, I would conservatively estimate that at least one in 10 are related to benefits. I am seeing people who are left confused and anxious by a system of mystifying complexity. It lacks compassion; it processes people as if they were mere numbers going through a machine; and its rigid inflexibility prevents people from accessing the support to which they are entitled. I believe that it leaves people feeling less and less empowered.

Sharon Wright, a senior lecturer in public policy at the University of Glasgow, has said:

"Received wisdom dictates that benefit receipt is the outcome of making 'wrong choices'. Welfare reforms have become increasingly punitive, on the rationale that strong disincentives and coercion are required to prompt the 'right choice'."

As she points out, claiming benefits is not a life choice; it is the result of unforeseen circumstances in a person's life, such as unemployment, sickness or disability. However, welfare recipients still face hostility and a strong social stigma that defines them as being workshy or lazy, or as having given up on a sense of personal responsibility. I could spend the entire debate highlighting the failings of the welfare system, but I can summarise them by simply stating that our welfare system is not working.

A universal basic income could be a solution to this problem. In the words of Malcolm Torry, the director of the Citizen's Income Trust:

"Technology lying idle, human creativity frustrated, wealth flowing from poor to rich, and finite resources uncontrollably exploited ...we are still waiting for the next new key concept. A Citizen's Income might be just what is required."

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He mentions the EUROMOD report by Mr Torry, and I wonder whether he saw the part of the report in which it is stated that, in order to support a universal basic income, the basic rate of income tax would have to rise to 48 pence in the pound. Can he say how on earth that is supportable in a modern economy?

Ronnie Cowan: As I said at the very start of my speech, there are many and varied approaches to this issue; no one has worked up the complete solution at this stage. What we are aiming for is acknowledgement of the fact that our current system is not fit for purpose, and the people of the United Kingdom should be looking for "best of breed". If we are not prepared to take on that challenge, then we are not in the right job.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree with me that his proposal for a universal basic income has the potential to eradicate poverty, to make work pay and to ensure that all citizens can live in dignity, which does not happen today?

Ronnie Cowan: Absolutely. The aims of this approach are laudable ones and are not something that we, as representatives of the people, should turn our back on.

As a general definition, a universal basic income would be an unconditional basic income given to each individual irrespective of their other income. At this stage, everything else needs to be defined, including what proportion of the welfare system would be replaced by a UBI. We should be sincere in our approach to this issue by saying that its successful implementation would require a revolutionary shift in attitudes towards social security.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree that one of the most successful universal payments that we had was child benefit? It was well targeted, it helped with the costs of raising children, it redistributed

wealth between families without children and families with children, and—crucially—it was paid to women, which of course improved their children's prospects. Does he not think that an earlier, simpler and more effective move might be to return to the days of universal child benefit, and to make that the political priority rather than a universal basic income?

Ronnie Cowan: I take on board the hon. Lady's comments. My concern about that idea is that it would entail a change to just one aspect of what we are trying to achieve. It is a very important aspect of what we are trying to achieve, but it would not fulfil the requirements of everybody who relies on welfare.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. A basic income has long been Green party policy, so I am very glad to hear him talk of it. Does he agree that as well as making the very strong case that he is making for a basic income on the grounds that our welfare system is not working, there is also a case to be made for it on the grounds that increasing automation will create a huge revolution in the way that work is done? There are estimates that by 2025 we could be losing a third of the jobs in the UK retail sector. For that reason too, we need to look outside the box and explore this idea in a lot more detail.

Ronnie Cowan: Yes, we are going there. I believe that it is called the “gig economy”, in which people share jobs and try to find a better work-life balance. People do not want to have to put in all those hours of work in simply to make money if it is not within them that they want to spend all that money. That chasing of the capitalist dream is hopefully something that is confined to the past.

If we genuinely want to create a more effective system of state support, we need to be prepared to address the difficult questions. Part of the challenge will be to bring together the patchwork of individuals and organisations that have expressed an interest in pushing forward the UBI agenda. Groups such as Citizen's Basic Income Network Scotland and the Citizen's Income Trust have helped me to outline what options are open to us in defining a basic income.

It is argued that the benefits of introducing a basic income include: reducing poverty and boosting employment; providing a safety net from which no citizen will be excluded; and creating a platform upon which all people are able to build their lives. More generally, it could be argued that a basic income would bring about increased social cohesion and mark the end of incentives that discourage work and saving.

In the time available to me today, I can only touch on the wide range of questions that will need to be answered in order to implement such a scheme. Who will be eligible for basic income? What will be the rate of payment? Over what timeframe will it be implemented? Most important, can the affordability of such a scheme be demonstrated? Having clear answers to these questions is vital, but that will not be enough; we will also need the political will to make changes.

The Irish Government published a Green Paper on a basic income as far back as 2002. It concluded that a basic income would have a substantial positive impact

on the distribution of income in Ireland and would reduce poverty in a more effective way than the existing welfare system, but 14 years later the concept has not managed to evolve into a fully formed Government policy.

Julian Knight: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way to me again; he is being most generous with his time. The Irish Government came up with this proposal in 2002, but 14 years later they have still not been able to implement it. Also, would he reflect on the fact that in Switzerland this idea was actually put to a referendum and two thirds of voters voted against it? Is not the real reason that these people have gone against a basic income is that they realise it destroys the incentive to work?

Ronnie Cowan: I am not here to speak on behalf of either the Irish Government or the Swiss Government, but there is absolutely no indication that providing somebody with a basic income removes the incentive to work. Instead, what it does is to put life choices in front of people, so that if they want to study part time, work part time or work on a farm voluntarily they will not be penalised for doing those things, and therefore it is more likely that people will be prepared to take on work at a level that suits them.

If policy makers regard the basic income idea as simply an academic or abstract economic concept, we will never see it being used to break down the worrying levels of poverty and inequality that we have in the UK. The United States, Canada, Namibia and India have all piloted basic income schemes, while Finland and the Netherlands plan on trialling limited local schemes.

Many Members will be aware that Switzerland has already held a referendum on the implementation of a basic income. Although the proposal was rejected, that shows that other nations already have a more developed understanding of the concept. The charity GiveDirectly has announced that it will launch a full basic income trial. The project will involve at least \$30 million and academic support from leading researchers. The trial will fully adopt the basic income model by making regular cash payments to every resident in several villages in Kenya.

I secured this debate with the humble notion that I do not have all the answers to the questions. I hope to facilitate discussion, to debate with my parliamentary colleagues and to consult the relevant organisations about the benefits and feasibility of the basic income concept. I believe it was first proposed by Thomas Paine in his 1797 pamphlet “Agrarian Justice” as a system in which at the “age of majority” everyone would receive an equal capital grant—a “basic income” handed over by the state to each and all, no questions asked, to do what they wanted with. Could this be an idea whose time has finally come?

On 25 May 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced before a special joint session of Congress the dramatic and ambitious goal of sending an American to the moon before the end of the decade and returning him safely. Not for one minute did he intend to design the rockets himself, and he had no ambition that I know of to be on the flight. His not unrealistic and ultimately correct proclamation was built on the premise that he knew America had the time, the money, the brain power and the will to achieve the goal. He challenged the

[*Ronnie Cowan*]

American people to succeed and they rose to that challenge. I stand here in front of the Chamber today and I challenge all of us to work together to create a fairer welfare system—one that does not trap people in poverty, but instead acts as a platform from which the citizens of the United Kingdom can build better lives for themselves.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): If Members want to take off their jackets, as I already have, they are obviously free to do so.

4.52 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing this important debate. I want to raise three particular areas that I think we should examine, given that the conditions of the 21st century demand that we investigate basic income in more detail.

First, as the hon. Gentleman powerfully set out, our social security system is no longer fit for purpose and requires fundamental reform. Through my constituency surgeries, I see at first hand just how badly the system is failing. The combined impact of bureaucratic complexity and a brutal, punitive sanctions regime that almost seems designed to humiliate those that need help the most can be absolutely catastrophic for vulnerable families and individuals. We simply cannot go on tinkering with a model of social security that was designed to meet the economic and social conditions of the 1950s. However, it is absolutely crucial that any move to a basic income protects and increases the income of the poorest and those who are unable to work on account of disability. A universal payment for all must not undermine additional help for those who need it most.

Secondly, fundamental changes to our economy and labour market are working together to make work itself increasingly precarious. Well-paid jobs on permanent contracts have dwindled, while short-term, zero-hours contracts and bogus self-employment are rife. Alongside a genuine national living wage, a basic income would provide a vital buffer against this new age of insecurity and an escape route for those caught in the trap between a complex, punitive and quite simply outdated social security system and low-paid, insecure and all too often exploitative employment.

Thirdly, a basic income would give people more control over their working, caring and personal lives. That is especially important for women, who despite the growing number of stay-at-home fathers continue to do most of the heavy lifting of child and elder care without payment, but it is also about having the opportunity to contribute more time and effort to our local communities by doing things we might simply want to do. There is far more work that needs to be done than that which is simply parcelled up into what we call jobs. We only have to look around our local communities to see railings that need painting, older people who need visiting and allotments that people would love to tend, but we cannot necessarily do many of those things—they are in some ways important economic activities—because right now we are penalised for doing so.

We must not get carried away—basic income must not be seen as some kind of panacea for all our problems, but it could play a key part in rebalancing towards more satisfying lives and a more sustainable economy. I very much welcome today's debate, and the growing interest across the political spectrum in an idea that my party has fought for over many years. It is heartening to see the invaluable work being done by groups such as Compass, the Royal Society of Arts, the Fabians and the Institute for Public Policy Research, as well as by long-standing advocates such as the Citizen's Income Trust. It is refreshing to hear Members from other political parties talk positively about an idea that treats people on the basis of the best in them, not the worst.

We do not have all the answers yet—of course not. Getting to a meaningful basic income from where we are now presents major challenges. I think 34 MPs signed my cross-party early-day motion, which calls on the Government to fund and commission further research into the various basic income models, looking at their feasibility and how the challenge of moving to a basic income might be met. I hope that we can build on that number and that between us we can generate universal support for an idea whose time has definitely come.

I point to the progress being made in other countries. In Finland, the coalition Government have announced a €20 million experiment that will test two or possibly three basic income models over the next two years, involving up to 180,000 citizens. Green councillors in the Dutch city of Utrecht are also planning a basic income pilot, as is the Canadian province of Ontario. In New Zealand, the opposition Labour party is actively considering basic income as a means to combat the possibility of higher structural unemployment. In a sense, the UK would just be catching up by doing its own research into this. I mentioned a whole range of different independent organisations that are doing research, but it would be most helpful if the Government commissioned some research and did some pilots of their own. A lot of the figures that we need to investigate on how best to make this a serious policy proposal are figures that the Government have but the rest of us do not. I make a plea to the Minister to look seriously at this proposal and to use some of the resources at his disposal to invest in a pilot and some more research, because I genuinely think this is an idea whose time has come.

4.57 pm

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): We have had an interesting debate already this afternoon, and I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on stimulating discussion of whether a basic income model of social security would better meet the needs of our citizens at a time when we are facing significant demographic and economic change. He and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) have highlighted some of the pilot schemes under way internationally, particularly those in other advanced economies, notably the Netherlands, Finland and Ontario in Canada. There is a tacit acknowledgement that all the schemes are in an early stage of development or implementation, and some have not even commenced yet; nevertheless, they offer insights into how basic income models might work in practice and how they might be adapted for a UK context.

My hon. Friend pointed out that the idea has a long pedigree, dating back to the late 18th century. I first encountered the concept of a basic income or citizen's income models a number of years ago through the work of the late Scottish feminist economist Professor Ailsa McKay, who was particularly interested in exploring ways to close the income gap between women and men—a gap that more than 40 years after the Equal Pay Act 1970 continues to grow through the course of women's working life and becomes most acute in old age. The idea of a citizen's income did not have so much currency back then, but more recently there has been greater interest in a range of basic income approaches and the start of a more serious debate. Although that debate is still in its early stages, I am glad it is opening up.

As we have heard, the proponents of basic income schemes argue that giving every citizen the automatic right to an income could help tackle our growing problems of extreme poverty and destitution, streamline the complex bureaucracy of the existing benefits system and promote greater social inclusion. Those are all laudable aims, but for me one of the most attractive aspects of a basic income approach is that it would to some extent neutralise some of the toxic rhetoric that has developed around social security recently and has perpetrated divisive and damaging stereotypes about people living on low incomes. A basic income or citizen's income would undoubtedly help us to move away from the trope of the undeserving poor and make it much harder to blame those swept away by rough economic tides for their own financial insecurity. That in itself makes it pretty appealing. When the gulf between the wealthy and the rest has not been so stark in living memory, any social security system that promotes social cohesion and a meaningful contract between the citizen and the state deserves to be explored.

None the less, I still have a lot of questions about how a basic income model would work in practice and whether it can live up to the grand claims sometimes made for it. My questions are mostly pragmatic. My biggest concern is that a minimum income could act as an income ceiling rather than a floor for large numbers of people, particularly those who are already the most economically disadvantaged and for whom the prospects of supplementary income over and beyond that are the most fragile. It would be counterproductive if those who are unable to work or have limited capability for work were to find themselves caught in a new, newly differentiated poverty trap.

I also worry that the value of a basic income could become eroded over time. We have seen, for example, how the value of the state pension has been diminished over recent decades to the extent that no one expects to live on it as a sole source of income any more. The poorest pensioners have to receive top-up pension credits to bring them up to a basic standard of living and those lucky enough to have had the opportunity to save through an occupational pension scheme depend on that income to top up their state pension. I wonder how we can avoid the risk that the value of a citizen's income would shrink over time, entrenching poverty for those who would be most dependent on that income.

In addition, we would still face the major challenge of tackling income inequality and the widening gulf between those in secure, well paid jobs and the increasing numbers

in insecure, intermittent, low-paid work. In my view, that is key to building a fairer society. A basic income could arguably smooth the fluctuations in earnings for those in precarious employment, but it would not do anything to close the earnings gap and it would mean that over time those in well-paid jobs could move even further adrift. My own sense is that a greater emphasis on reducing income inequalities in the tax and benefit system as a whole would go further towards promoting social cohesion. I will be interested to see the extent to which the basic income schemes being trialled in an international context address that point.

I am also interested in how basic income models could articulate and interact with those parts of the tax and benefit system that would still need to be based on assessment and means-testing. Most of the proposals I have seen for basic income models in the UK context exclude housing and disability benefits. Aside from state pensions, the biggest chunk of our social security budget goes on housing benefits and the level of support claimants get varies widely across the country, depending on the housing market in different areas, whether a claimant lives in private rented accommodation or social housing, and their income levels, because it is a means-tested benefit that is gradually reduced as earnings or incomes rise. Someone living in London renting in private sector accommodation and working in a minimum-wage job would receive a lot more in local housing allowance than someone in similar circumstances in my constituency for example, simply because the market rents are so much lower in my constituency. It is hard for me to see how we get away from variable rates of housing support given the huge disparities in housing costs across the UK, so we would still be left with means-testing for large numbers of people. Unless we are very careful on how withdrawal tapers are managed, a lot of people in rented accommodation could be left substantially worse off.

Similarly, there would still need to be capability assessments of some sort for those unfit for work, assuming that we recognise that sick and disabled people face extra costs and have less recourse to alternative income streams. In some cases, people will need long-term support. If one of the advantages of basic income models is that it gets away from harsh conditionality regimes and punitive sanctions, the problem for sick and disabled people is that they would still be subject to assessments and conditions even if the benefits themselves are non-means-tested.

I retain an open mind about the merits of basic income models, but until we examine specific models, it is impossible to fully assess the pros and cons or any potential unintended consequences of such substantial policy change. We need to be cautious in our approach, while looking carefully at the emerging evidence on how these models might work in practice and could be used to benefit people in the UK.

5.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing this debate, which is most welcome and timely. The contributions that we have heard demonstrate that we are in absolute agreement that our current social security

[Debbie Abrahams]

system is not fit for purpose. It is not delivering for claimants, who frankly deserve better, in a whole range of different ways. The Minister and I have exchanged views on that in many debates in the past; the detail is there for everybody to review.

Like the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford), I am open-minded on this issue. I want to see the evidence, and it is very early days yet. We know that the current social security system is not delivering, in particular for people in work on low incomes, who might also go from in-work to out-of-work and back into work. The system is not flexible enough. The rapidly changing labour market is not currently catered for by our social security system. The Bank of England's chief economist, for example, suggests that 15 million jobs are at risk of automation. These are huge changes, which have been growing over the last 20 years or so. Whether or not those jobs will be replaced by new sectors, we have seen a massive change in the labour market, with zero-hour contracts and insecure, low-paid work—our social security system is just not dealing with that. It is not fit for purpose in today's labour market and there are huge ramifications for how we adapt and develop our social security system to ensure it can properly respond to the rapidly changing circumstances that workers face, and provide them with the necessary security to build happy and fulfilling working lives.

In the light of those great challenges, the Government's ongoing failure to implement the universal credit programme is of serious concern, and questions about that were again raised last week. Universal credit was meant to attempt to address some of the challenges around flexible working. Unfortunately, because of the way it has been pared back in recent years, as well as the difficulties with implementation—at great public expense—that has just not happened.

Kate Green: Would my hon. Friend accept by contrast that Labour's working tax credit, after initial teething problems, was very effective in reaching low-paid workers, lifting families out of poverty, making work pay and responding to changing work circumstances?

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. My hon. Friend has, as ever, hit the nail on the head. I am proud of Labour's record of lifting nearly 1 million children out of poverty as a result of that policy. It is one of which we should be justifiably proud.

We need to respond to the rapidly changing labour market. The Government's failure to deliver on the heavily diminished universal credit project has led to considerable problems and it is right that we look at the alternatives out there.

There are, of course, different views on what universal basic income is. At its simplest, it is about all of us having a non-contributory, unconditional lump sum, which would be available to all citizens regardless of means. I would like to explore both the positives and negatives. We have already heard some of the positive arguments, such as its simplicity and the way in which it may lift people out of poverty. Currently, there is very poor take-up of income-related benefits across the country.

A mere half of those entitled to income-based jobseeker's allowance are claiming their entitlement. That might have something to do with the current Government's sanction regime, but it is undoubtedly affecting the numbers of people experiencing poverty in the UK, which now stands at 13 million people. By offering a simple, single sum to all, UBI may go some way to tackling the poverty that so many of our citizens are facing.

In replacing our complex system of universal contributory and means-tested support with a single, simple mechanism, UBI would also allow for a greater simplification of social security administration, with subsequent savings to the Department's budget. Again, we really need to look at that.

Secondly—this is a really important point—by offering support to everyone regardless of their circumstances, UBI could go a long way to ensuring that the British public retain trust in the social security system. Over the last six years, we have seen the complete erosion of the social security system and the denigration of claimants. Some of the language that has been used—not by the Minister but by some of his colleagues—is frankly shameful.

The recent Fabian Society report, "For Us All", demonstrated that the Government give as much tax support to people on high incomes through the shadow welfare of tax reliefs as they do to the poorest in our society. It has been suggested that if we were to replace the Government's tax reliefs for the wealthy with a single universal payment, the reality that social expenditure benefits us all would be much clearer. It would get us away from the Government's divisive rhetoric of strivers and skivers. Fundamentally, Labour believes that we should value our social security system, which, like our NHS, is based on the principles of inclusion, support and security for all, should any one of us become sick or disabled, or fall on hard times.

Let me focus on some of the concerns. Alongside those arguments in support of UBI, it is clear that tension could arise between its simplicity and its adequacy in supporting people with vastly differing needs and circumstances, which the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan described. A flat rate could not possibly provide the additional costs associated with disability—approximately an additional £500 a month—which are one of the causes of disabled people being twice as likely to be living in poverty. The Government, with their swingeing cuts, have not recognised that. To allow for variations in need, UBI would need to be supplemented with additional top-ups, increasing its expense and complexity, which is where we get to some of the issues discussed earlier.

My final substantial concern is the cost. A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggested that realising the policy would require not only an increase in income but a considerable shift in the general public's understanding and knowledge of what and whom a social security system is there for. We know from the British social attitudes survey's time-series analysis that although superficially there are peaks and troughs of support, when people understand what the system is for, whom it is for and the circumstances in which people make claims, they are a lot more supportive of it, so we need to inform people and extend their understanding.

I welcome this debate and I again thank the hon. Member for Inverclyde for securing it. I look forward to further exploring the strengths of UBI, but we must make informed decisions and evidence-based policy.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, as always, Mr Davies. I would like to join the congratulations to the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) on securing this important debate. I thank everybody from all parts of the House who contributed to it. I was particularly interested in the speech of the hon. Member for Oldham West and Saddleworth—

Debbie Abrahams: Oldham East.

Damian Hinds: I am so sorry.

I think she confirmed that the official Opposition are considering a universal basic income. We already knew that the Scottish National party will look into it further after their conference, and we now know that the official Opposition also see some benefits in it.

Debbie Abrahams: I think the Minister is running away with himself. I said it would be useful to explore it. That is not how he characterised it.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful for the clarification.

A universal basic income or similar systems that guarantee a minimum income to all have been debated and discussed at some length across the world. This debate has been stimulating and important, and discussing UBI and similar concepts, such as the negative income tax, which was a popular subject for academic debate before UBI, is an engaging activity. Any system that promises protection and, to quote the recent report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Compass, “freedom of choice for individuals between work and leisure” is bound to sound appealing. It is difficult to argue with a utopian system that enables individuals to choose whether to work or to engage in leisure activities, alongside all the other valuable things that people do, such as voluntary work and caring.

However, as the Compass report suggested, the big issue with UBI is not whether it is desirable but whether it is feasible. Would it be affordable, and could it be introduced in a way that prevented losses among the poorest sections in society? The hon. Member for Inverclyde said we should not turn our back on laudable aims. I could not agree more, but laudable aims are not enough. When Jack Kennedy said he wanted to put a man on the moon, he knew that just willing it would not make it happen. It had to be technically feasible.

The Citizen’s Income Trust, which the hon. Gentleman cited, and the RSA claim to have developed cost-neutral models for a scheme, but less highlighted is the fact that they could do so only by collecting huge amounts of additional tax. I can confirm that that is not everybody’s definition of cost-neutral. As the JRF and Compass report found, the additional tax revenue required to deliver a sustainable UBI would be as much as £160 billion. Such a system is clearly unaffordable, even if we assume that the introduction of a UBI would not affect individual behaviour in the labour market and that

nobody would give up paid work as a result of its introduction. That assumption, of course, goes against common sense. It goes against trials that have happened in other countries, which have been referred to, and the principles of this Government and all recent Governments that I know of.

Caroline Lucas: I have got the Compass figures in front of me. The report says that the net cost of the hybrid model that Compass proposes would be about £8 billion a year. That is a significant sum, to be sure, but it is not impossible if we are talking about a revolution in the way that work is organised. The problem with many of the contributions this afternoon is that it has been assumed that we go on as we are now and suddenly graft a citizens’ income on top of it. I think the way work is going to look in the future will be very different; therefore we need to look at bolder ideas.

Damian Hinds: I think the hon. Lady has the relevant page in front of her; I do not, but I have it nearby. From memory, if she casts her eye about three lines further up above the £8.2 billion figure, she will find another figure for what the impact on income tax will be. That is where the total effect, which is so much greater, is laid out.

Debbie Abrahams *rose—*

Ronnie Cowan *rose—*

Damian Hinds: I am spoilt for choice. I give way to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth.

Debbie Abrahams: I am interested that the Minister is picking on one model. We need to be clear that there is a range of different models. He needs to clarify that in his remarks.

Damian Hinds: I am more than happy to clarify that the report looks at five models. There are three different proposals that might be called pure UBI models, which would deliver different levels of universal income; then there are two hybrid or adjusted models. The one that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) referred to was, I believe, model No. 5, so it was the second of the adjusted models. The other ones are more expensive. The pure UBI models are more expensive than that one.

Ronnie Cowan: As we have heard here and in the main Chamber on a number of occasions, when the money is required, it is found, whether it is to renovate this place or Buckingham palace, or to spend on the vanity project that is High Speed 2 or on Trident nuclear missiles. The money is there; it is just a question of which box we want to put it into.

Damian Hinds: I do not know where to go with that. I am not sure that it is true that the money is there; in fact, I am confident that it is not. In this country, the only way in which we raise money for public expenditure is through taxation on individuals, companies and other activities.

Dr Paul Monaghan: Everyone watching the debate will be interested if the Minister can tell us which of those initiatives that my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) cited cannot be afforded by the UK Government?

Damian Hinds: One of the main things that I am in the Chamber to say is that a universal basic income has a number of drawbacks, one of which is the great cost attached. If I may, I will now continue through my remarks.

The Government's approach to welfare has been about recognising the value and importance of work, making work pay and supporting people into work, while protecting the most vulnerable. A universal basic income goes against every aspect of that approach. Indeed, it would put at risk the huge progress that we have made over the past six years in transforming lives through the power of work. Employment is at a record high. As we announced this morning, there are now 31.77 million people in work.

Kate Green: I hope that the Minister, in his analysis of the Government's track record in relation to paid work, will also address the rise of in-work poverty under this and the previous coalition Government?

Damian Hinds: If the hon. Lady will bear with me, the claimant count is close to its lowest for 40 years, unemployment is at the lowest rate for 10 years and pay is rising. Our reforms are working. Why would we put all that at risk by implementing a blunt policy of financial handouts that does not treat people as individual human beings, with their own different ambitions and aspirations? UBI would also make no allowance for those with additional needs—a pure UBI system has no additional payments for those with disabilities or variations in housing costs, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) highlighted. Our reforms are about supporting people to reach their full potential, treating them as individual human beings and giving them the opportunity to get on.

Universal credit lies at the heart of the Government's commitment to reform the welfare state, as the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, rightly identified. We want a welfare state that is fairer and more affordable, tackling poverty and welfare dependency, while supporting the most vulnerable households. The Government believe that work is the best route out of poverty, which universal credit supports by supporting people into work and by making work, and more work, pay. Together with the rise in the personal tax allowance, investment in childcare and the national living wage, our reforms are ensuring that support goes to those who need it most. There is additional help to cope with essential living costs, such as housing and childcare, and we will ensure that being in work will always pay.

Universal credit is already changing people's lives for the better. Claimants are moving into work more quickly and staying in work longer than under the legacy system. For every 100 people who would have found employment under the old jobseeker's allowance system, 113 universal credit claimants will have moved into a job.

Debbie Abrahams: There is so much in that sentence, and the preceding ones, that I do not know what to pick on first. The increase in wages is slowing down, according to today's figures. Also, will the Minister explain why millions of people will be affected by the cuts in work allowances for UC under the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016? In effect, they will get a £2,000-plus a year cut.

Damian Hinds: According to this morning's figures, we still have good wage growth in this country, and at a time when we have low levels of inflation, so real wage growth is also close to 2%. The hon. Lady mentioned universal credit, which is a massive reform to the welfare and social security system, with the smooth taper rate taking away the cliff-edge points at 16, 24 and 30 hours a week. Those are important developments in supporting people into work and up the hour scale.

Some of the extra things we are doing include childcare, with the 30 hours for three and four-year-olds, the tax-free childcare and the increase under universal credit relative to tax credits from 70% to 85% of eligible childcare costs. Those are all critical things that the Government have been doing to reform welfare, and to help people into work and to develop in work.

Our high employment rate shows that an active welfare system that helps people into work, rather than only handing out money to everyone in the same way, is the right approach. Compare that to a system of universal basic income. I have already mentioned the report from Compass and the JRF, which shows that UBI would be prohibitively expensive. The report also shows that UBI would create too many losers among the poorest families and dramatically increase the number of children living in poverty—a point confirmed through modelling even by the Citizen's Income Trust. UBI would dramatically increase inequality, because it does not account for individual needs and circumstances.

Some, such as the RSA, in what was a reasonable line to develop, suggest introducing adjustments—some such points have been made in the debate—and maintaining additional means-tested benefits alongside a UBI to fix that inherent flaw. The problem, however, is that the more we adjust to counteract the inequalities inherent in a UBI system, the closer we come to something that begins to resemble universal credit.

Universal credit is far more than simply a system of giving out money. It incentivises claimants to move off benefits and it provides tailored support to help people find work and increase their earnings. In contrast to UC, a UBI allows for no work-based conditions on payment to encourage that or to increase incentivisation, and for no complementing support to help people make the most of their potential.

Even the most modest of UBI systems would necessitate higher taxes, as I was discussing just now with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion. Those increased taxes would be combined with the erosion of the tax-free allowance. At the same time, it would cause a significant decrease in the motivation to work among citizens, with unforeseen consequences for the national economy.

Trials of UBI have been mentioned in the report and in the debate today, such as those in the 1970s in the USA and Canada. The results showed that 5% of primary earners moved out of work, and an even greater number among secondary earners. The recent report that we have been discussing highlighted those results, but called that a small drop. From the perspective of a Government who have had to work hard with business—to have the entire economy working hard—to increase the employment rate by 4.3% over the past six years, that does not sound like a small drop to me.

Whereas at first sight a UBI seems attractive, as more scrutiny is given to the idea, the less attractive it becomes. As recently as June of this year, the concept of a universal income was formally rejected by Switzerland, as hon. Members know, with nearly 77% of people opposing the plan in a referendum.

I will briefly address some of the particular points made by hon. Members during the course of the debate. The hon. Member for Inverclyde suggested that our existing system has been driving up inequality, but 300,000 fewer households than in 2010 are now in relative low income. The evidence is clear about the role of work in helping families, and children living in those families, out of poverty. The evidence is strongest about where it is possible to move into work—[*Interruption.*]

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. There has been some sedentary commentary, but we have until 17.38, so if people want to ask to make an intervention, please do—obviously, it is for the Minister to allow.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds *indicated assent.*

Debbie Abrahams: Three out of four people in low-paid work are still in low-paid work 10 years on. How is the system helping them?

Damian Hinds: Helping people on relatively low incomes to increase their incomes by moving up the hours scale or the earnings scale is of course an objective that the hon. Lady and I share. That is why we have made the childcare reforms that I alluded to and brought in the national living wage, which will affect people who were previously on the national minimum wage but will also have a ripple effect on pay grades immediately above that. The critical thing, which we come back to time and again, is that universal credit will reform the system, in which there are certain cut-off points on the hours scale, to ensure that there is as smooth as possible a transition through work.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion talked about less secure employment. It is certainly true that today's labour market differs in several ways from the labour market of the 1960s and 1970s. Several factors are at play, including the long-term shift to the service sector and the fact that people are living longer. Yes, it is also true that people are much less likely to stay in a job or work for one employer or even in one sector for their entire careers, but it is important to note that three-quarters of the increase in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work. Only around 14% of people in part-time work would prefer to be working full time, although obviously we want to increase the opportunities for them.

Relatively few people in the economy rely on zero-hours contracts, which give people on average around 25 hours of work per week. We know from surveys that most people on zero-hours contracts are not seeking to increase their hours. Although those types of contracts clearly are not even close to being suitable for everyone, there are some people for whom they work. A lot of people on zero-hours contracts are students or people coming back into the labour market, and such contracts

can be a good way in. It is absolutely right for the Government to have banned exclusivity clauses that prevent people from taking up other work.

Dr Paul Monaghan: Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Gentleman forgive me if I press on? The extremely important point of technological change was raised, and that needs to be debated in the House and elsewhere. Some proponents of a universal basic income cite the inevitable changes in the world of work, driven by technological advance and artificial intelligence, which they believe will make many jobs obsolete and increase unemployment. That argument has a long pedigree, which goes back beyond the spinning jenny, and I do not at all belittle the importance of that discussion or the implications of structural change. We must of course be sensitive to such possibilities, but time and again over the decades, as technological change has removed the need for one type of work, it has created another.

In conclusion, although a universal basic income may appear to be desirable at first glance, any practical implementation would, I am afraid, be unaffordable. Because UBI does not properly take into account individual needs, it would markedly increase inequality. Universal credit is the right system for the United Kingdom. This responsible Government are implementing a system that encourages work, supports the most vulnerable and is affordable.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I invite Ronnie Cowan to wind up the debate, for a couple of minutes.

5.33 pm

Ronnie Cowan: Thank you very much—and it is pronounced Cow-an, as in cow, as in “moo”.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Cowan—sorry.

Ronnie Cowan: I thank the Minister, the hon. Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) for their contributions. I also thank the Members who interceded and kept the debate going, which is an important part of the process: the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) and the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who is no longer in his chair—he adopted the seagull strategy of fly in, make a lot of noise and leave.

I am disappointed that the Minister seems so intransigent in his support for the current system. It concerns me slightly that he is so happy with the status quo. I end with a quote from Noam Chomsky, who said:

“Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so.”

I ask the Government to take responsibility.

5.34 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 14 September 2016

TREASURY

Contingencies Fund

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

The Aire Valley Master Trust (AVMT) is a residential mortgage backed securitisation (RMBS) programme, which currently encumbers approximately £8.5 billion of mortgage assets and provides Bradford & Bingley (B&B) with just over £2.6 billion of funding. As at 30 July 2016 the balance of the outstanding AVMT notes was approximately £5.4 billion. B&B holds £2.8 billion of these notes, with the remaining £2.6 billion (the funding) held by market. B&B proposes to call the notes to unencumber the mortgages enabling them to be included in any future sales when market conditions allow. The transaction replaces expensive legacy B&B-issued debt with cheaper DMO-issued debt, with no change in balance sheet totals. The transaction is, therefore, neutral from both a public sector net debt and budgetary perspective.

B&B has a working capital facility loan agreement with HM Treasury, allowing it to borrow up to a maximum of £11.5 billion to cover everyday operations of the company. B&B proposes to draw down £2.975 billion from this facility to redeem the notes.

The cash for the loan will form part of HM Treasury's supplementary estimate 2016-17, which will not receive Royal Assent in the associated Supply and Appropriation Bill until mid to late March 2017. HM Treasury will, therefore, be utilising the Contingencies Fund to make this urgent payment. While B&B's capital facility draw down will be £2.975 billion to redeem the notes, £0.750 billion will be repaid from income. The additional amount, therefore, that HM Treasury requires—and will form part of their supplementary estimate request—is therefore £2.225 billion.

Parliamentary approval for additional cash of £2,225,000,000 for this expenditure will be sought in a supplementary estimate for HM Treasury. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £2,225,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS153]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

2019 World Road Cycling Championships (Contingent Liability)

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I wish to inform the House that on 14 September 2016, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport laid a minute recording the Government's commitment to underwrite the 2019 world road cycling championships to be staged in Yorkshire. The departmental minute will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

As set out in the minute, I am pleased to inform the House that a formal bid to host the world championships was submitted to the international cycling federation by the deadline of 16 August 2016, through collaboration between Welcome to Yorkshire, UK Sport, Government and British Cycling. The Government will provide £9 million to support the delivery of the championships and an underwrite for the event. If the bid is successful, the Government will, in addition, provide £15 million towards developing cycling facilities in England, including closed road circuits, as a lasting legacy for the event. The Government underwrite, therefore, creates a contingent liability for the Department in relation to the championships in 2019.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-09-14/HCWS149/>

[HCWS149]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Falklands Demining

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):

Under the anti-personnel mine ban convention, which sets out the worldwide approach to landmine removal, the UK is required to clear all mined areas under its jurisdiction or control. In the case of the Falkland Islands, I am pleased to announce that the Government have decided to provide a further £20 million to this process. As a result, thousands of landmines will be cleared in the next phase of work making safe dozens of areas which have been unusable since the mines were laid during the 1982 conflict.

This significantly increased funding will build on previous demining projects, which have so far cleared more than 30 minefields. The latest phase of work will be jointly funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence. It will see teams of expert contractors clear 46 minefields and carry out surveys to prepare for the clearance of another 27 over the next two years, as the UK continues to work towards fully clearing mines from its territories.

The UK is committed to meeting its international obligations under the anti-personnel mine ban convention and to doing its part to uphold the rules-based international system. This project is just one of many UK demining projects around the world.

[HCWS150]

North Korea Nuclear Test

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma):

On 9 September North Korean state media claimed that the country had successfully conducted its fifth nuclear test at 00:30 GMT (09:00 Pyongyang). The Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty Organisation reported seismic signatures from a location close to where North Korea conducted its January nuclear test. We assess that the seismic event was caused by a nuclear test. The magnitude of this latest test was slightly larger than the one that occurred in January.

This nuclear test is a serious violation of UN Security Council resolutions 1718, 1874, 2087, 2094 and 2270. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programmes continue to pose a significant threat to international security and regional stability, and hinder the prospects for lasting peace on the Korean peninsula.

On 9 September the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), issued a statement strongly condemning the nuclear test as a grave violation of UN Security Council resolutions. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to his counterparts in Japan and Australia to discuss the nuclear test and the international response and we are in close touch with other partners, including the United States and the Republic of Korea.

The UK strongly supported the UN Security Council's swift condemnation of this nuclear test in an emergency session on 9 September. The UN Security Council agreed that this test was a clear violation of existing Security Council resolutions, and that there should be a robust response including immediate work on further significant measures.

I summoned the North Korean ambassador to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 12 September in order to underline, in the strongest terms, the UK's firm condemnation of this nuclear test and to make clear to North Korea that it must engage constructively with the international community or it will face an increasingly tough international response. Amid reports of widespread hardship and human rights violations, the priority must be the health and welfare of the North Korean people rather than continuation of the nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

We continue to urge the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to return to credible and authentic multilateral talks on its nuclear programme, to abide by its obligations under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and to permit full access by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

[HCWS151]

Syria: Chemical Weapons

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I wish to make a statement about the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the steps Her Majesty's Government are taking to respond to the situation.

This Government wholeheartedly condemn the use of chemical weapons, by anyone, anywhere. It is appalling that three years after the Ghouta attacks in 2013, where hundreds died from exposure to nerve agent, Syrian civilians continue to be the victims of chemical weapons.

In 2013, following concerted international pressure, Syria joined the chemical weapons convention (CWC), and declared a stockpile of 1,300 tonnes of chemical weapons and precursors. These have been destroyed by the international community. The UK contribution to this effort included the safe destruction, by incineration, of approximately 200 tonnes of chemical precursors. However, Syria has yet to satisfy the international community and Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) that the declaration it made of its chemical weapons programme is complete

and accurate. The OPCW has stated that Syria's declaration contains "gaps, inconsistencies and inaccuracies" which need to be answered. We continue to press for the Syrian regime to provide the required level of co-operation and transparency for the OPCW to be able to resolve these issues.

The UN Security Council has made clear repeatedly, in resolutions 2118 (2013), 2209 (2015), and 2235 (2015), that there would be consequences for those responsible for using chemical weapons in Syria. The Security Council thus sent a clear signal that all chemical weapons attacks in Syria must cease. Despite this there have been frequent allegations of chemical weapons use in Syria, including in Aleppo earlier this month.

The UK has been at the forefront of international efforts to ensure that reports of attacks are properly investigated and those responsible identified. In August 2015 the UN Security Council established the UN/OPCW joint investigative mechanism (JIM) to

"identify to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups, or governments who were perpetrators, organisers, sponsors or otherwise involved in the use of chemicals as weapons, including chlorine or any other toxic chemical, in the Syrian Arab Republic".

The UK argued for the establishment of the JIM and has strongly supported its work, including providing £500,000 to help it become operational. This was in addition to our contribution in excess of £3.5 million to the OPCW, including £2 million to the OPCW's Syria trust fund, for destruction and verification activities.

In its report of 24 August the JIM focused on nine incidents in Syria, between 2014 and 2015, which the OPCW had identified as involving chemical weapons. The report confirmed what the UK and others have strongly believed for a long time, that the Syrian regime is directly responsible for chemical weapons attacks. Specifically, the JIM concluded that attacks in Sarmin and in Talamenes were the responsibility of the Syrian regime. This is the first time either the UN or OPCW have publicly attributed use of chemical weapons to the Syrian regime.

The JIM concluded that one incident, involving sulphur mustard gas, was the responsibility of Daesh—an attack in Marea in August 2015. The use of chemical weapons by Daesh is completely unacceptable. The UK continues to play a leading role in efforts to defeat Daesh and prevent its further use of chemical weapons, including through the global coalition.

The UK is working with international partners, including other members of the Security Council, to ensure there are consequences for those responsible for using chemical weapons and to send a clear message that such attacks are completely unacceptable and must stop.

[HCWS152]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reporting Commission

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The Independent Reporting Commission is one of a series of measures set out in the 2015 "Fresh Start" agreement to tackle ongoing paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland.

Provision for the Independent Reporting Commission to be established by agreement (“the agreement”) between the UK Government and the Government of Ireland was included in the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016. The agreement was signed on 13 September.

The agreement establishes the IRC as an independent, international body. It sets out the functions, duties and membership of the IRC, and provides for certain privileges and immunities to be conferred through legislation. It also requires the commission not to do anything in carrying out its functions which might put at risk the safety or life of any person, prejudice national security interests, have a prejudicial effect on any proceedings which have, or are likely to be, commenced in a court of law, or have a prejudicial effect on the prevention, investigation, detection or prosecution of crime.

Paramilitary activity continues to be a scourge on Northern Ireland society and to cause untold damage to individuals and their communities. It was never justified in the past in Northern Ireland and it has no place in

society today. This new commission will therefore play an important role in assisting efforts to tackle paramilitary activity and associated criminality.

Specifically, the Independent Reporting Commission will report on progress towards ending continuing paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland. It will provide assessments of the implementation of the relevant measures of the UK Government, the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive. These include oversight of the Northern Ireland Executive’s strategy to end paramilitarism.

The commission will consult a wide range of stakeholders, including law enforcement agencies, local councils, communities and civic society organisations and its reports will also inform the Executive’s programme for Government priorities through to 2021.

The commission will be independent of the UK and Irish Governments and will have a significant degree of discretion in fulfilling its functions. This independence will help to ensure the credibility of its reports and enable it to carry out its work effectively.

[HCWS148]

Petition

Wednesday 14 September 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

New national stroke strategy

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that there is a need for a new national strategy for stroke; further that a new strategy will ensure that

stroke survivors and their carers receive the support they need; further that it will drive improvements in hospital care; further that it will drive the roll out of a new treatment, thrombectomy; and further that a new strategy will save lives.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to commit to writing a new national stroke strategy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mr Nigel Evans.*]

[P001708]

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