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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 2 November 2016

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE AND THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Voter Registration: Young People

1. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of young people registered to vote. [906977]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government are building a democracy that works for everyone, including young people. Online registration has made it easier and faster to register to vote, and since its introduction a record 4.2 million applications to register have been made by people aged 16 to 24.

Mr Cunningham: That was a very interesting answer. How can the Government be building a democracy when they have excluded nearly 2 million people who were allowed to vote in the referendum, and are going ahead with boundary reviews that will particularly affect young people in universities?

Chris Skidmore: We are absolutely committed to taking account of the issues that matter to young people. As for the boundary changes, it is right for us to ensure that every seat is of equal value. It cannot be right for some constituencies to contain 95,000 people and others 38,000. We will ensure that every vote is equal, and that includes those of young people.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): As my hon. Friend will know, next week the Youth Parliament will sit in this place. Does he agree that many 16, 17 and 18-year-olds are taking a growing interest in public affairs and what we do in the House—that is certainly what I find when I visit schools in my constituency—and that such initiatives will help youth registration?

Chris Skidmore: It would be remiss of me not to note that the Youth Parliament will be sitting in this very Chamber on 11 November under your command, Mr Speaker. I am sure that we all look forward to hearing young people discuss the issues that matter to them. When it comes to “every vote matters”, we should

bear in mind the fact that young people are interested in issues such as mental health and a curriculum that works for everyone, and those are the issues that are being debated in the Chamber. We look forward to working with young people to ensure that their voice is heard.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the Youth Parliament will be sitting under my encouraging chairmanship rather than under my command, but I am extremely grateful to the Minister for the sentiment that he has expressed.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that 16-year-olds in Scotland are able to vote for Members of the Scottish Parliament and for councillors, and that the plans for devolution under the Wales Bill might mean that 16-year-olds are allowed to vote for Welsh Assembly Members and councillors. Will he now give proper consideration to a full and positive report on the need to ensure that 16-year-olds can vote for Members of the House of Commons so that there can be full democracy for people aged 16 and over?

Chris Skidmore: We discussed this issue at the previous session of Cabinet Office questions. We will not be lowering the parliamentary voting age, because since the general election Parliament has debated the proposal a number of times and repeatedly voted against it. It is important to recognise that most democracies consider that 18 is the right age to enfranchise young people. A person must be at least 18 to serve on a jury for similar reasons.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend referred to the need to ensure that every vote is equal. In the light of the number of spoiled ballot papers in elections for police and crime commissioners, will he think again about reintroducing the first-past-the-post system for elections of that kind in England?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is right that we need a clear and secure democracy if we are to continue to have confidence in our system. In the elections for police and crime commissioners, about 8 million people voted and there were more than 300,000 spoiled ballot papers. For the EU referendum, in which 35 million people voted, there were just 25,000 spoiled ballot papers. There is clearly an issue that the Government will want to look into.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Has it occurred to the Minister that if the Government were not so aggressively making it difficult for millions of people to be included in the register, and if the previous Prime Minister had not so arrogantly dismissed the case for enfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds, the referendum result would have been different, and he would still be Prime Minister?

Chris Skidmore: It is important to recognise that in the referendum a record number of people voted on one side—17.4 million voted for the UK to leave the European Union—and that a record 46.5 million people were registered to vote, of whom 3 million registered using the individual electoral registration system online. That shows that people have full confidence in the future of our new system.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that more young people might register to vote if they thought that it would make a positive difference to their lives, and that decisions such as trebling tuition fees, abolishing the education maintenance allowance and restricting young people's housing benefit only act as a disincentive for them to become involved in politics?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady is right, but there is a problem with young people's registration: we allow 16-year-olds to register to vote, but only 37% of them choose to do so. As I said earlier, we need to take account of the issues that matter to young people. Such issues will be debated by the Youth Parliament next Friday, but none of those to which the hon. Lady refers are on the agenda.

Voting Rights: Overseas UK Citizens

2. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): How he plans to give UK citizens living overseas the right to vote for life. [906978]

10. **Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What progress he has made on giving UK citizens living overseas the right to vote for life. [906986]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): On 7 October the Government published a policy statement setting out our detailed proposals for votes for life, and explaining how we plan to meet our manifesto commitment to scrap the 15-year time limit for overseas voting. We intend the system to be in place before the next scheduled UK parliamentary general election.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Minister for that encouraging reply, but may I return to the subject of cutting the cost of politics? Can he tell us when the Government will be able to equalise the size of constituencies?

Chris Skidmore: We are determined that by the time of the 2020 general election, the historic principle of equal seats will be in place. If we do not introduce that reform, we will be fighting our seats on the basis of data that go back to the year 2000, meaning that they are 20 years out of date. That is completely unacceptable, which is why we must press ahead with boundary reform.

Glyn Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that by including British citizens living abroad who have previously been resident to vote, as well as those who have previously been registered, the Government are enabling more people to participate in our politics and delivering a democracy that truly works for everyone?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Our proposal to scrap the requirement that an overseas elector must have been previously registered to vote when they were resident in the UK will mean that even more Brits abroad can vote if they so choose.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): How will the Minister ensure that UK citizens living overseas in the EU have not only the right to vote, but the right to remain in EU countries?

Chris Skidmore: We will ensure that we have a democracy that works for everyone, which is why we are determined to ensure that Britons living abroad will, regardless of which country they live in, be able to participate in our democracy, especially those who have lived abroad for more than 15 years, such as Harry Shindler, a Labour voter who lives in Italy and fought in world war two, but is unable to vote at the moment. It is right that we give these people who have served their country the right to vote.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Alongside extending suffrage for UK citizens living abroad, what consideration has the Cabinet Office given to extending suffrage in general elections to all EU and non-Commonwealth immigrants permanently living in Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Chris Skidmore: In terms of local government suffrage, EU citizens can already vote. For parliamentary suffrage, we are extending the franchise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) rightly says, to an extra 3.7 million Brits abroad. When it comes to the question of those living in this country, obviously that is subject to future negotiations.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): At a time when the Government are failing in any serious way to address the democratic deficit in the UK, they are, as has been mentioned, pursuing plans to remove the 15-year time limit for overseas voters and to hand a vote for life to an estimated 1 million expats. Will the Minister explain how that might affect Electoral Commission guidelines on "permissible donors", and will he assure the House that under no circumstances will the proposed changes allow unlimited political financial donations from non-UK taxpayers abroad to be funnelled into the coffers of any UK political party?

Chris Skidmore: First, may I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place? It is great to see him across the Dispatch Box.

On the issue of overseas electors and ensuring that those living abroad for more than 15 years have a vote for life, the principle is clear: we must ensure that those who were born in this country, who have often paid tax in this country and have moved abroad are given a right to participate in our democracy. These include people such as Harry Shindler, a Labour voter who fought in world war two. We want to ensure that these people who have given something to our country are allowed to participate in our democracy.

House of Lords: Membership

3. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): If he will bring forward proposals to limit the size of the membership of the House of Lords. [906979]

5. **Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): If he will bring forward proposals to limit the size of the membership of the House of Lords. [906981]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government agree that the House of Lords cannot grow indefinitely. However, comprehensive reform is not a priority for this Parliament, given the growing

number of pressing priorities elsewhere. Nevertheless, when there are measures that can command consensus, we would welcome working with peers to look at taking them forward.

Chris Law: A simpler answer would have been, “No, we will kick that into the long grass.”

It is clear that the House of Lords needs radical reform. In fact, we should listen to the new Lord Speaker, who said only last week:

“I don’t think we can justify a situation where you have over 800 peers at the same time as you’re bringing down the Commons to 600 MPs”.

Does the Minister agree?

Chris Skidmore: This was raised at an important debate on 26 October, when the House agreed with the Government that this is not a priority. The Government agree that House of Lords reform is not one of the priorities of the British people: a recent YouGov study showed that just 18% of the public think House of Lords reform is a priority. I am amazed that the Scottish National party has chosen this issue to campaign on. Why not campaign on education or on health—why not campaign on the issues that matter to the Scottish people?

Ian Blackford: What an outrage to democracy that answer from the Minister was. We have the ridiculous situation that there are more unelected Members of the House of Lords than MPs living in the highlands of Scotland, yet this Government want to cut democratic participation. We will be left with three Members of Parliament for half the landmass of Scotland and the highlands. That is not democratic accountability. Cut the Lords, not MPs.

Mr Speaker: It was difficult to detect a question there, but the intellectual dexterity of the Minister will enable him briefly to reply.

Chris Skidmore: We have proposals on boundary changes in Scotland, and there is a consultation that I commend to all Members. Some seats in Scotland are twice the size of others, and that historical injustice must be rectified.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right that reducing the size of the House of Lords is not a priority, but neither is reducing the size of the Commons. As we are abolishing goodness knows how many MEPs and taking on their workloads, should not the Government look again at their proposal and equalise seats, which is quite correct, but keep the same number of Members of Parliament?

Chris Skidmore: The previous Parliament passed a law to ensure that we could reduce the number of seats from 650 to 600, but a delay occurred because Opposition Members decided to kick this can down the road. The reduction in the number of seats will save £66 million over the course of a Parliament. It is right that we should make savings and put our own House in order.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is absolutely right that there should be equal votes and that we should cut the cost of politics in the House of Commons. It is absurd that there are no Scottish National party peers

in the House of Lords while the party has 56 Members in this House, and that there are 100 Liberal Democrat peers but a pathetic rump of only eight Members here. Does the Minister agree that this shows the need to rebalance membership of the House of Lords?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The historic campaign for the equalisation of seats was initiated by the Chartists in their people’s manifesto back in 1838, and this Government are determined to ensure that this historic wrong is righted.

13. [906989] **Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): There has been much speculation that a certain Nigel Farage will be joining the swarm of unelected bureaucrats in the House of Lords. Is Mr Farage to be rewarded with a peerage, or have the Government done enough damage already?

Chris Skidmore: All appointments to the House of Lords are scrutinised by an independent Committee, and it is right that that process should be followed.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recall the words of Sir Winston Churchill when he said that democracy was not a particularly good system but the best that we had? Does he agree that, until someone comes up with a better idea, the House of Lords is perhaps not that bad?

Chris Skidmore: As I have said, House of Lords reform is not a priority in this Parliament; nor is it a priority for the general public. We want to establish a consensus with the House of Lords, and it must be for the House of Lords to come up with that consensus.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Could we not at least get rid of the by-elections for hereditary peers? Earlier this year, the House of Lords decided to remove the second Baron Bridges because he had not turned up for five whole years. There was then a by-election, in which the 15th Earl of Cork and Orrery defeated the 12th Lord Vaux of Harrowden and the eighth Viscount Hood. Under the alternative vote system, the Earl of Limerick was bottom of the list. Does not this bring the whole system into disrepute? Is this “Blackadder” or Gilbert and Sullivan?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to “Blackadder”, this was a Labour policy introduced by a Labour Government, so this is yet another U-turn from the Corbynistas.

Hon. Members: Ooh!

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think that—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I can scarcely hear the hon. Gentleman. He must be heard.

Tommy Sheppard: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think that people watching this debate will be terrified by the complacency of this Government. Does the Minister not realise that the twin actions of increasing without limit the number of unelected Members of Parliament while reducing the number of elected lawmakers is

seriously damaging this institution in the eyes of our own electorate and lowering the esteem in which we are held abroad?

Chris Skidmore: The Government agree with the primacy of the House of Commons. The hon. Gentleman made those points in a debate on 26 October, and at that time the House agreed with the Government that this was not a priority and that our priority should be to equalise seats and to ensure that the historic principle of boundary reform occurs.

Departmental Efficiency Savings

4. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to help Government Departments deliver efficiency savings. [906980]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): The Government are striving towards their manifesto commitment to achieve £20 billion of annual efficiency savings by 2020. Cabinet Office functions are supporting Departments by providing expert support and advice in all areas, including commercial property, infrastructure, fraud and error, and debt. In addition, I will be leading a review with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to see whether further savings are possible over that period.

Mr Speaker: I know the House will want to join me in congratulating the Minister on the recent arrival of his second child, a brother for Wilfred.

Huw Merriman: May I add my congratulations as well? I thank the Minister for his answer. How much did the Government deliver in efficiency savings over the last term and how much is to come?

Ben Gummer: I thank my hon. Friend and you, Mr Speaker.

We saved £18.6 billion in the previous Parliament. We hope to do better than that over this Parliament. We have made a good start with more than £1.5 billion saved by transforming how Government works, but there is more to do. It is a hard task, but we will complete it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): May I first congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your energy efficiency saving this morning, on the bicycle in Portcullis House, for the poppy appeal? Is it possible for hon. Members and the wider public to track savings in various Departments to see the practical benefits of those savings?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible suggestion. As we evolve the single departmental plans, I hope to be able make the savings in individual Departments far more transparent. He is right to touch on that subject; it is something that I want to do more with.

15. **Mr Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): [906991] Government efficiency savings can be achieved through greater use of new technology, such as GOV.UK Notify. Will the Minister encourage its greater use by Whitehall Departments?

Ben Gummer: GOV.UK Notify is another excellent Government Digital Service product. We are putting more money into the GDS, which we are using more across Government. I hope that that will be one of many applications brought forward as a result of its success.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given that the cost of special advisers has almost doubled in 10 years and that the Tory Government are spending more on special advisers than the new Labour Government, would not dealing with that be a simple cost-cutting measure?

Ben Gummer: On the contrary, we have kept the cost of special advisers under review and fairly flat. The list of responsibilities has been published recently and the hon. Gentleman will see that that cost is fairly constant.

Voting Fraud

6. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle voting fraud. [906982]

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government are committed to tackling fraud in UK polls. We have already taken steps to improve the security of polls through the introduction of individual electoral registration. We are currently considering the findings and recommendations of the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) into electoral fraud. The Government will provide a full response in due course.

Neil Parish: In a democracy, we want as many people to vote and register as possible. In some constituencies, however, there is still too much electoral register fraud. What more can the Minister and Government do about that?

Chris Skidmore: For democracy to work for everyone, we need to ensure that it is clear and secure. The Government are determined to ensure that the electoral register is as complete and accurate as possible. We note that the Electoral Commission has also made recommendations about ID in polling stations. We will reflect on the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar and respond in due course.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the Minister believe that lessons can be learned from the additional measures to tackle voter fraud in Northern Ireland?

Chris Skidmore: Obviously, the electoral system in Northern Ireland is separate and has seen advances when it comes to security around polling stations and the electoral process. The Government are interested in all such examples and will be happy to respond when we publish our findings following the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar.

Topical Questions

T1. [906992] **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): The Cabinet Office is responsible for delivering a democracy that works for everyone, supporting the design and delivery of Government policy, and driving efficiencies and reforms to make the Government work better.

Jack Lopresti: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the work of the Minister for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), with my constituent Mehala Osborne and the domestic violence charity Survive, to reform anonymous registration to ensure that women silenced by the current registration process will no longer be denied the chance to express their democratic will?

Ben Gummer: I will indeed join with my hon. Friend. His commitment to the cause is well known, as is the commitment of my hon. Friend the Minister for the constitution, who has really taken this on as something that he wants to achieve in his post. For survivors of domestic abuse, voting is more than just a cross on a ballot paper; it is a renewed statement of the freedom that is rightfully theirs.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Let us take the Minister back to the boundary review, because interestingly the Government payroll is not being cut in this process. Ministers should therefore listen to the Members sitting behind them, such as the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who has said:

“We are talking about reducing the number of people we elect at the ballot box, whilst stuffing the House of Lords with yet more people”.

If this is really not a partisan process, and in view of Brexit and the fact that we are removing 73 MEPs, is it not now time to have a fresh review, based on having 650 seats in this place?

Ben Gummer: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will start as he means to go on. I see that he has five Members on the Opposition Front-Bench, compared with our very modest two, which shows how we can cut the cost of politics just by being in power.

T3. [906994] **Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con):** After the referendum, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee wrote to the Government suggesting that they should conduct a review of civil service capacity in view of the extra workload being piled on Whitehall. Can the Minister give any indication of whether such a review is being conducted? Would he consider conducting such a review?

Ben Gummer: The review is going on at the moment, and I am leading it. We have started by looking at senior civil service capacity, but it will go through the entire civil service. It is a very thorough process, and I am making sure that I am talking to all the Ministers leading Brexit-affected Departments to make sure that they are happy with the capacity of their offices.

T2. [906993] **Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab):** I do not disagree with the Minister on equalising constituencies, but if we want equal constituencies based on proper data, surely the 2 million newly registered voters should be taken into account in that equalisation.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman talks about data, so let us go back to the fact that if we delay boundary reform even further, we will be drawing up the seats on the basis of data, in England and Wales, from 2000—20 years ago. That is clearly unacceptable, which is why we must ensure that boundary reform takes place. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Far too many noisy private conversations are taking place, which is very unfair to Members who want to ask questions and Ministers who want to answer them. Let us hear the voice of the Vale of Clwyd, Dr James Davies.

T4. [906995] **Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con):** One benefit of devolution was meant to be that it would allow the comparison of different policy approaches to the same problems. With that in mind, will the Minister consider legislating to ensure the provision of comparable data across the UK?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend makes a sensible point. We are learning a lot from the devolved Administrations, just as they are learning from us. His point is well made, which is why we signed a concordat on statistical evidence a few months ago, ensuring that we are sharing the same methods of evidence gathering across all the Administrations.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Instead of using the single example of an expat war veteran to justify extending the franchise to UK citizens abroad, should the Minister not concentrate on those who live here and pay their taxes—EU citizens—and those who will have to live with the consequences, the 16 and 17-year-olds?

Chris Skidmore: Giving votes for life to those Britons who have lived abroad for more than 15 years was a manifesto commitment that will be delivered by this Government. We are determined to ensure that British people who live abroad are given the right to participate in our democracy, which is absolutely the right thing to do.

T5. [906996] **Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con):** I welcome the speech by the Minister for the Cabinet Office to the Reform think tank, in which he made the powerful case for public service reform, to make it more tailored to individual needs. May I urge him to be careful to ensure that, in delivering it, Whitehall does not end up exposing or misplacing personal data, as has happened in the past?

Ben Gummer: I will, and I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. It is of course important that we take people with us on this, but at its core we must remember that the state is there to serve people, not the other way round. That is why this Administration are putting themselves at the service of the British people, and I intend to ensure that public services reflect that fact.

T8. [906999] **Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** This Department has estimated that cutting the number of MPs to 600 will save £15 million a year. Library figures collated for me have shown that House of Lords allowances

alone cost £20 million a year, so does the Minister not accept that the cuts and savings to be made should be applied to the unelected House, not the elected Chamber?

Chris Skidmore: This Government are proud of the fact that the cost of the House of Lords has been reduced by 14% since 2010.

T6. [906997] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): It is good to see the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in his place. Will he perhaps set out what his priorities will be?

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Sir Patrick McLoughlin): As Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, I oversee the administration of the estates and the rents of the Duchy of Lancaster. I contribute to the Government's policy and decision-making process by attending Cabinet and attending and chairing Cabinet Committees. This role is not without precedence under both Labour and Conservative Governments.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government plan to audit racial disparities in public service outcomes, but may I ask Ministers that, in doing so, they ensure that every Department and agency uses the 2011 census classifications, which differentiate Gypsies and Travellers?

Ben Gummer: That is a very helpful contribution from the hon. Lady, and I will indeed ensure that.

T9. [907000] **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): The annual canvass is extremely expensive. What are the Government doing to reduce its cost?

Chris Skidmore: It is absolutely right that we make the system as efficient as possible and less expensive. To address both those aims, we are undertaking three pilots this year to test new approaches to conducting a canvass. I am also pleased to announce today that there will be 18 more pilots in England and Wales in 2017.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Latest assessments suggest that only 51% of 16 to 17-year-olds are registered to vote, compared with 85% of adults. In Neath, we have had successful voter registration awareness events to encourage under-18s to register. Will the Minister please explain the Government's plans to promote young people's registration?

Chris Skidmore: As part of a democracy that works for everyone, we are determined that young people's voices will be heard, which means going around the country, as I am doing in the coming weeks, to places such as Sheffield, Manchester and Liverpool to talk to young people about their priorities and how we can ensure that they are fully involved in the democratic process.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906962] **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 2 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Stephen Doughty: We have no clarity on access to the single market, huge disadvantages still in energy costs, and foreign steel being used in our key defence projects. We know that the Prime Minister likes to try to channel the Iron Lady, but when will she show some mettle in standing up for British-made steel?

The Prime Minister: This Government have stood up for British-made steel, and we have taken a number of measures that have improved the situation for the steel industry. The hon. Gentleman says that there is no clarity in relation to Brexit. I am very clear that what we want to achieve is the best possible deal for businesses in the United Kingdom, so that they can trade with, and operate within, the single European market.

Q2. [906963] **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I applaud the Government's continued commitment to infrastructure development, with 6,000 projects in the pipeline worth £480 billion. Will the Government quickly and speedily take forward the lower Thames crossing and extra investment in Kent roads, which will help to provide more homes, jobs and businesses, and help people in Kent, Medway and the Thames Gateway area?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for recognising the contribution that the Government have made in increasing investment in infrastructure, and the importance of that investment. We have consulted on proposals around a lower Thames crossing. There were more than 47,000 responses to that consultation. Those are now being considered, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will respond to that consultation in due course.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to welcome Neasa Constance McGinn? I hope that the evidently effective crash course in midwifery undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is not a sign to the Government that we believe in downgrading midwifery training.

Just a few months ago, on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister promised to stand up for families who are "just managing" to get by. However, we now know that those were empty words, as this Government plan to cut work allowances for exactly those families who are just getting by. Is it not the case that her cuts to universal credit will leave millions worse off?

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the birth, I understand, of his granddaughter? *[Interruption.]* No? I am sorry. In that case, I am completely mystified. *[Interruption.]* In that case—*[Interruption.]* Wait for it. In that case, perhaps one should never trust a former Chief Whip. *[Interruption.]*

On the point that the right hon. Gentleman raised in relation to universal credit, the introduction of universal credit was an important reform that was brought about in our welfare system. It is a simpler system, so people

can see much more easily where they stand in relation to benefits. Crucially, the point about universal credit is making sure that work always pays. As people work more, they earn more. It is right that we do not want to see people just being written off to a life on benefits and that we are encouraging people to get into the workplace.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is a bit unfair to blame a former Chief Whip for some little bit of confusion—very ungallant. Can we not just admire my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North for his work? *[Interruption.]* It is extremely rude to point.

The Prime Minister's predecessor abandoned those same cuts to working people through the tax credit system. Now the right hon. Lady as Prime Minister is enacting them through universal credit. The Centre for Social Justice says that these cuts will leave 3 million families £1,000 per year worse off. Why is the Prime Minister slipping the same cuts in through the back door?

The Prime Minister: At least my former Chief Whip has a job. On the serious point that the right hon. Gentleman raises about universal credit, I repeat what I have just said. I think it is important that we look at why universal credit has been introduced. It was introduced because, with the benefits system under the Labour Government, we saw too many people finding that they were better off on benefits than they were in work. What is important is that we value work and we value getting people into work if they are able to work, but we want a system that is fair both to those who need the benefits and to those who pay for the benefits through their taxes. There are many families struggling to make ends meet who are paying for the benefits of others. I want a system that is fair to them as well.

Jeremy Corbyn: This week, an Oxford University study found that there is a direct link between rising levels of benefit sanctions and rising demand for food banks. A million people accessed a food bank last year to receive a food parcel; only 40,000 did so in 2010. I welcome the Government's promise to review the work capability assessment for disabled people, but will the Prime Minister further commit to reviewing the whole punitive sanctions regime?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that in our welfare system, we have a system that makes sure that those people who receive benefits are those for whom it is right to receive benefits. That is why we have assessments in our welfare system. But it is also important in our welfare system that we ensure that those who are able to get into the workplace are making every effort to get into the workplace. That is why we have sanctions in our system. What the right hon. Gentleman wants is no assessments, no sanctions and unlimited welfare. That is not fair to those who are accessing the welfare system, and it is not fair to the taxpayers who pay for it.

Jeremy Corbyn: According to a Sheffield Hallam University study, one in five claimants who have been sanctioned became homeless as a result. Many of those included families with children.

Could I recommend that the Prime Minister support British cinema, and takes herself along to a cinema to see a Palme d'Or-winning film, "I, Daniel Blake"? While she is doing so, perhaps she could take the Work

and Pensions Secretary with her, because he described the film as "monstrously unfair" and then went on to admit that he had never seen it, so he has obviously got a very fair sense of judgment on this. But I will tell the Prime Minister what is monstrously unfair: an ex-serviceman like David Clapson dying without food in his home due to the Government's sanctions regime. It is time that we ended this institutionalised barbarity against often very vulnerable people.

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that, of course, it is important that, in our welfare system, we ensure that those who need the support that the state is giving them through the benefits system are able to access it. But it is also important in our system that those who are paying for it feel that the system is fair to them as well. That is right; that is why we need to have work capability assessments—it is why we need to have sanctions in our system. Now, the right hon. Gentleman has a view that there should be no assessments, no sanctions and unlimited welfare. I have to say to him that the Labour party is drifting away from the views of Labour voters; it is the Conservative party that understands working class people.

Jeremy Corbyn: The housing benefit bill has gone up by more than £4 billion because of high levels of rent and the necessity of supporting people with that. Is that a sensible use of public money? I think not.

In response to the March Budget, I asked the Chancellor to abandon the £30 cut for disabled people on employment and support allowance, who are unable to work, but who, with support, may be able to work in the future—they want to be able to get into work. What evidence does the Prime Minister have that imposing poverty on people with disabilities actually helps them into work?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to say that what we have seen under this Government is nearly half a million more disabled people actually in the workplace. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has launched a Green Paper on work, which is starting to look at how we can continue to provide and increase support for those who are disabled who want to get into the workplace. But the right hon. Gentleman started his question by asking me about the increase in the money that is being spent on housing benefit. If he thinks that the amount of money being spent on housing benefit is so important, why did he oppose the changes we made to housing benefit to reduce the housing benefit bill?

Jeremy Corbyn: As the Prime Minister well knows, my concern, and that of my party, is about the incredible amount of money being paid into the private rented sector in excessive rents, and that could be brought under control and handled much better.

Many people in this House will have been deeply moved by the article by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) about the tragic death of her son and having to take out a bank loan to cover the funeral costs. The Prime Minister may be aware that the *Sunday Mirror*, with the support of the Labour party, is calling for an end to council charges for the cost to parents of laying a child to rest. It would cost £10 million a year—a very small proportion of total

Government expenditure—to ensure that every council could ensure that those going through the horror of laying a child to rest did not have a bill imposed on them by the local authority to put that child to rest. I hope the Prime Minister will be able to consider this and act accordingly.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the issue that the right hon. Gentleman has raised. There are, of course, facilities available through the social fund funeral expenses payment scheme for payments to be made available to people who qualify and meet the eligibility conditions. Of course it is difficult for anybody when they have to go through the tragedy of losing a child and then face consequences of the sort that the right hon. Gentleman mentions. We are making sure, of course, in relation to local authorities, that they now have the extra revenues available to them through business rates and other local revenues. It is up to councils to consider what they wish to do on this, but I say to the right hon. Gentleman that there are facilities available through those social fund funeral expenses to deal with the issue that he raises.

Q3. [906964] David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): Northamptonshire has for a long time had a growing population without the right level of funding for our public services. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the current reviews of the funding formulas for schools, policing and health will properly reflect the population growths in Northampton and the rest of the county so that our services get the funding they need?

The Prime Minister: We have protected the schools budget in relation to funding paid per pupil, and we are protecting the police budget. But of course, as we look at the various ways—the various funding formulas—through which we are funding public services in my hon. Friend's constituency and in the county of Northamptonshire, we will be looking at the very issue of what is right in terms of the needs of the local area and the numbers of people there.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): It is with sadness that we learned of the death of a serviceman in a live firing exercise at the range in Tain. No doubt the Prime Minister and right hon. and hon. Members across this House will extend their condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of the serviceman who has died so tragically.

The Prime Minister says that she wants to tackle international and domestic tax avoidance and serious criminality. SNP Members support this. If she were told that specific UK financial vehicles were being used for tax avoidance and other serious criminality, what would she do about it?

The Prime Minister: First, I am sure that, as the right hon. Gentleman says, the whole House would wish to pass on our condolences to the friends and family of the serviceman who has died at the Tain range.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions tax avoidance. Yes indeed, we have done a significant amount in relation to tax avoidance. He asks what anybody should do if they have evidence of people actually avoiding tax. I suggest that he speaks to HMRC.

Angus Robertson: Scottish limited partnerships were established by this House in 1907, and they are being aggressively marketed internationally, especially in eastern Europe. The International Monetary Fund has warned of the risk posed by SLPs in the fight against global money laundering and against organised crime. It is now a matter of public record that SLPs have acted as “fronts for websites peddling child abuse images, and...have been part of major corruption cases”

in Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Latvia and Moldova, including in the arms industry. Given the seriousness of this issue and the Prime Minister's commitment to dealing with criminality, but the lack of progress on SLPs, will she agree to meet me to discuss a joint way forward?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises issues around criminality and investigations into criminal activity that is taking place, and talks about the issue of websites peddling child abuse and child sexual exploitation. It is precisely in order to increase our ability to deal with this criminal activity that we created the National Crime Agency and have been ensuring that we are working with the City on other issues such as money laundering. We are looking at the whole question of how we can ensure that we are taking effective action on criminal activity. I am pleased to say to the right hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* He keeps asking me to meet him. As he knows, I do meet him on occasion—I am always happy to do so—but if he wants to talk to me about dealing with criminal activity, then I will be able to tell him about the work that has been done over the past six years under this Government in terms of the National Crime Agency, working with the City on money laundering, and enhancing our ability to deal with exactly the sort of criminal activity he is talking about.

Q5. [906966] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is disappointing that we did not hear from the Leader of the Opposition any welcome for the huge boost to manufacturing and employment that has come from Nissan's decision to produce two new models at its factory? Does she agree that that decision demonstrates great confidence in the UK, with benefits throughout the supply chain, which includes companies such as Automotive Insulations in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right in two senses. First, it is extremely disappointing that the Leader of the Opposition has not welcomed this, unlike his colleague, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has welcomed the fact that these jobs have been saved in her constituency and in the supply chain around the country—that supply chain is every bit as important. I know that Automotive Insulations in my hon. Friend's constituency is receiving money as part of a project funded through the Advanced Propulsion Centre, and I wish it all the very best for the future.

Q4. [906965] David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): What assurances can the Prime Minister give to the agri-food sector right across the United Kingdom that it will be given the important status required in Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we are determined to get the best possible deal for the British people on exiting the European

Union. We are looking at the various sectors and we are very conscious of the importance of the food and agricultural sector across the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland. We will do everything we can, including listening to representations made by the Northern Ireland Executive, to ensure that we get the best deal possible for our agri-food sector.

Q8. [906969] **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): Last week's announcement on the report on accelerated access to medicines will have a positive impact on the lives of children and adults with a rare genetic or undiagnosed condition. For decades, patients have struggled to get access to medicines in a timely fashion, and the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) made massive progress. Will the Prime Minister confirm that if the programme is successful with the first five to 10 drugs in the first year, it will be extended to further drugs in following years?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to welcome the accelerated access review and to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who has done so much to place life sciences in the UK on the agenda and to ensure that the UK develops as the best possible place to develop new drugs, which is exactly what we want to see. The Department of Health will look at the review's recommendations and respond to them shortly. This is an important development in our ability to accelerate access to drugs, which is to the benefit of patients.

Q6. [906967] **Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In recent weeks, three Government Ministers have expressed three different views on what will happen, while industry cries out for clarity. I am talking not of Brexit, surprisingly, but of the oil and gas industry. Will the autumn statement provide additional support for the industry, or is the Prime Minister happy to sit back and see thousands more jobs lost?

The Prime Minister: We understand the challenges faced by the UK oil and gas industry and we take them very seriously. That is why we established the Oil and Gas Authority and why we have taken action, with the £2.3 billion package of measures in the last two Budgets, to make sure that the North sea continues to attract investment, and to safeguard the future of that vital national asset. We have taken a range of measures. We understand the concerns about the oil and gas industry, which is why the Government have already taken action.

Q11. [906972] **Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Rochester airport and Medway city industrial estate in my constituency are home to a growing number of successful science and tech SMEs that are doing wonders for innovation and our economy. Ahead of my right hon. Friend's trade mission to India, I congratulate her on her decision to take with her a cohort of SMEs to help to increase trading relationships with emerging economies. Will her delegation continue to ensure that all parts of our economy are able to seize the opportunities that present themselves as we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the importance of small and medium-sized businesses, particularly in the technology industry. That

is why I am pleased that I will take leading small and medium-sized businesses from the life sciences and technology sectors with me on my forthcoming trip to India. It is important to enable them to forge trading links with India, and I assure my hon. Friend that, as we look at the arrangements for leaving the European Union, we will take the interests of all sectors into account.

Q7. [906968] **Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Tata Speciality is a big employer in my constituency and its workforce are worried by the long period of uncertainty enacted by Tata Steel. Will the Prime Minister use her trade visit to India to secure from the company the future of steel production in Britain, and to convey the importance of Tata acting as a responsible owner and, in the case of Tata Speciality, seller of its UK steel assets?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Lady that we recognise both the importance of steel and the importance of Tata in the United Kingdom. That is why, as a Government, we have had discussions with Tata on the future of steel here in the United Kingdom, and we will continue to do so.

Q12. [906973] **David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): As I am sure the Prime Minister is aware, my constituency apparently contains more cows than any other. That means world-class cheese, from Godminster and Barber's to Montgomery's Cheddar, Wkye Farms and many more. Can my right hon. Friend assure the west country's farmers that in negotiating the best deal for Britain in the coming weeks and months, the interests of our agricultural industry and farming community will be uppermost in her mind? Will she pop down to Somerset soon for a chunk of Cheddar and perhaps a drop of cider?

Mr Speaker: West country cheese! I think we are clear.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend's invitation to some west country cheese and cider is difficult to refuse, so I look forward at some stage to coming down to Somerset and being able to sample those products. He is absolutely right, as others in this Chamber have been, about the importance of our agricultural sector to economies across the UK. Particular parts of the UK rely heavily on the agricultural sector, and we will be taking their needs and considerations into account as we negotiate and deliver the best possible deal for this country in leaving the EU.

Q9. [906970] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): This morning the High Court ruled that the Government have comprehensively failed to tackle air pollution properly. Which does the Prime Minister feel is worse: the Government losing in the High Court for the second time, or the 40,000 early deaths that result from air pollution every year in the UK?

The Prime Minister: I have been asked about air quality in this Chamber previously at Prime Minister's questions, and I have always made it clear that we recognise that there is more for the Government to do. We have been doing a lot in this area. We have been

putting extra money into actions that will relieve the issues around air quality, but we recognise that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs now has to look at the judgment that has been made by the courts, and we have to look again at the proposals that we will bring forward. Nobody in this House doubts the importance of the issue of air quality. We have taken action, but there is more to do and we will do it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Prime Minister will remember visiting the Witney constituency recently. I am pleased to report that Chipping Norton has been shortlisted for the Great British High Street awards. Will she join me in congratulating the small businesses of Chipping Norton, and can she tell me what support Government offer to the small businesses in our market towns?

The Prime Minister: May I take this opportunity, which is my first, to welcome my hon. Friend to this Chamber? I congratulate him on his excellent result in the by-election.

My hon. Friend's question brings back many happy memories for me, because when I was a child Chipping Norton was our local town. I used to go there and spend my pocket money assiduously in the shops, so I have done my bit for his high street in Chipping Norton. We are very clear, as a Government, that the action we have taken on issues such as business rates is there to help to support small businesses.

Mr Speaker: We are always grateful for a bit of extra information, and we have now had it.

Q10. [906971] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This Government's record on immigration detention is disgraceful, with the UK being the only country in the EU that has no time limit on detention. Amid concern over plans to replace Dungavel with a short-term detention facility near Glasgow airport, the people of Renfrewshire want no part in these inhumane and ineffective practices. Will she use the closure of Dungavel as an opportunity to rethink detention policy and end this stain on our human rights record?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that a lot of work has been done by the Government on the whole question of immigration detention, and a number of changes have been made. An independent review took place about a year ago on the whole question of detention of people in the immigration estate. It is important to realise that where people are due to be removed from this country and there is the prospect that they could be lost to the system if they are not detained, there are circumstances in which it is right to detain them in the immigration estate. We need to make sure we have got that estate right, and that is why a lot of work has been done on this. The fundamental point is that I suspect he does not think we should detain anybody in relation to immigration enforcement, but we believe there are those who are rightly detained before we remove them from this country.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): When people make fun of Christianity in this country, it rightly turns the other cheek. When a young gymnast, Louis Smith,

makes fun of another religion widely practised in this country, he is hounded on Twitter and by the media and suspended by his association. For goodness' sake, this man received death threats, and we have all looked the other way. My question to the Prime Minister is this: what is going on in this country, because I no longer understand the rules?

The Prime Minister: I understand the level of concern that my hon. Friend has raised in relation to this matter. There is a balance that we need to find. We value freedom of expression and freedom of speech in this country—that is absolutely essential in underpinning our democracy—but we also value tolerance of others and tolerance in relation to religions. This is one of the issues we have looked at in the counter-extremism strategy that the Government have produced. Yes, it is right that people can have that freedom of expression, but that right has a responsibility too, which is the responsibility to recognise the importance of tolerance of others.

Q13. [906974] Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Today's *Daily Record* leads on DWP issues. Is the Prime Minister aware that a telephone call to the Department for Work and Pensions by a severely disabled person or their carer can cost up to 45p a minute, which, with an average length of a call of 13 minutes, is a considerable sum from their social security entitlement? Should a disabled citizen pay this price, or does the Prime Minister agree with me that we should end this telephone tax on the most vulnerable in our society?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has been raised on a number of occasions in this House. That is why the Government are implementing new guidelines in relation to the operation of these telephone lines. The number of lines that are costing people in the way to which he refers is being reduced, so the Government have recognised the issue and are taking action.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The past 18 months have been hell for commuters in my constituency of Lewes using the Southern rail network. Last night, a journey that should have taken just over an hour took over four hours. May I beg the Prime Minister to intervene on the Southern rail network? While we have a country that works for everyone, in Sussex we have a railway that works for no one.

The Prime Minister: I feel for my hon. Friend in relation to the journey she had to go through last night and the extended time that it took. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has been taking action in working with Southern rail and Network Rail in relation to the improvements that are necessary. We have stepped in to invest £20 million specifically to tackle the breakdown on the Southern rail network, which is proving so difficult for passengers. I recognise the degree of concern about this. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is on the case, and is working to ensure those improvements.

Q14. [906975] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Has the Prime Minister spotted the ludicrous refusal by FIFA, the footballing federation, to let our

players wear poppies at the forthcoming Scotland-England game? Will she tell the respective associations that, in this country, we decide when to wear poppies and that we will be wearing them at Wembley?

The Prime Minister: I think the stance that has been taken by FIFA is utterly outrageous. Our football players want to recognise and respect those who have given their lives for our safety and security. I think it is absolutely right that they should be able to do so. This is for our football associations, but I think a clear message is going from this House that we want our players to be able to wear poppies. I have to say to FIFA that before they start telling us what to do they jolly well ought to sort their own house out.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her recent announcement of a taskforce to stamp out the vile business of modern slavery? Will she join me in congratulating my constituent Mike Emberson and the Medaille Trust on their 10 years of work with the victims and the 70 places they now provide across their homes for these most unfortunate women?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to endorse my hon. Friend's comments. I have met representatives of the Medaille Trust and talked to some of the victims they have helped. It is absolutely right that we continue the momentum in our fight against modern slavery. This country is leading the world and we should continue the fight because, sadly, too much slavery is still taking place on the streets and in the towns and villages of this country. That is why the taskforce I have set up will continue that momentum. We will be relentless in our pursuit of eradicating modern slavery.

Q15. [906976] **Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): In July, the armed forces charity SSAFA published an in-depth survey of nearly 1,000 working-age veterans. Some 85% of them thought the UK did not give them enough support and only 16% thought the armed forces covenant was being implemented effectively. What is the Prime Minister doing personally to change that?

The Prime Minister: We absolutely recognise the debt we owe to our veterans. That is why, through the armed forces covenant and throughout the work the Ministry of Defence is doing, we increasingly recognise the support that is necessary for veterans. The hon. Gentleman talks about what we can do. One thing we can do is to help people who come out of the armed forces to find their way into the world of work. That is why it is important both that we have a system that helps them to find the support that is necessary to get into the world of work and that we have an economy that is providing the jobs that people need.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): This week is Offshore Wind Week. The development of the offshore wind sector is vital to my Cleethorpes constituency. Will my right hon. Friend assure the industry and my constituents that the Government will continue to work with the industry to develop future jobs for young people, with a particular emphasis on training?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that the Government will continue to work with the industry. It has been an important development for the United Kingdom and makes up an important part of the energy we generate from renewables. As he says, it does provide jobs and we need to ensure that we look at the training that will enable people to take up those jobs. That is why skills form part of the work we are doing on our future industrial strategy.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is highly irresponsible and, indeed, dangerous for people to talk up the prospect of increased violence in Northern Ireland as a result of our leaving the EU, and that people should use the agreed institutions that were set up under the various agreements, not stand outside them or create new ones? Does she also agree that Brexit will not result in any change, alteration or impeding of the way in which the regions, countries and people within the UK connect with one another?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance in relation to movement around the United Kingdom. No change will take place. We will ensure that Brexit is a good deal for the whole of the United Kingdom. Those who wish to encourage violence off the back of that should, frankly, be ashamed of themselves. It is essential that we all work together to make a success of this and get the best possible opportunities for people across the whole of the United Kingdom.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in praising Henley-on-Thames for receiving its first tranche of community infrastructure levy money at the higher rate because it has a neighbourhood plan? Will she join me in praising neighbourhood planning generally as the best means of giving communities a say over the planning system?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate my neighbouring MP and Henley-on-Thames on that achievement. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that neighbourhood plans are a crucial part of the planning system. That is how local people can have a real say over what is happening in their local area.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn)? Moving swiftly from midwives to doctors, is the Prime Minister aware that doctors in Doncaster face a crisis in primary care, because as GPs retire, it is proving almost impossible to get new ones to take over their practices? Because of restrictions in the Health and Social Care Act 2012, NHS bodies cannot take the necessary action, for example putting in salaried GPs. Will she do something about this matter quickly? Otherwise, many of my constituents will be left without a doctor.

The Prime Minister: After my unfortunate mistake earlier about the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), I failed to add my congratulations to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), so am happy now to do so.

It is important to have GPs coming through, so that we can replace those who are retiring. Over the past six years we have seen thousands more GPs in our NHS. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), and my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Health are ensuring that we have a programme to bring more doctors into training, so that places such as the right hon. Lady's constituency, and those of other Members across the House, have GPs in the numbers needed.

Point of Order

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you do anything about the fact that the Home Office is not observing named days? On 17 October, the Home Secretary made a statement on the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, in the course of which she said that she had passed on a request that Dame Lowell Goddard should appear before the Home Affairs Committee—as you know, Dame Lowell Goddard had resigned as the inquiry's chair. I put down a named day written question to the Home Secretary asking if she would put the relevant correspondence with Dame Lowell Goddard in the Library. There was an interim reply saying that the Home Office was unable to answer the question on that particular day. A few days later I therefore put down another question, due for answer yesterday, asking when the Home Secretary would make a substantive reply to the first question. There has been no reply at all.

The Home Office, as I understand the position, seems to be in such a state of crisis about written questions that it is not able to answer them—unless it does not want to provide an answer in the first place. This seems quite simple to me: the Home Secretary could say that she had placed the correspondence in the Library or else say what she meant when she said what she had passed on the information. It is hardly a complex question, so why do I have to raise a point of order with you, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: It is a very curious state of affairs to which the hon. Gentleman alludes. If he has a wider concern about overall response rates to questions it is of course open to him to write to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), the Chair of the Procedure Committee, which keeps an eye on these matters. In relation to this particular question, the situation seems rather curious. However, experience tells me that when a Member raises his or her disquiet about a lengthy delay in securing a reply to a parliamentary question, that reply is, thereafter, ordinarily forthcoming very quickly. If the hon. Gentleman is in any doubt on that matter, he can always have a word with his right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), who has found it expedient to complain from time to time and has then secured very quick replies. The Leader of the House will have the hon. Gentleman's interests at heart and I think a solution will be found, possibly within hours.

Mr Winnick: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I will persist if that does not happen.

Mr Speaker: If I may very politely say so, that observation was superfluous, in the sense that I do not think that any Member of the House would have expected anything less of the hon. Gentleman. He is nothing if not persistent and tenacious to a fault.

British Victims of Terrorism (Asset-Freezing and Compensation)

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

12.44 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the freezing and seizing of assets belonging to states or organisations who sponsor or perpetrate acts of terrorism for the purposes of enabling compensation to be paid to the British victims of such terrorism; to provide a definition of British victims for the purpose of eligibility for such compensation; and for connected purposes.

Today, I lay before the House a Bill that will give hope to all British citizens who have suffered at the hands of terrorism—hope that one day soon their own United Kingdom Government might be obliged to act decisively against the perpetrators and backers of these horrific crimes, and deliver justice to all those whose lives have been so cruelly cut short, or have suffered injury or loss. My Bill would give Her Majesty's Government direct power to freeze or seize assets of any state or organisation that sponsors or perpetrates such acts. IRA terrorism, supported by Colonel Gaddafi's regime, is the most significant example in recent times of when British citizens have been failed by their own Government in seeking justice for crimes committed against them, but in today's world there are new threats and new generations of terrorists who seek to harm British people. My Bill will mandate Governments to seek compensation for all British victims of terrorism, providing them with the powers they need to do so.

As chairman of the parliamentary support group for victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism, I am proud to have championed, along with my colleagues, the cause to obtain compensation for the victims of these dreadful crimes, and to follow on the good work of the former Member for Thurrock, Andrew Mackinlay, to whom I pay heartfelt tribute for his steadfast support for the campaign for justice for the victims of terrorism perpetrated by the IRA.

Many of us have friends, family or constituents who have suffered at the hands of politically motivated terrorism. Last year marked a quarter of a century since the assassination of my friend and former Member for Eastbourne, Ian Gow, whose murder at the hands of the IRA in July 1990 had a profound effect on me and on so many others who knew Ian as a soldier, lawyer, parliamentarian, friend, and staunch defender of Queen and country. In this Chamber, we commemorate with personal shields our own fallen colleagues who were victims of terrorism: Ian Gow, Airey Neave, Robert Bradford and Sir Anthony Berry, who was killed in the Grand hotel, Brighton in 1984. All were victims of IRA-INLA terrorism.

Terrorism in the '70s, '80s and '90s had a profound effect on so many of my generation, who remember growing up with the threat of bombs in London, Belfast and towns and cities across the United Kingdom. Indeed, 9 February 1996 will always be etched on my mind. I visited the Britannia hotel in Docklands to discuss plans for an international dinner I had organised, to be held on 1 October that year, in honour of Lady Thatcher. I travelled back via South Quay station and arrived home in Romford only to watch the "ITN News" with

[Andrew Rosindell]

horror, as I learned about the devastating bomb explosion that had occurred soon after I had boarded the docklands light railway. That bombing, as well as so many other acts of terrorism by the IRA, was carried out using explosives supplied by the Libyan regime, yet so many years later victims have not received the compensation they rightly deserve. Some of the victims and their families who suffered that trauma are now elderly or have passed away.

Zaoui Berezag was a victim of the Canary Wharf bombing, and was left severely mentally and physically impaired; he was cared for by his devoted wife Gemma until she sadly died last year. They never received one penny in compensation. Victims of the Harrods bombing of 17 December 1983, such as the family of WPC Jane Arbuthnot and Police Inspector Stephen Dodd, did not receive compensation, while the family of an American who was killed precisely in the same place at the same time did receive compensation. That is because, unlike the UK Government, the United States Government, under President George W Bush, fought and won the argument with the Gaddafi regime for American victims.

How can it be justified that some victims should receive compensation while others do not? Surely it should be settled when the victims or their families are still alive. It is truly terrible that British victims have been treated so differently from Americans. Their Government stood by their victims; our Government did not.

Each time the issue of compensation for these deserving victims is raised, we have until now received the same empty response from Governments of all persuasions. Each time, we hear weak excuses for not pursuing a way of bringing this matter to a satisfactory conclusion for the British victims of terrorism. Each time, the long-hurting victims of the IRA-Gaddafi's regime listen in, only to be let down and left to wait indefinitely.

These wicked acts took place a long time ago and many of the victims fear that, unless action is taken soon, they will not be around to see this matter concluded and will never receive the justice and compensation they deserve. Time is running out, so today I bring this Bill to the Floor of the House with the aim of giving Her Majesty's Government the power to act and resolve this issue by making provision for the freezing and seizing of

assets belonging to any state or organisation that sponsors or perpetrates acts of terrorism against a British citizen. I include in that category citizens of Ireland, as well as any citizens of our Crown dependencies or overseas territories that might have been affected.

When sanctions against Libya are eventually lifted, it is vital that we do not miss the opportunity finally to bring this matter to a close and come to an agreement with any future Government in Tripoli. The British victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism must never be forgotten, and we must not discard the one bargaining tool we have—frozen assets—to ensure that justice is served.

Over many decades, Governments have both missed and avoided opportunities to bring justice to the victims. This cannot be allowed to happen one moment longer. It would be intolerable if, when the assets are unfrozen, the UK is unable to ensure that talks are opened and had no power to act. Just as the Libyan people were victims of Gaddafi, the British victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism are too, and it is the duty of Her Majesty's Government to fight to bring justice.

This Bill proposes a thorough basis for legislation to allow Her Majesty's Government to ensure that eventually, however many years it takes, the UK victims of the IRA-Gaddafi regime will eventually receive compensation and justice. I say to the House that we need a law that ensures that any future victims of terrorism will not have to suffer the same trauma. That is why my Bill is important, not just for the victims of IRA terrorism, but for those British citizens who may, God forbid, become victims of terrorism in years hence. So it is for the defence, the well-being and the protection of all of Her Majesty's subjects that I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Andrew Rosindell, James Cartlidge, Mr Nigel Dodds, Kate Hoey, Sir Gerald Howarth, Daniel Kawczynski, Danny Kinahan, Mr Khalid Mahmood, Dr Paul Monaghan, Ian Paisley, Gavin Robinson and Henry Smith present the Bill.

Andrew Rosindell accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 88).

Opposition Day

[11TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Community Pharmacies

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment tabled in the name of the Prime Minister.

12.55 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that community pharmacies are valued assets that offer face-to-face healthcare advice which relieves pressure on other NHS services; calls on the Government to rethink its changes to community pharmacy funding; and further calls on the Government to ensure that community pharmacies are protected from service reduction and closure and that local provision of community pharmacy services is protected.

This is an issue that affects many of our constituents, and it has aroused considerable opposition from so many of them that 2.2 million people have signed a petition. Community pharmacists, I am sure, have lobbied Members of all parties about these cuts and have explained why they should be opposed. Indeed, Members of all parties have raised their concerns and their opposition to these cuts.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron). Government Members have also raised their opposition in Westminster Hall debates, Adjournment debates and parliamentary questions. Their opposition to the cuts is entirely understandable.

When the Government announced, in December last year, that they were going to pursue the cuts, they talked of cutting the budget for community pharmacy services by £170 million, with further cuts to follow. Opposition to the cuts was clear, and indeed was heightened when the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who I see in his place and for whom I have tremendous respect, suggested that the cuts could lead to the closure of up to 3,000 community pharmacies.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We have had a lot of correspondence from local pharmacists and their customers worried about essential parts of the local community such as businesses, but is it not also the case that, with massive cuts in acute services and with primary care under pressure, those pharmacies provide an essential and cost-effective part of the local health service, which we simply cannot do without?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has anticipated my argument—I could probably sit down now that he has put it so eloquently, but I shall plough on while I have the indulgence of the House.

I was saying that the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire had said that the cuts might lead to some 3,000 community pharmacies closing. Then, of course, the right hon. Gentleman left his post in the Department of Health, which we are all very sad about. Now we have a new Minister, and we are delighted to

welcome the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) to his place—not least because in one of his first interventions when he was allowed out, he visited the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's annual conference in September and said he was delaying the cuts. He said:

“I think it is right that we spend the time, particularly me as an incoming minister, to make sure that we are making the correct decision”.

He continued by saying that

“what we do is going to be right for you, is going to be right for the NHS and right for the public more generally.”

Well, if the Minister had left it there—with that U-turn—he would have won the praise of Labour Members.

Unfortunately, we then had a U-turn on the U-turn from the Minister. When the Minister came before the House last month we found out that, far from having listened, taken account of various consultations and decided to do what was best for the NHS, he intended to impose a 12% cut on current levels to pharmacy budgets for the remainder of this financial year—giving pharmacists just six weeks' notice—and a 7% cut the year after that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) *rose*—

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: Because she represents my mother's home town, I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston.

Kate Green: It is a privilege to represent my hon. Friend's mother, and he, of course, knows my constituency well. The constituency has high levels of deprivation, and our primary care services face incredible pressure owing to unsuitable practice premises and the difficulty of recruiting GPs. Does my hon. Friend agree that with only seven weeks' notice, it is impossible for GPs, other primary care providers and pharmacists to accommodate and make provision for these cuts in a way that will allow them to continue to support deprived communities in my constituency and, indeed, the constituencies of all Members?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the cuts have aroused so much opposition from not just Labour but Conservative Members.

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Over the past few years, a significant amount of work has been put into the Think Pharmacy First campaign, whose aim is to take pressure off GPs, ambulances and A & E services, but is “Think Pharmacy First for cuts and closures” really what the Government have in mind?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point, which completely blows apart many of the arguments that the Government have advanced in recent years.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Given the clustering of pharmacies, does the hon. Gentleman believe that no better way of funding the service can be envisaged?

Jonathan Ashworth: The cuts are not aimed at clusters. They are completely arbitrary, and they will result in the closure of many pharmacies in some of the most deprived parts of the country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I want to make a bit of progress, because I know that many other Members wish to speak.

The cuts will mean that patients, many of them elderly and unable to travel long distances, will be forced to go elsewhere for essential medical advice and support. What we need from the Minister now are the details of how many pharmacies will close. The previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire, told us that up to 3,000 community pharmacies—a quarter of all pharmacies—could close.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It may be helpful if I make a brief intervention at this stage. I gave an estimate which was based on what we thought was a possible worst-case scenario. The Department never had any plans to close pharmacies. It was the best estimate that I had at the time, but it was not a definitive figure.

Jonathan Ashworth: The right hon. Gentleman is an extremely experienced former Health Minister, possibly the most extreme—[*Laughter.*] He is definitely not an extremist, but he is possibly the most experienced Conservative former Health Minister apart from, perhaps, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). It is very noble of him to try to get the Minister off the hook, but the fact remains that he was the one who said that 3,000 pharmacies would close, and we will continue to remind Ministers of that.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the former Chief Whip, but then I will make some progress.

Dame Rosie Winterton: Doncaster pharmacists have told me that at least 20 pharmacies in the town will close as a result of the cuts. That is their estimate, on the ground. They have also told me that the Government should sit down with pharmacists and engage in meaningful discussions about pharmacy delivery. For example, setting up a minor ailments service and cutting the drugs budget could possibly save the NHS £5 million in Doncaster and £650 million overall.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. She was not only an exceptional Chief Whip but an exceptional pharmacies Minister in the last Labour Government, and she knows how foolhardy it would be to make cuts in the pharmacy sector.

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

Jonathan Ashworth: I should like to make a bit of progress, if I may. As I said earlier, I am extremely conscious that other Members wish to speak.

As we have heard, the former Health Minister said that 3,000 community pharmacies could close. When pressed about the figures last month, the current Minister said

“no community will be left without a pharmacy.”—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615.]

I hope he will confirm that he still stands by that statement. He also claimed:

“Nobody is talking about thousands of pharmacies closing”. —[*Official Report*, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 602-3.]

He obviously did not receive the memo from the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire. But what did he say when he was pressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) about the number of closures? What soothing, reassuring words did he offer to all our constituents? He said, “I do not know.”

I am sorry that the Minister has not got a clue, but I hope that when he winds up the debate he will be able to tell us how many pharmacies will close as a result of these cuts. If he is not prepared to tell us that, will he tell us how many services will be cut?

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy, but then I must make progress.

Oliver Colvile: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the number of pharmacies has increased by 18% over the past 10 years?

Jonathan Ashworth: I know that the hon. Gentleman works tirelessly as a champion for pharmacies, but he knows that these proposals will mean cuts in many services.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Many pharmacies in Halewood deliver medication, up to 8.30 pm, to elderly and vulnerable people who cannot get out of the house, and to care homes. What does my hon. Friend think will happen if those pharmacies have to close?

Jonathan Ashworth: I do not need to say what I think; I need to say what the sector thinks, and the sector has made it clear today that it will have to cut services such as the delivery of medicines to some of the most elderly and vulnerable members of society.

Dr Murrison *rose*—

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter, but then I really must make some progress.

Mr Bradshaw: Although the Government say that they want to devote a greater proportion of overall health spending to primary care, our Health Committee's report on primary care, published in the summer, showed that a smaller proportion was being devoted to the primary care sector, which, of course, includes pharmacies.

Is that not the ultimate false economy? If we do not invest more in primary care, all the pressure goes into the acute sector.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is another experienced former Health Minister, and he is right. As we learned this week, the Health Committee has completely blown apart the Government's figures on the financing of the NHS.

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: If I may, I shall make some progress. I promise to give way to the hon. Gentleman in a few moments, but I know that others wish to speak.

The Government will say that they are mitigating the cuts by introducing a pharmacy access scheme, but the scheme takes no account of the needs of the most deprived communities. The four constituencies that top the health deprivation and disability indices are Liverpool Walton, Blackpool South, Manchester Central and Blackley and Broughton. Not one pharmacy in those constituencies is eligible for the pharmacy access scheme. The least deprived constituencies are Chesham and Amersham and Wokingham. In Chesham and Amersham, 28% of pharmacies are eligible for this mitigating scheme, while in Wokingham 35% are eligible. *[Interruption.]* The Minister says that it is a disgrace, but those are the figures. Only this Department, which spins figures all the time and which has been discredited for the way in which it uses them, can call a pharmacy cuts package an "access scheme".

Today, in an article in *The Times*, the Minister himself focuses on cities such as Leicester and Birmingham. He claims that if you walk

"along roads in Leicester you will see 12 pharmacies within ten minutes of each other".

As the Member of Parliament for Leicester South, I walk along roads in Leicester every day. I do not know whether the Minister has actually walked along any of those roads; he has never told me that he has. Let me therefore extend an invitation to him to come to Leicester, where he will see numerous community pharmacists in areas with a high proportion of black and ethnic minority communities providing specialist services for families who have relied on them for 20 or 30 years, often dealing with elderly people and speaking to them in Gujarati, Urdu and Punjabi. Many of those people will have to go to GPs' surgeries and A & E departments if the pharmacies are closed. The Government's assessment takes no account of the disproportionate effect that the cuts will have on black and ethnic minority communities in cities such as Leicester and Birmingham.

Dr Murrison *rose—*

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) *rose—*

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the hon. Member for Newark.

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. Gentleman at least acknowledge that we all support community pharmacies? The town I live in has 3,500 residents and there are four pharmacies within a quarter of a mile. Will he at least acknowledge that a model that gives a block grant of £25,000 to each of those pharmacies purely for establishing themselves regardless of demand obviously needs review?

Jonathan Ashworth: If the hon. Gentleman wants to tell his constituents he is in favour of closing pharmacies, good luck to him.

Of course it is not just pharmacy closures that we will see. The National Pharmacy Association has reported today that that 81% of community pharmacies will have to restrict services that help elderly people and 86% will have to restrict free services such as delivering medicine to housebound patients. Does that not confirm that the elderly and the most vulnerable will be hit the hardest by the cuts to community pharmacies, and the Government are entirely to blame?

Dr Murrison *rose—*

Jonathan Ashworth: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has been very patient.

Dr Murrison: Surely the hon. Gentleman accepts that we have to get the most efficiencies we possibly can from the system? His party colleague the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) made a serious point about engaging with pharmacies to see how we can do it better. Does he agree—I would be interested to know why this is not in his motion—that category M clawbacks, which are levied exclusively on small independent pharmacies, might be extended to vertically integrated wholesalers as a way of making sure the system is more efficient than at present?

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Gentleman talks of efficiencies; he will presumably have seen the research that says if people cannot get to a pharmacy one in four will go to a GP. We will see greater demand on GP surgeries and A&E departments. That is not efficient. It is a false economy, which is why the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee has said the proposals are

"founded on ignorance of the value of pharmacies to local communities, to the NHS, and to social care, and will do great damage to all three. We cannot accept them."

It is why the chief executive of Pharmacy Voice described the decision as

"incoherent, self-defeating and wholly unacceptable",

and it is why charities such as Age UK have said the plans are

"out of step with messages encouraging people to make more use of their community pharmacists, to relieve pressure on overstretched A&E departments and GP surgeries."

Age UK has hit the nail on the head: these cuts to community pharmacies completely contradict everything we have been told by Ministers over recent years and will lead to increased pressures and increased demands on GP surgeries and A&E departments.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has made some crucial points about how the funding has been allocated across our country. There are 129 community pharmacies across the whole of Liverpool, yet just two of them will be eligible for this payment. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is absolutely outrageous and will impact on the entire population of Liverpool?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right, and even after this scheme is in place pharmacists who are eligible for the mitigating funds are still saying that they will have to close despite them.

[Jonathan Ashworth]

We believe in the importance of community pharmacies, because

“pharmacies have a big role to play in this, as one in 11 or 12 A and E appointments could be dealt with at a pharmacy”—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2014; Vol. 576, c. 162.]—

and:

“Pharmacies have an important role to play, because they could save a significant number of A and E and GP visits.”—[*Official Report*, 23 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 1049.]

Those are not my words: they are the words of the Health Secretary, said from that Dispatch Box over the last two years.

If the message the Health Secretary has been giving at that Dispatch Box is that community pharmacies are a way of relieving pressure on A&Es and GP surgeries, why is he now coming to the House to support cutting community pharmacies? It is a complete false economy. I will give way if he wants to explain that. He does not, probably because he knows it is a completely false economy.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Arundhati Patel runs the Jamaica Road pharmacy in my constituency and an alcohol cessation service is one of the services it provides to the local community. He pointed out there were 1,400 hospital stays in Southwark due to alcohol harm. On the point about efficiencies and avoiding visits to hospital that Members have talked about, is this not another example of what my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) called a false economy?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right, and Government Ministers, including the Health Secretary even on Monday, justify these as part of a package of efficiencies. Indeed when I raised this a few months ago with the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire, he told me in correspondence that these cuts were necessary as part of delivering the £22 billion-worth of efficiency savings. So this is more proof that when they talk of efficiency savings, they are actually talking of cuts to frontline services.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) *rose*—

Jonathan Ashworth: I am sorry, but I need to make progress.

The NHS is going through the worst financial crisis in its 68-year history. Even the previous Health Secretary, who is now in the other place, said he did not expect another five years of such tight budgets for the NHS.

The black hole in hospital finances last year was £2.45 billion. Under Labour, we spent the European average on health as a proportion of GDP; we are now spending less than Greece. We are seeing a huge financial squeeze on the NHS and the cuts are part of that squeeze agenda.

We want the Government to think again on the cuts, because they will lead to more pressures on GP surgeries and A&E departments. There is a consensus not just among the Labour party, but among our constituents, the sector, clinicians and indeed Conservative Members

against the cuts. It is Ministers who stand outside that consensus. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) has said:

“It does not make sense that we are encouraging pharmacies to take on a bigger role in the NHS, while potentially reducing the number of them.”

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has said:

“I do not think this 4% cut is a wise move.”—[*Official Report*, 20 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 974.]

The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said

“when our A&Es are under so much pressure, we need community pharmacies.”—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 598.]

I agree and our message to Conservative Members who want to stand up for their constituents and who have been lobbied by pharmacists is, “Join us in the Division Lobbies and get Ministers to think again on these damaging cuts.” I commend the motion to the House.

1.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “NHS services” to the end of the Question and add:

“welcomes the Government’s proposals to further integrate community pharmacy into the NHS, including through the Pharmacy Integration Fund, and make better use of pharmacists’ clinical expertise, including investing £112 million to deliver a further 1,500 pharmacists in general practice by 2020; supports the need to reform the funding system to ensure better value for the taxpayer; and welcomes the establishment of a Pharmacy Access Scheme which will ensure all patients in all parts of the country continue to enjoy good access to a local community pharmacy.”.

I welcome the opportunity to set out again the Government’s approach to pharmacy in general and community pharmacy in particular over the next few years. I will also address some of the points that we just heard, which were, frankly, alarmist scare-mongering.

The proposals I announced two weeks ago are directed at four main areas: first, the need to better integrate pharmacy with GPs, primary care and the NHS more widely; secondly, the need for the existing community pharmacy network to move from a dispensing-based model to a value-added services-based model; thirdly, the need to continue to work with NHS England to ensure value for every penny we spend on the NHS; and fourthly, the need to ensure that, as we undertake these reforms, everybody in the country continues to have ready access to a community pharmacy.

First, on integration with the NHS, especially in general practice, over the weekend Simon Stevens, the NHS England chief executive, again reiterated the importance of that and why he supports this process. We know we need to expand the number of GPs, and by 2020 we will have a further 5,000 doctors working in this area, but as well as recruiting and retaining more doctors, we need to provide them with further support. The “General Practice Forward View”, published by NHS England, has set out fully costed plans to recruit a further 1,500 clinical pharmacists into GP practices by 2020. By then there will be one pharmacist working within a GP practice for every 30,000 of population. Most of these will be prescribing pharmacists, and all

will have a role in performing medicine reviews and leveraging GP time. This is a major investment and it is already happening.

Huw Merriman: The point I wanted to make when trying to intervene on the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) was that I recently went to a pharmacy in my town of Bexhill, and it is making deliveries to every single customer who asks for a delivery, not just the vulnerable and the elderly. It does so because if it did not Lloyds would put it out of business. Does the Minister agree that that shows that there are efficiencies to be made, and the fact that those efficiencies are recycled in the health service has got to be good for all our constituents?

David Mowat: It does show that. This is a competitive business. My hon. Friend mentions Lloyds; it is one of the two big players in this industry, in which two players own 30% of all pharmacies.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister talks about moving away from a dispensing model to a value-added model. I shall say something about healthy living if I get the opportunity to speak in the debate, but in relation to that shift, what is his view on warehouse pharmacies?

David Mowat: Our view on the structure of the industry is that it is up to individual companies within the sector to organise themselves and to provide their services as efficiently as possible. It is true that 70% of all pharmacies are either chains, multiples or public companies, and I will address that point later.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I want to make some progress.

Secondly, we want to see an enhanced role for the community pharmacy network in providing value-added services. This is an aspiration that we share with the network and its representatives. To that end, NHS England has commissioned Richard Murray of the King's Fund to produce an evidence-based report to determine which types of primary care services are best done by pharmacists over the next two or three years. The report, which will be published later this year, will inform NHS England's decisions on how to use the integration fund of £42 million that I announced two weeks ago. There are many candidate areas, including long-term conditions, minor ailments, better care home support and more medicine reviews, as well as the work that pharmacists do in public health.

Maria Eagle: Many of the pharmacies in my constituency already provide such services, but they are now threatened by the Government's proposals. Does the Minister not realise that, according to research carried out by Pharmacy Voice, in a constituency such as mine, which is No. 20 on the list of deprived areas, four in five people who cannot see a pharmacist will end up going to their GP? Does he not agree that that will achieve exactly the opposite of what he wants?

David Mowat: The impact review, which was published at the same time as my statement two weeks ago, estimated that the amount of extra time that people

would have to spend going to a pharmacy would be a matter of seconds, even if we had, say, 100 closures. The impact review sets that out in some detail. Did someone sitting behind me wish to intervene?

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) could detach himself from his device for a matter of seconds. It is very good of him to drop in on us and to take a continuing interest in our proceedings. They certainly interested him greatly a few seconds ago.

Oliver Colvile: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was just trying to find something that was going to inform my intervention. Is my hon. Friend the Minister aware that in Devon, about £5.5 million is wasted on unused medicines? We need to do something about that.

David Mowat: I do realise that, and I mentioned the fact that the King's Fund is looking into medicine reviews.

As I have said before in the Chamber, the model that is adopted for pharmacies in Scotland has a lot to commend it, even though we might not adopt it in its entirety. I hope that we will get a chance to discuss that later.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: Before I give way, I should like to quote the chief pharmacist himself. Dr Keith Ridge has confirmed that the review

"will support community pharmacy to develop new clinical pharmacy services, working practices and online support to meet the public's expectations for a modern NHS."

Two weeks ago, I announced two initiatives that will proceed in advance of the King's Fund report. From 1 December, phone calls made to NHS 111 for urgent repeat prescriptions will be directed not to an out-of-hours GP service as at present but to a community pharmacy. This will amount to some 200,000 calls a year, resulting in further revenue streams, for the consultations and for supplying the medicine. NHS England has also committed to encouraging national coverage of a locally commissioned NHS minor ailments service. Some areas, including West Yorkshire, already do this, and we will roll it out to the whole country by April 2018. Both those initiatives will relieve pressure on surgeries and emergency care centres. Both will result in additional incremental revenue for pharmacies, but they are very much only the start.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the Minister accept the view expressed in the impact assessment that independent pharmacies, which are often micro-businesses, and small chains of up to 20 pharmacies will be at a higher risk of closure than the larger chains?

David Mowat: In terms of these proposals, we have to be blind to the ownership of pharmacies. The fact is that the average pharmacy sells for something like £750,000. I do not accept that the proposals will cause closures in those segments, if that was the thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's question.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I want to continue.

The third area I wish to address is value for money, and I make no apology for doing this. According to recent OECD analysis, the UK now spends above the OECD average on healthcare, but however much money we spend, every penny needs to be spent as efficiently as possible. If that does not happen, waiting lists can become too long, treatments can be denied to patients and drugs might not be available. We also know that efficiency savings are required of every part of the NHS, and community pharmacy must play a role in contributing to the £22 billion of savings that we need to find. I do not apologise for that.

Dr Murrison: I certainly support the amendment on the Order Paper today, but does the Minister agree that, in relation to efficiencies, the issue of category M clawback is an important one? I tried to extract an answer to that question from the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) earlier. Also, I ask the Minister to think again about the ownership-blind point that he just made. There is not an equal playing field at the moment, and there is a real risk that small independent pharmacies will continue to be done in.

David Mowat: I do accept that point. We are working on the category M clawback, and I hope to be able to make some progress on that matter soon.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): If anybody can square this circle, it is the Minister, given his extensive experience in this area. I genuinely believe that we have to sort out this issue. I am not happy to subsidise large private companies through the system—some of the chains have already been mentioned—so it is right to look at where the clusters occur. The Minister is well aware of the Kennet pharmacy in my constituency, and we all have really value-added pharmacies that are doing very valuable work. How can we help him, over the review period, to identify and support the services that those pharmacies provide? They must not be allowed to close as a result of this policy.

David Mowat: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have set out the work that we are doing, and the fact that we are providing more money for services, over and above all the money involved in the cuts and efficiency savings that we have had to make, will help that process.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Further to that point, the Minister knows that our pharmacists are a highly skilled and professional resource that has long been underused in the NHS. He has mentioned the ongoing Murray review, and a sustainability and transformation plan process is also going on around the country. My concern is that the closures will come about in a random way, rather than through a planned process based on identifying skills in particular areas. Will he consider delaying them until we have all the reports in place and we can consider the matter on an area-by-area basis?

David Mowat: The access scheme is the device that will ensure that pharmacies are not closed in a random way. I want to address the point about closures head on. It is my belief that there will be a minimal number of closures. The impact analysis talks about 100 and it

models 100. The average pharmacy has a margin of 15%, and the amount of efficiency savings that we are asking pharmacies to make over two years is 7%. In addition, the average pharmacy is trading for £750,000 when it closes or merges, even after we announced these efficiency savings a year ago. That value is being retained.

Jonathan Ashworth: The previous Minister put a figure on this. Will the hon. Gentleman tell us what he means by a “minimal” number of closures? What is the number?

David Mowat: These are private businesses, each with a different business model and a different amount of income from the NHS, from other retail activities and from services. Each is financed in a different way. Indeed, 30% of them are owned by two public companies, and 70% of them are multiples.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): Can reassurance be given that local pharmacies are the frontline of primary care? Will the Minister extend the work and responsibility of those local pharmacies, particularly in deprived areas, and reassure us that that is the focus of this debate?

David Mowat: I spoke to 500 pharmacists this morning and gave them that precise reassurance. The changes that we are making to transform the sector into a service-based, not dispensing-based, economy will do just that. That is where pharmacies need to go and it is where they want to go. Frankly, it has taken too long.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I need to make some progress. I will give way in a moment.

At present, the average pharmacy receives NHS income of £220,000 a year, which is based on throughput of £1 million from the NHS. That translates into a value of the order of £750,000 for each pharmacy. When pharmacies merge or are sold, that is what they are traded for and the changes will not make a significant difference.

Returning to an earlier point, 40% of all pharmacies are located within a 10-minute walk of at least two others. Instances exist of a dozen or more pharmacies located within half a mile of each other. As I noted earlier, each one will most likely be receiving £25,000 a year just for being there.

Jonathan Ashworth: Has the Minister been to Leicester?

David Mowat: I was brought up on the outskirts of Leicester, so I am delighted to tell the hon. Gentleman that I have indeed been there. Giving all these clusters £25,000 of national health service money is not the best way to spend precious resources.

In addition, the extra services that pharmacies will choose to provide, such as winter flu jabs and public health services, are commissioned separately and will be unaffected by the reset. For example, 600,000 flu jabs have been given in community pharmacies this year—more than all of last winter.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I need to make progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think it is fair to say that the Minister is being what I would call—if it does not sound a contradiction in terms—courteously harangued to give way, but it is perfectly evident to me that he is not giving way at the moment. Members will therefore have to exercise their judgment as to the frequency with which they make further attempts.

David Mowat: I will continue to make some progress and then give way towards the end of my remarks.

I do not want to downplay the impact of the change on the private businesses that own and operate the network. The pharmacy sector is a mixed economy with 70% of the market made up of multiples and chains and 30% owned by independents. It is hard to accurately predict the impact of the changes on those individual business models. What I can say, however, is that the savings we are making will be entirely recycled back into the NHS. Every penny of the efficiency savings that we are asking of community pharmacies will be spent on better patient care, better drugs and better GP access.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I totally understand the importance of trying to get as much bang for your buck from pharmacy services, but does this not actually amount to a significant cut in spending on preventive services? That seems completely counter to the Government's aim.

David Mowat: When one takes into account the £112 million that we are spending on getting more pharmacists into GP practices, the right hon. Gentleman's point is incorrect.

Luciana Berger: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment.

Finally, I want to talk about the work that we are doing to ensure that everyone in the country has access to a community pharmacy. We have developed a scheme with two components. First, all pharmacies that are more than 1 mile from another pharmacy will be eligible for additional funding, which will almost entirely mitigate the impact of the changes. That component is specifically designed to protect areas where current provision is quite spread out. In total, it will apply to around 1,400 locations—roughly half urban and half rural. Pharmacies that are in the highest 25% by prescription volume, and therefore most profitable, will not be eligible for the scheme. Secondly, there is a near-miss scheme under which pharmacies that are located up to 0.8 miles from each other and in the 20% most deprived areas in the country can apply to be reviewed by NHS England as a special case. The final safeguard is that NHS England has a continuing duty to ensure the adequate provision of services. Its role is to commission a new pharmacy in any area where it believes access is inadequate. That duty will continue.

Luciana Berger: I thank the Minister for very kindly giving way. Will he correct the record on something? Pharmacies are not all private enterprises. Many co-operatives across our country provide community pharmacies, often in rural and isolated areas. For the

purposes of this debate, will he clarify his understanding of the distinction between a community pharmacy and a GP pharmacy? That has not been clear in his remarks so far.

David Mowat: The distinction is that a community pharmacy is part of a privately owned business that dispenses and is paid in that way. The ones that we are hiring into GP practices will leverage GP time and do medicine reviews, and I expect them to enable the pharmacy network in an area to work more cohesively. It is a welcome and, frankly, overdue step forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I need to continue.

Taken as a whole, I am confident that the three measures I have talked about for protecting access will ensure that everyone has access to a community pharmacy in much the same way as they do at present. The future for pharmacy is bright. The change we are implementing of a 7.4% efficiency requirement over two years is proportionate and will continue to orientate the profession towards services and—for the first time—quality and away from a remuneration model based on dispensing.

I will finish by again quoting the chief pharmacist, who said:

"The public can be reassured that while efficiencies are being asked of community pharmacy just as they are of other parts of the NHS, there is still sufficient funding to ensure there are accessible and convenient local NHS pharmacy services across England. The NHS is committed to a positive future for pharmacists and community pharmacy."

Every penny that we save as a result of the efficiency reviews will be spent within the NHS on better care, better drugs and on quicker treatment. I urge Members to support the amendment later today.

1.38 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Minister kindly referred to the system in Scotland, which has been running for 10 years since we passed the Smoking, Health and Social Care (Scotland) Act 2005. It took time to introduce the new system, but now all pharmacies in Scotland are community pharmacies, meaning that they all provide services. They do not get a big payment merely for existing—they receive a quite tiny £1,730—but they do get payments based on needs that reflect a population's age, vulnerability and deprivation, so those things are taken into account in their global funding. That funding is due to go up 1.2% in Scotland while there is talk of a reduction of 4% here.

The services provided have been referred to as the minor ailment scheme. Many pharmacies in England make provision under that scheme, but it is not a national system. In Scotland, the scheme is national and such services must be provided. One issue is that the pharmacies have to invest. They have to build a consulting room and change their building so that people can be seen privately when their minor ailment is diagnosed. They work to protocol for a whole list of ailments that they can diagnose and have the ability to treat. The ailments are minor things that many people would experience, and the approach avoids their having to go to a GP.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. People who go into a community pharmacy today will see a special treatment room where they can get phlebotomy, advice on blood pressure and all sorts of other things. Is it not perverse, cruel and utterly irrational to say to a group of professionals, who have done all this work to change the way they deliver their services, “Now we are finished with you. Out you go. You’ve done your bit. We are going to put you out and close down your pharmacy”?

Dr Whitford: I agree with the Government about looking for more services, but this is not the way to work with the profession, given that they want those in it to do more work and to work differently. Sadly, during my time in the House, we have repeatedly seen the Government not sitting down with a profession and saying, “Why not look for where savings can be made?”, but simply making a cut.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I was going to intervene on the Minister to follow up the point made by the Chair of the Health Committee. We are looking at bottom-up planning in England for the first time for a number of years with the sustainability and transformation plan process, so this is completely the wrong time to be making these irrational and random cuts.

Dr Whitford: We recently debated STPs and the potential they provide. The danger is that at the moment we are seeing finance-centred care, instead of patient-centred care. Going back to place-based planning, which is what we have kept in Scotland, where we still have health boards, means that we can look at integrating services, and pharmacies definitely need to be part of that. They have the potential to be a significant front-line player.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am interested in the experience in Scotland, although we do not have the same system in England. What does the hon. Lady think about moving pharmacists into GP surgeries? I think that it is a mistake. I would much prefer the approach that is being taken in Scotland, where pharmacies are expanding by having consulting rooms of their own.

Dr Whitford: Scotland actually has both. We do have pharmacists who are in a consulting room within a practice, and our Government have put £85 million into taking on an additional 140 pharmacists who work in primary care with GPs. We are not, as has been done in the past, saying, “Everyone on drug A must change to drug B because it is cheaper,” without giving any thought to how that affects the patient. We are consulting patients, who are often on 10 or 15 medications, all of which interact and have different side effects, and then rationalising that and giving the patient advice. We are therefore providing a clinical service rather than just a changeover service.

Our community pharmacy system has been running for 10 years, so it is quite mature. Patients register with a pharmacist in the same way as they register with a GP. The aim is for all people to be registered with whomever they consider their local pharmacist to be, as that means that they can access minor ailment treatment. It also means that people who are on chronic medication

have a chronic medication service, with their prescription sent electronically to the pharmacy, which then keeps track of when it is due and therefore ensures that patients do not run out of medication. The pharmacies also provide an acute medication service for people who have not signed up to the other service but suddenly find they have no tablets, as they had not thought to re-order them with their GP. If they are regulars at the pharmacy, a single round of drugs can be prescribed for them so that they do not have a gap in their treatment. The important thing is that our vision is to have all our pharmacists as prescribers by 2023, and to have our public registered with pharmacists by 2020.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes two important points: this move is cuts-led, rather than well planned; and just as communities rely on their doctor, they rely on the facilities at their pharmacy. That is particularly true of elderly people and those with disabilities, who may have to travel miles, depending on where the pharmacy is.

Dr Whitford: It is crucial that the service covers all areas, including those that are deprived and those that do not have good public transport. Distance is not everything; this is also about how people travel that distance. In many places, the distance involved might not be that great, but there simply may not be a bus going in the required direction.

Catherine McKinnell: I wanted to make this point to the Minister: the closure of community pharmacies will clearly lead to a poorer service, a loss of patient choice and poorer health outcomes for those in more deprived parts of the country. Is this not just another example of Government short-term cuts that will cost us more in the long term?

Dr Whitford: If this is introduced badly, the cost will be greater in the long term. When the Minister talks about a more service-based approach, I think that he aspires to something more like the Scottish model, which I would commend. I just feel that this is being done “backside forward”.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Dr Whitford: I need to make a bit of progress.

We need to design the services with the people who work in them. Some 18% of Scotland’s population—nearly 1 million people—are registered with and do access the minor ailment service, which takes pressure off accident and emergency, because there is availability out of hours, and GPs. The fourth service that we have is the public health service, with 70% of all smoking cessation work in primary care being carried out in our community pharmacies. These four services together—minor ailments, chronic medication, acute medication and public health—represent a huge breadth of service for a community. It is important that pharmacies in England that are currently just retail and dispensing pharmacies are encouraged to go in that direction, because it brings benefit for the NHS.

My biggest concern is the random nature of how this process might develop. If the Government simply cut and let the dice fall where they will, the problem is that

they will not end up with an integrated service. Scotland still has health boards, so if a community pharmacy is to open there, an application needs to be made to the health board. When the project started, the boards decided which places got to become community pharmacies, and they decide whether there is a need to open a new community pharmacy. The biggest mistake in this scheme is its randomness.

One issue raised by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) was the profits made when drugs are sold on. The Government could look at the vertically integrated wholesalers—the big chains. In the mid-2000s, they were not considered. The Government do not know how much profit they make or where that profit is made, and the system is totally unregulated. These chains control about 40% of the pharmacy market. One of the biggest chains, Walgreens Boots Alliance, has declared profits of almost £1 billion, yet it has somehow been able to reduce its tax bill by more than £1 billion in this country. We are talking about people who are make almost half their profit from taxpayers yet do not pay their full share of tax. I absolutely agree that under this proposal the big chains will survive and the small, independent, very community-based pharmacies will be lost.

Neil Coyle: The Minister accused those who highlight concerns of “scaremongering”. Atul, who runs St George’s pharmacy at the Elephant and Castle in my constituency, says:

“We may survive the first set of”—

in-year—

“cuts by compromising on our services. But the second set of cuts next April will most definitely place us at a real risk of closure.”

Does the hon. Lady agree with Atul that it is right for us to highlight our concerns, especially in constituencies such as mine, where we face losing 18 community pharmacies?

Dr Whitford: Losing that many pharmacies in any area would be a disaster. This is a bit like groundhog day, because this is our third discussion on this topic in as many weeks. The Minister said that there absolutely would be protection, but the pharmacy access scheme still largely comes down to the amount of dispensing that is done and the distances. It does not take account of which pharmacies are providing a good service, which ones are set up to provide a good service and how to encourage others to develop. This is what is completely wrong in the Government’s approach. They are just slicing money off and leaving individual businesses to decide whether they think they will be profitable. The danger would be that we get a whole lot of pharmacies deciding to sell out and walk, instead of someone saying for a particular area, “Eighteen is too many”—especially if they are all around one town square—“so which ones are best able to develop a service? Let them bid for it and let them be inspected, and let’s see how they take it forward.”

The Government could make a lot of savings by addressing the wholesalers. In Scotland, we have margin sharing, which means that a price control group looks at the profit that is made at various stages, and some of it has to be shared back. We do have people who are trading on the open market and moving drugs around, especially in the big chains. As we heard earlier, we

would get a better result by sitting down with the profession and designing a service. STPs could provide the model within which to look at how many community pharmacies there should be and where they should be, and then it would be a case of working backwards.

The danger of the Government’s approach is that it is the wrong way round. Just calling something an “efficiency cut” does not make it efficient, and the danger is that we just slash something and it falls over. The pharmacy access scheme is not enough of a protection or of an intervention. There needs to be planning. I commend the idea of a proper services-based pharmacy system, but the aspiration should be not just that a few pharmacies choose to do it and others do not. It should be that a patient who walks into a community pharmacy will know what services they can get, and we should aim to have that right across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, let me say that there will be a limit of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches. There are 25 people who are trying to take part in this debate, so it may be necessary to drop down that time a bit further later on, but let us start with five minutes.

1.51 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a shame that the Front-Bench speakers took so long because many colleagues want to contribute to the debate.

I agree with the Minister’s thrust of ensuring that we get the greatest efficiency for the taxpayer and the best possible health service for our constituents. We cannot afford to waste money in any way, shape or form, but if we can find ways to redirect money into NHS front-line services, I agree that we should do so. As the Minister said, the NHS chief pharmacist has been very clear throughout the consultation that the current way in which community pharmacy is paid and organised needs to be reformed, so it is right that we should look at it.

The NHS is labouring under huge financial pressures, so we should look at any areas in which inefficiencies or duplications lead to precious resources being distributed inefficiently. The public want the money that could be saved through this measure to be reinvested in front-line NHS services. I am glad that the Minister has taken the opportunity to reassure us about that.

My own West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust struggles under a massive deficit that has been growing year on year. Its latest financial report revealed that it had a revenue deficit of £41.2 million by 2015-16. We cannot fail to tackle the huge financial pressures on the NHS, but just throwing money at the problem will never be enough if we do not seek to tackle the system at the same time. Surely the Opposition cannot be asserting that these matters should never be looked into. Their manifesto pledged £6 billion less than this Government have committed, so I am really intrigued to know how on earth they would keep this system in its entirety and, at the same time, put more money into NHS services, which is what I would like to happen.

I, like many, want the biggest bang for the taxpayer’s buck. I want the Health Minister to succeed in his aim of delivering the very best pharmacy service, with facilities that help to keep patients out of A&E and doctors’

[Mrs Anne Main]

surgeries and, at the same time, promote good health within communities. I agree that it is important to integrate community pharmacies into the NHS urgent care system and GP services.

I welcomed the Government's announcement in October that the pharmacy integration fund will provide up to £42 million

"to improve on how pharmacists, their teams and community pharmacy operates within the NHS as a whole."

If we are looking at an establishment payment of £25,000 to pharmacies, we must ensure that we get the right result. When it comes to the closure of small pharmacies, we must protect residents who live in more rural or sparsely populated areas, as well as those who do not have access to cars. The Minister has said that the existing funding system does not do enough to promote efficiency and quality, or to promote integration with the rest of the NHS. He has also said that in most cases the NHS is giving each of these pharmacies a guaranteed fixed payment of £25,000 per year regardless of their size, quality or local demand, and that in total the average pharmacy receives nearly £1 million for the NHS goods and services that it provides, of which around £220,000 is direct income.

Our pharmacy provision varies greatly across the country. The Quadrant pharmacy in St Albans, which I am due to visit on Friday, is situated in a small parade of shops and provides a valued local service. Other pharmacies are located as concessions in huge supermarkets such as Sainsbury's in London Colney, which have the added attraction of longer opening hours, a large car park, being surrounded by other out-of-town superstores, and a huge footfall of shoppers who can get their prescriptions along with the dog food and Sunday roast. As many concessions are operated by the bigger chains, such as LloydsPharmacy, we must ensure that they do not extinguish the light of the smaller pharmacy that also operates in London Colney, just around the corner from the doctor's surgery. It is important that we get this right.

I accept that there is an inefficient allocation of NHS funds when Government figures show that 40% of pharmacies are now in clusters of three or more. That means that two fifths are within 10 minutes' walk of two or more other pharmacies, and I know that that is the case in certain areas of my own constituency. In the St Albans high street shopping area, there are five dispensing pharmacies within a half-mile area. Some are just over the road from each other, some have only yards between them, and some are also operating fairly near to that tightly packed city zone. That cannot be a good idea. St Albans is certainly very well served by pharmacies—not surprisingly St Albans is also the home of the National Pharmacy Association.

It is important that we look at the proposal on offer, but we must get this right. I hope that quality can be provided, that nobody is left behind when pharmacy services are streamlined, and that everyone has access to good services.

1.56 pm

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I should say that I am chair of the all-party pharmacy group. I am sure that many of my colleagues will today talk about the

savings and services that community pharmacies provide to the national health service. Although that is an important point, it is also essential that we highlight the good that they provide to patients. They do so much more than just deliver prescriptions to people. Let me just highlight the scale of their operations. Some 11,800 community pharmacies dispensed more than 1 billion prescription items in 2015.

Community pharmacists are well prepared to adapt to many different problems with which they are presented. They help people to give up smoking, alter their diets, become healthier and manage their cholesterol. Effectively, they are on the frontline as far as the health of the public is concerned.

Anna Turley: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Pharmacies are right at the heart of their communities. As has already been mentioned today, access to those services is vital. In some areas—such as our two constituencies—bus services are being cut and people are finding it increasingly difficult to access services. It is nonsense for the Minister to say that it is a matter of seconds between pharmacies. Will my right hon. Friend comment on how important access to pharmacies is to our communities?

Kevin Barron: It is very important, and the mechanism that has been put in place will not solve everything. We may get Boots in Gatwick airport supporting it, but there is the potential that others may drop off the line because they are just outside the geographical area. We need to look at that.

Let me turn to population health. This cannot be done by central distribution centres or a pharmacy based miles away, as they have no link with the locality. I am pleased that the idea of major companies getting involved in prescribing has been dropped. Pharmacists know their customers well and are familiar with their medications and, consequently, the customers feel confident in asking them for their advice.

The Government's figures show that the £170 million cut could force up to 3,000 community pharmacies—one in four across the country—to close their doors to the public, so people would have to travel a lot further to their pharmacist and not have the local connection that I mentioned previously. Community pharmacy is the gateway to health for some 1.6 million patients each day. If anything, that is something we need to get a grip on.

A core component of current pharmacy services supports the public to stay well, live healthier lives and self-care. Pharmacists play a central role in the management of long-term conditions. They carry out medicines use reviews, for example. We must remember that more than 70% of expenditure on our national health service at both primary and acute level is spent on people with long-term conditions. There could not be a better gateway for those people to get the assistance they need to manage those conditions than through local pharmacies.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right. Community pharmacies are at the heart of the gateway. Does he agree that there is a danger that the proposed cuts might end up costing more money than they save?

Kevin Barron: That is a danger. We do not know what is going to happen.

Community pharmacies attract patients who will not access health care anywhere else. People greatly value the fact that they do not need an appointment at a pharmacy. The long opening hours, too, are appealing. People from deprived populations who may not access conventional NHS services do access community pharmacies, which helps to improve the health of the local population and to reduce health inequalities.

I know that there is some weighting of the figures in relation to the assessment scheme. We need to see how that will work. I hope that we will take it into account that where there are higher levels of deprivation, large numbers of pharmacies might not be inconsistent with need.

I was contacted by a pharmacist in my constituency to highlight two examples from the past week that showed the vital role of a local community pharmacy. In the first example, a 34-year-old lady with epilepsy had run out of her essential medication, owing to a visit lasting longer than she had anticipated. She went along to the local walk-in centre but was denied a supply because of the lack of prescription evidence. As we all know, records are not as joined-up as they should be. The lady then visited her local pharmacy, which, thanks to local record access, was able to determine that her request was genuine and gave her a short-term supply. A lengthy and stressful visit to A&E was therefore avoided and the risk of potentially harmful seizures was averted as well.

In the second example, the pharmacist described spending 45 minutes with the parents of a one-year-old late on Wednesday evening, helping to administer soluble prednisolone for severe croup. The fact that the pharmacist was able to spend that time with the family got the job done, and again an A&E visit was avoided.

The difficulty in collecting such examples is that so many pharmacists see this simply as what they do, rather than as great examples of care for patients. They do not moan about it, worry about whether they get paid to do it or pass the buck; they just deal with the situation and improve patient care for the individual in front of them.

As well as providing extra services, community pharmacies are taking on more of the clinical roles that have traditionally been undertaken by doctors, such as the management of asthma and diabetes and blood pressure testing. That should be welcomed, as it reduces the pressure on GPs. It is usually so much easier for people to visit their local pharmacy for these services than to wait at their GP's surgery. Because of the greater amount of time that they can spend with each patient, community pharmacists can respond to patients' symptoms and advise on medicines that have been prescribed or are for sale in pharmacies.

The public support for local pharmacies and the services that they provide is huge. I was one of a number of Members from both sides of the House who presented a petition to No.10 a few weeks ago that now has some 2.2 million signatures. It is the biggest health petition that we have ever had here in the UK.

I shall finish with a quote from a pharmacist in Rotherham, who said, "I do what I do to make a positive difference to patients' health and wellbeing every single day. How many things would I be able to

pick up post-cuts? Probably not as many, as we will have to cut back on staff and I won't have as much patient-facing time." The all-party group will be looking at the proposals. I do not say that we should move away from a dispensing model, but we need reassurance that any move will not affect our community pharmacies and patients' needs.

2.4 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), who runs the all-party parliamentary group extremely well. I agree with much of what he says about the value of community pharmacy.

I start my brief remarks by thanking the people I was involved with in pharmacy for their immense courtesy at all times, even though we were talking about some very difficult things. Those people included my local pharmacists, Arif and Raj in Wootton; Graham Phillips of Harpenden, who spent a large amount of time showing me his shops and is still very engaged with me; those on Bedford local pharmaceutical committee, who invited me at a most difficult time to launch their healthy living pharmacies in the area; and of course my team in the Department of Health.

Instead of repeating the Minister's statement and his commitment to pharmacy, I shall say a little about why we are where we are and what I found when I was dealing with pharmacy, and look ahead to the future. This is the sort of debate where the previous Minister finds that, owing to pressing parliamentary business, he is not able to attend and he is somewhere else because all this is now nothing to do with him, *guv*. I thought that would be most unfair and I wanted to be here to support my hon. Friend and to give a little background.

The process started with the settlement made in 2015 between the Department of Health and the Treasury. In that settlement, extra money was released for the NHS, particularly in my portfolio—adult social care, mental health and primary care—but as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) in speaking for the Opposition, efficiency cuts were required throughout the NHS, as advocated by Simon Stevens. Part of that involved £170 million off the £2.8 billion for pharmacy. I thought that this was appropriate and that, once it was announced, we could work through it.

I regret the 3,000 figure that I gave to the right hon. Member for Rother Valley at a meeting with the APPG. It was a worst-case estimate, taking no account of what changes pharmacies might make to accommodate any reductions in finance, and therefore it was absolutely top-end. The reason that I gave it in conversation with colleagues—it was open and public and I have no objection to the figure being used—was to indicate that I was aware of the difficulty and that we wanted to work very hard to mitigate it, which we then started to do. But the 3,000 figure took on a life of its own. With hindsight, it might have been wiser if I had stuck to exactly what the Minister says, which is that we do not know because the Government do not have a plan to close pharmacies. They are not in a position to do that and we do not know what will happen.

I do not believe for an instant that the outcome will be as dramatic as Opposition Members have suggested, because businesses do adapt. One of the things that I found when I arrived, as several Members have said, is

[Alistair Burt]

that 18% growth had taken place in 10 years. Pharmacies are a business and pharmacists will make adaptations to their business to cope, so we will have to wait and see what happens. I would not use the 3,000 figure again.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): As Health Minister, the right hon. Gentleman said that 3,000 of the 12,000 pharmacies could close. That has come from pharmacies, not from politicians, so does he not accept that that is the real situation, as he said himself?

Alistair Burt: No. I said it, so I know why I said it. I said it because it was an estimate, and it took no account of any business change that people might make. It was a top-end estimate and I said it to indicate that I was aware that there might be closures and that we accordingly wanted to mitigate the effects. With hindsight, I would not have given that figure, because everyone has said that the Minister said that so many pharmacies would close. No, I did not. That figure does not represent the pharmacies that will close. They might have done if we had not had mitigating measures and if businesses had not made changes themselves. I wanted to put that on the record.

Let me say what I found when I took on the role. There was a discussion in pharmacy about its future. There were plenty of voices in pharmacy which said that the funding model that values volume and establishment but not necessarily quality of service was not the right way for pharmacy to go. The pharmacy profession wanted to see some changes. I thought that was relevant. There were differing voices in pharmacy. The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee represents some, but there are other voices.

The integration fund we suggested as a way to look at how pharmacy was changing to come into GPs' surgeries was warmly welcomed. There were innovations all over the country in pharmacy in general. There was a growing move towards healthy living pharmacies providing more services. All this was going on at the same time as we were talking about what changes we needed to make to provide the extra funds for the NHS.

So where are we going to go in the future? I think that we will get through this process. I remember saying to stakeholders in December 2015, "The future of pharmacy will not be decided by this letter. The future of pharmacy in 2020, 2025 and 2030 is still to be decided. It won't all rest on this; it will rest on changes and progress to be made."

First, the PSNC consultation process needs to be changed; I am not sure whether it works well when other voices are excluded, and that should be looked at. Secondly, the differing voices in pharmacy should find a way to get together and present a view beyond what is happening on the high street to show where pharmacy is going.

Thirdly, the integration of the NHS could be done better. Why are there not pharmacists on every single clinical commissioning group? There should be more commissioning of services; the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) was absolutely right that we need to do more, but the NHS needs to do more, with better commissioning and pharmacists being involved.

Fourthly, there needs to be a thorough review of what pharmacy can do and provide in the future, and that should be a springboard. Sometimes innovation comes out of pressure, not out of great resources, which we would love to see in a perfect world. Finally, we should ensure there is long-term support for a locally based network—there are models that would remove more from the locally based network that we should all resist—and such an approach would be the start of a good future for pharmacy.

2.11 pm

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who tried to be extremely helpful to the current Minister—most ex-Ministers have ex-Ministeritis and tend to be extremely unhelpful to current Ministers, but not so the right hon. Gentleman. However, he did use that figure of 3,000 pharmacies—one in four—facing closure. He has attempted to qualify it now, and his defence seems to be that he made the estimate without properly thinking it through. To that extent, there is remarkable continuity with his successor, who makes a number of assertions without remotely thinking them through. However, if we are now told that we have to disregard what the previous Minister said, why on earth we should believe what the incumbent says? Who is to say that, in a year's time, after some reshuffle, the Minister's successor will not come to the House and tell us at the Dispatch Box, "You don't want to pay any attention to what the fellow before me said. He never knew what he was talking about."?

The Government's impact assessment is worth closer examination, because it states:

"the potential impacts...are assessed on the basis that there is a scenario where no pharmacy closes"—

not one. That scenario is not shared by anyone else. Even the Minister, when asked how many would close, told the House, "I do not know." The impact assessment goes on to concede:

"There is no reliable way of estimating the number of pharmacies that may close as a result of this policy."

The Department literally has no idea. According to the impact assessment, the Department is officially clueless as to the impact on pharmacies.

Anna Turley: Does my hon. Friend agree that an impact assessment of the knock-on effects for the NHS more broadly would have been useful? One in four patients will probably seek with a GP an appointment they would have sought with a pharmacist. We have heard nothing from the Government about what the knock-on effect would be or what investigation they have done into that.

Michael Dugher: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It would have been helpful to have had an impact assessment as the basis for debate, rather than having something that was published on the day of the announcement.

My hon. Friend alludes to the fact that the impact assessment on community pharmacy says that cuts to community pharmacies will increase patient health benefits

"by reallocating savings from community pharmacy funding to other uses"—

a point the Minister made—

“ensuring that patient health is unaffected”.

Yet, polling commissioned by Pharmacy Voice shows that one in four patients would make an appointment at a GP if their local chemist was closed—a figure rising to four in five in more deprived communities such as my own in Barnsley.

There is no consideration whatever in the Government’s assessment of the potential downstream costs to other parts of the NHS budget, such as the pressure on GPs and A&E. The Department’s impact assessment does say that these cuts are

“expected to lead to reductions in the employment of pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and other pharmacy staff”,

so the Government are clear at least that local pharmacists—the people many of our constituents rely on—will go because of these cuts.

The impact assessment predicts that there will be a “corresponding increase” in other NHS employee numbers, so there will be “no net effect” on the NHS. That is completely without foundation. Are the Government really trying to tell us today that, for all their talk about the importance of community pharmacies and all the evidence about the pressures that will result on GPs and A&Es, which are already overstretched, the work of pharmacists in our local communities will, and should be, taken up by a corresponding increase in other NHS staff?

The impact assessment says:

“the modelling does not take any account of potential reduction in opening hours which may also affect access.”

You bet! New research published today and carried out by the National Pharmacy Association shows that, when faced with the Government’s budgetary cuts, 86% of community pharmacies are likely to limit or remove the home delivery of medicines to housebound patients; 77% of chemists say they will probably become more retail focused to deal with funding shortages—exactly the opposite of what the Minister hopes to achieve; and 54%—more than half—are likely to reduce their opening hours, which will limit patient access and put more strain on our already overstretched GP surgeries and A&E departments.

To sum up, the Government’s own impact assessment, which is well worth a read, if only for comedy value, reads as though it was written in haste on the back of a cigarette packet. The Government—rather like the Minister—are making up the policy as they go along. What Ministers are actually asking us to do today is to make a leap of faith: to turn a blind eye to all the evidence; to disregard all the warnings; to ignore the unanswered questions, the contradictory statements and the glaring omissions in the Government’s own case; to brush away expert opinion; and to dismiss the concerns of the public. Based on the Department’s own impact assessment, how can any right hon. or hon. Member possibly support the Government in the Lobby today?

2.16 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): As we have already heard in the debate, many of us have seen the considerable value that local community pharmacies provide in our constituencies. I have seen that myself with the Manor pharmacy in Elstree, which is run by Graham Philips, to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) paid tribute. I would urge

the Minister to meet him; he really is a pool of expertise on this issue. The same is true of those at the Crown pharmacy at Borehamwood and Shenley.

What we see time and time again in these places is that the commitment to the customers goes way beyond what we would see from a normal retailer. There is a genuine understanding of the needs, health and wellbeing of the people who use such pharmacies. The services range from dementia-friendly services, picking up the early stages of the disease; healthy living advice, including assistance with drugs and weight management; and smoking cessation services.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Would my hon. Friend add to his list Nick Kaye in my constituency? He is carrying out some excellent work to collaborate with local GPs and to find innovative ways to deal with patients. Does my hon. Friend agree that pharmacies are particularly important in tourist areas, as the frontline that can deal with tourists who have health problems, and take pressure off the other health services?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that pharmacies play a crucial role in relieving the frontline of NHS services. However, that does not mean that reforms are not necessary. Of course we need to incentivise the kind of advantageous behaviour we have talked about; but we also need to recognise some of the problems with the provision of pharmaceutical services.

We know the basic problem; it has been referred to by other Members. The pharmacy budget has increased by 40% over the last decade. Even taking into account all the changes that the Government are proposing, funding for community pharmacies will still be 30% higher than when this Government first came to office in 2010. Equally, we have the problem of excessive clustering—a situation where there are many pharmacies within a short distance of one another.

Those who argue that there is no need for reform really need to explain where the money will come from. If we are not recycling these services to the frontline, we need to look for other savings, or we need to look at lower levels of service in the frontline of the NHS, whether that is services for diabetes or for cancer. There is no magic money tree. We have to take these difficult decisions in order to provide for the frontline, so I completely agree with the overall thrust of Government policy.

We can take an intelligent approach towards this issue. As we have heard, there is a big difference between various types of pharmacies. At one end of the scale, there are the very large pharmacies that are often in large retail outlets such as supermarkets and sit at the very back of the store. They are there, in essence, to encourage customers to go through the rest of the store to purchase other goods. They could easily take a larger cut than is being proposed, because they are just operating as loss leaders for those stores to get customers in the door in the first place.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. I was slightly disappointed that the shadow Minister did not really understand the principle of vertically integrated pharmacies. Some big national companies are making a lot of money out of pharmacy at the moment.

Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Equally, many such pharmacies do not provide any of the wider community health benefits. In essence, they are just dispensing services.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Is it not estimated, however, that those will be the ones that survive, purely because they are big, while the small, high-service pharmacies in communities are more vulnerable?

Oliver Dowden: That is precisely the point that I am coming to. As we proceed with these reforms, hon. Members need to recognise that we will need further savings in this area. I am not attacking large retailers because of their size; it is because of the lack of such wider provisions. We need to look at ways of securing further savings from them which we can plough back into the community pharmacies that are providing the services on which all our constituents rely. I completely accept that pharmacies that are purely dispensing services are very inefficient as such. They are highly labour-intensive; it is just a very expensive way of delivering drugs. We need to identify ways in which we can bifurcate the two different types of providers.

I pay tribute to what the Minister has announced so far. He clearly demonstrates an understanding of the situation, as we have seen in relation to the protection of key local pharmacies through the community access scheme. For example, in my constituency, the services in places such as Elstree and Shenley, where we have small, rural communities, often with an elderly population, will be protected. Equally, the quality payment scheme recognises some of these wider community benefits.

However, I urge the Minister to do more in that area. Let me make two brief suggestions. First, we need more detailed recording of the sorts of services that are provided by pharmacies which take pressure off the NHS. As I understand it, there is no systematic way in which these additional benefits are recorded, and we are all working on the basis of estimates. We could have a system whereby the community pharmacies systematically recorded the benefit that they provided, and then they could be better rewarded for those benefits. At the same time, there would be a means by which we could penalise, or find further cuts from, the pharmacies that did not provide those additional services.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) rightly commented on the common ailments scheme that operates in Scotland. The Minister indicated that the Government are moving down that route. I urge the Government to go further on this. There is absolutely no reason why patients suffering from things such as common cold and flu symptoms or head lice could not be referred directly from their GPs to pharmacies, thereby saving money for GPs and providing additional income for those pharmacies.

I support the overall direction of reform, but as the Government proceed with these reforms, they could do with engaging more in looking at ways of supporting what is best in community pharmacies while providing further savings from the services that do not provide them.

2.24 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak in support of the Opposition motion. I put on record my thanks for the extremely hard work

that has been done on this campaign by a number of my hon. Friends, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher).

Community pharmacies play a really crucial role in my constituency and, indeed, right across the country. We know from the many statistics, and the surveys and inquiries that have been done, that they are trusted. When I speak and listen to my constituents, it is clear that they trust the community pharmacies that they engage with, and also develop very close relationships with the people who work in them. I see that for myself when I go to collect my prescriptions locally. They are enormously busy places. I note that the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) said that they just deliver drugs, but they do so much more than that within our communities.

Oliver Dowden: That was not my point; I was saying that many large-scale dispensaries, particularly in supermarkets, do little more than deliver drugs, but we need to focus on the community pharmacies that provide the wider services.

Luciana Berger: The hon. Gentleman has just spoken in support of the Opposition motion.

When we had an urgent question on this subject, I listened closely to the Minister, who talked particularly about how far he expected people to travel and said that lots of community pharmacies were not very busy. Over recent weeks, I have made a point of looking through the windows of my local community pharmacies to see whether any of them are in fact empty, and it is fair to say that none of them are at any point. The statistics show how busy our local community pharmacies actually are. The figures speak for themselves. The average community pharmacy sees, on average, 137 people every single day. They dispense 87,000 prescription items over the course of a year. They support, on average, 250 people with diabetes, 389 people with asthma, 463 unpaid carers, 805 older people, 1,317 with a mental health condition, and 1,416 people discharged from hospital. The last figure is particularly important. I will not presuppose what the Health Committee report that comes out tomorrow might say about pressures on our winter A&E services, but it is fair to say that many people are expecting, following a summer crisis in the A&Es in our hospitals, that our local hospital services will be under enormous amounts of pressure. Our community pharmacies already do a really important job in supporting our constituents who have been discharged from hospital.

I have had the opportunity to listen to members of my local pharmaceutical committee. When I asked them what the local stats and figures were so that I was equipped for this debate, I was very struck by what they said. Hon. Members have already mentioned to the Minister—it is regrettable that he is no longer in his place—the pharmacy assessment scheme and how it has been put together. It is enormously regrettable, to put it politely, that it does not take account of deprivation. That means that the pharmacies in the most deprived areas of our country, where patients have greater health needs, are not entitled to claim the payment. I made this point earlier, and I make it again: in Liverpool, we have some of the highest levels of deprivation; Kensington ward is in the top 20 in the country. No pharmacies in my constituency are eligible for the pharmacy assessment

scheme payment, and just two across the whole of Liverpool are eligible—one in Croxteth and one in Netherley. That means that all the other 129 community pharmacies across Liverpool, and six distance-selling pharmacies, face the full funding cut. That puts at risk the very vital service that they offer to my constituents and people across Liverpool.

The funding cut in this financial year has already had an impact on our local pharmacies. Some have already curtailed their free, but unfunded, delivery service to patients. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East highlighted the hours in which those services are often provided. They are a lifeline for house-bound and vulnerable patients across our country.

Other pharmacies are already in the process of making staff redundant, so they will have to survive on fewer staff. Pharmacists in some of our community pharmacies will, therefore, inevitably be tied more to the dispensing bench rather than undertaking the enhanced clinical role that NHS England, the Department of Health and Ministers expect them to deliver under the five year forward view.

The point about deprivation is so important. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said in his important opening remarks, it is outrageous that the pharmacy assessment scheme will further widen health inequalities in our country. We will have a specific debate about that issue next Tuesday, so I ask the Minister to reflect on it. In 2016, we have a responsibility to close the gap, not promote schemes that will widen it. I note in particular that the scheme makes no provision for patients and communities with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will make a very brief point in the 13 seconds that I have left. Some Members, including the Minister, keep calling community pharmacies “private enterprises,” but there are many co-operatives that provide these services, often in rural and isolated areas across the country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am afraid that the limit has to be dropped to four minutes.

2.31 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Like many Members, I have been fortunate over the years to see the brilliant services provided by local pharmacies in my constituency, including in the communities of Haxby and Wigginton, Fulford and Poppleton, to name but a few. I have also witnessed the very important role that pharmacies play in delivering care in the community. We must ensure that they are properly incorporated into the delivery of primary care.

I have the utmost respect for the new Minister and I wish him well in his new role, but I fear that he has been given a hospital pass. Having said that, I understand why he wants to make reforms. I agree that we need to improve the service offered to patients, allocate resources more efficiently and ensure better integration with the wider NHS. I welcome the recently announced pharmacy integration fund, which aims to link pharmacies to primary care.

If we are truly seeking to integrate services better, however, and to reduce reliance on funding to pharmacies for simply existing and to promote high-quality care, we must further expand the role of pharmacies and the treatments that they can administer. That would help shrug off the lingering perception that pharmacies are simply drug dispensers. For example, could things such as the winter flu jab be overseen exclusively by pharmacies?

I also support the growing calls for a truly national minor ailments scheme that directs patients to pharmacies and away from GP practices where appropriate. I welcome the Minister's announcement that NHS England hopes to have such a scheme in place by April 2018. I hope that it will be a transformative moment for community pharmacies and primary care more widely, and I look forward to scrutinising it.

I am also pleased that, through the introduction of a pharmacy access scheme, the Minister is seeking to address some of the concerns about rural communities losing their pharmacies. He has said that 40% of pharmacies are in clusters of three or more, and I agree that we should introduce a better funding system to disincentivise that practice.

That brings me to the one-mile rule. Although I understand completely the principle behind it, I remain concerned about whether it will truly ensure that “a baseline level of patient access to NHS community pharmacy services is protected.”

In the short time that I have left, I will cite an example in my constituency. Fulford pharmacy, which is a small, independent business and is not part of a large chain, sits only 80 metres away from the one-mile rule and is, therefore, ineligible for the pharmacy access scheme. It is not in one of the 20% most deprived areas, either. As a result, I fear that the 3,000 residents of Fulford could lose access to that fantastic service, given that the next nearest pharmacy is some distance away in Fishergate. May I encourage the Minister to consider introducing flexibility or a case-by-case assessment to ensure that pharmacies that serve specific communities do not fall by the wayside?

I will reinforce that point in the last few seconds that I have left. I am told that two branches of Boots pharmacy in terminals 3 and 5 of Heathrow airport will receive pharmacy access scheme payments, as they are more than a mile apart, despite clearly not serving any specific community.

2.35 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): This debate could not come at a more important time for my constituents, because a potential 25% of the 42 community pharmacies in my constituency face closure due to the funding deal that this short-sighted Government imposed last week.

Pharmacies in Bradford West play a vital role in the total holistic healthcare services on offer to my constituents. My constituency is the fourth most deprived in the country, and we have one of the most diverse communities. Constituents face genuine day-to-day struggles to access the services and advice that they require. The 2014 patient survey report showed that more than a quarter of them could not access a GP appointment when they needed it.

We acknowledge the essential and diverse service that our community pharmacies perform and, in an attempt to maximise their impact, Bradford trialled the minor

[Naz Shah]

ailments scheme, which the Minister has referred to, in 2014. I spoke to Mr Ajmal Amin of my local pharmacy, Sahara, only this morning, and he explained that, in addition to the more than 100 people a week who walk through his door, an average 50 a week do so as part of the minor ailments scheme. Even if one in four people end up going to a GP appointment, that means 90,000 extra GP appointments a year in my constituency alone, at a cost of more than £4 million.

Bradford has a higher incidence of cancer, diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease, and that is because poverty, deprivation and ill health go hand in hand—there is a clear correlation between them.

I will give a recent personal example. Over the past few months, my mother has suffered three transient ischaemic attacks. One of them was a potential stroke and she has already had cancer. Only last week, she was admitted to Luton hospital with an acute kidney infection. On Monday morning, it took 42 attempts for me to get through to my GP practice to make an appointment, but by the time I got through at 23 minutes past 8, all the appointments had gone. That experience is not unique to me; it is happening across the country. If we close community pharmacies, GPs will come under extra pressure. I have not seen a Government plan to give my constituency—which is one of five in Bradford—£4 million for another 90,000 appointments a year.

The reality is that the proposals will disproportionately affect those who need healthcare the most. Yes, we have lots of pharmacies, but the Government's proposals do not take into account diverse communities with complex health needs.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is interesting to hear what is happening in my hon. Friend's constituency. Five of the 23 pharmacies in my constituency of Wirral West are at risk of closure because of the Government cuts. Given the huge pressures that NHS services are under, does my hon. Friend share my concerns that the cuts will further inhibit the options of elderly and infirm people in particular in accessing the services that they need?

Naz Shah: I agree with my hon. Friend. My constituents have so many complex health needs. I am a former NHS commissioner, and I commissioned services in accordance with public health priorities in Bradford. Obesity, cancer and diabetes are long-term chronic conditions and they impact on those communities with the most deprivation. It is not just one whammy: we have deprivation, lack of jobs and so on. We need to look holistically at people. Taking away pharmacies from our communities is not the way to provide healthcare services. We cannot and must not look at pharmacies as stand-alone items. They are part of a holistic care package across the board, and they complement the NHS and GPs.

Let me be clear: the fact that I could not get through to my GP surgery until my 42nd attempt is not a reflection on my GP practice, Kensington Street health centre, which is one of the best I have ever experienced. The staff are amazing. They are working to try to fit a square peg into a round hole because of the extent of the cuts that they have already experienced. This is not about GP practices not delivering what they can; it is

simply that they do not have the resources. We do not have enough GPs as it is, and taking away pharmacies will not help.

I urge the Government to revisit this proposal, which has not been clearly thought through and does not take into account constituencies such as mine. I urge the Government to abolish it and bring something else to the table, because it is clearly not going to work.

2.40 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): We are all aware of the letter received by pharmacists on 17 December last year, in which the Department of Health discussed the potential for far greater use of community pharmacies and pharmacists. The letter referred to community pharmacists' role in preventive care, in support for healthy living, in support for self-care for minor ailments and long-term conditions, in medication reviews in care homes and as part of a more integrated local care model. The letter also informed us of plans to reduce funding by £170 million.

I was fortunate enough to be the first MP to raise the matter in a Westminster Hall debate at the beginning of this year. I raised the concerns of community pharmacists about their funding as the plan progressed, as it was intended to do by October 2016. That all came about because the issue was raised in a constituency surgery that I held in St Ives at the start of January. Since then, the general public have been very engaged in this, and they are concerned about the future of their pharmacies. I joined others in this House to present a petition with 2 million signatures to No. 10 in the summer.

I represent a Cornish seat where every effort is being made to integrate health and social care, and community pharmacists see themselves as essential players in a new, modern national health service that is equipped to meet the demands placed on it by today's society. Community pharmacy is valued and depended on, and it can embrace new clinical responsibilities and meet the demands of an ageing population, but the sector is looking to Government for some reassurance about its future, particularly regarding funding for community pharmacy.

In my constituency, I have several independent community pharmacists. That is because my patch is large and includes areas of social deprivation, which has an inherent impact on health. A car journey from the north to the south of my constituency takes an hour, and a journey from the most westerly point to the most southerly point takes an hour and nine minutes. In a rural area such as mine, community pharmacists provide invaluable access to the NHS and invaluable support to vulnerable people. I am reassured by the fact that the Government have indicated that some protection will be given to rural pharmacies and those in deprived rural areas. That is welcome indeed.

However, funding of community pharmacy remains a concern, and the community pharmacy sector has called for the Department of Health to use funds cut from the community pharmacy budget to fund a minor ailments service from 2017. The service would allow eligible people with a list of common health complaints to visit their pharmacy for advice and, where appropriate, medicines at no cost. That could create significant savings for the NHS by ensuring that patients with minor conditions use pharmacies, thereby preventing unnecessary GP appointments and A&E attendances.

I am well aware of the need to secure better value for money in areas of the NHS. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly we are actively involved in drawing up our STP, as directed by NHS England. The NHS has outlined this approach to ensure that health and care services are built around the needs of local populations. I believe that that provides the best opportunity to integrate health and social care in a meaningful way, reduce the pressure on acute services and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions. I also believe that the community pharmacy is central to achieving that objective.

I am aware of the time, so I will just ask a few questions of the Minister. Can the Minister give more details about what support will be given to rural independent community pharmacies and those in deprived areas, many of which operate in Cornwall? Will the Minister comment on the community pharmacy forward view, and the Department's response to the vision set out by community pharmacy—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order.

2.44 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Here we are again, debating more slash-and-burn cuts to vital public services. Generations and decades of investment are being eroded in just a few short years. What will be left?

I think we all accept that if we can make savings in the public sector, we should do so, because we should use the money to the best possible effect. But it is short-sighted to take money away from community services when the accepted logic is that those services save money in the long run. It beggars belief that we are debating this again.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): In my constituency, local pharmacies and GPs are working collaboratively to build an integrated health centre in Haydock. Does my hon. Friend agree that although the Government say they want to encourage such working, their actions, as usual, do not match their words, because they are cutting the funding that would make that long-term, sustainable investment worthwhile?

Jim McMahon: I share that view entirely. My preferred option would be to devolve that power with fair funding to local areas, so that they can decide. The Government have proved time and again that they do not understand or value the public services that our communities rely on.

Let me tell Members what it is like in Oldham. We have 57 community pharmacies, nine of which have 100-hour contracts and four of which offer delivery services. That is about 25 pharmacies per 100,000 residents. Ask the public how they perceive those pharmacies, and 93% say that those pharmacies are doing a good job, while 88% of people in Oldham use those pharmacies. They are respected, and they are used by the community. When asked, the main reason people gave for using those pharmacies was their proximity and location. People could get to those pharmacies to access the services that they needed.

The truth is that we do not need fewer pharmacies; we need more, because demand is going up. I am not the only one who says so. The local health and wellbeing board says so in a 90-page review of pharmaceutical support in Oldham. It says that we have enough pharmacies

to meet current demand, but that demand is going up because people are living longer, because the population is increasing and because new homes are—as the Government want—being built in the area to support new families. That requires the infrastructure to be in place.

Many wards in the borough do not have pharmacies that are open at weekends, so it is not as though we have a gold-plated service. We are just about getting by. It is not as though pharmacists are twiddling their thumbs behind the counter waiting for somebody to walk through the door. The average number of prescriptions dispensed by those outlets is 7,000 a month. We really need to think about what we are doing, whether the money is in the best possible place and whether we are valuing the real saving that can be derived further down the line.

I am not the only one who says that pharmacies can help us to achieve savings. PwC, which is hardly a standard bearer for public services, has said that pharmacies in the community save £3 billion a year. Why? Because people do not have to go to the GP or present to A&E, and because prevention is far better than cure. That is exactly what community pharmacists are there to do.

I really worry about what we are going to do to the industry and to the profession—that community service—which people aspire to be part of. I can tell Members what community pharmacists are saying, because I have a letter from a local pharmacist who lives in the Werneth area of my constituency. Mr Khan studied hard through school, sixth-form college and university to set up his own pharmacy. He works very long hours; although he is funded to work 40 hours a week, he actually works 50 hours a week—10 hours a week free of charge to the NHS—because he believes in a community service. He provides a delivery service, which is not paid for by the NHS, where he takes prescriptions out to the public. For a lot of the people he meets, he might be the only person they see during the week. According to the estimates in the report that I referred to, 15,000 more people in my borough will be living alone by 2017. Loneliness and isolation are real issues, and such community infrastructure is an important way of combating them.

I want to read out an important quote from the pharmacist I have mentioned. He said:

“Many of us, however, feel betrayed, angry and confused right now because the government who promised to make Pharmacy at the heart of the NHS; has ripped the very heart out of Pharmacy.”

It is not me or the Labour party saying that, but a pharmacist. They have studied hard and worked hard to set up their own business, and they work hard every day for their community, but they are being let down by this callous Government.

2.49 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I declare an interest, as my wife works as a community pharmacist just outside my constituency. It is probably fair to say that from my discussions with her and with my local pharmacists, I know the valuable work they do and the pressures on them, as well as the changes that they would like so that they can give a better service.

The Public Accounts Committee has had nine or 10 inquiries in the past year or so looking at the pressure on NHS finances and the various deficits in the system. It is therefore quite hard to stand up and say that the Government are completely wrong to try to

[Nigel Mills]

find some efficiency savings from the pharmacy budget, or that we should just ignore the £3 billion or so paid to pharmacies each year without trying to find some savings. If we are going to hit the efficiency target across the NHS of £22 billion during this Parliament, while having all the services we want, we will have to accept such savings in every area, although it is not going to be easy wherever they fall. I can therefore see the logic of why the Government need to look at the pharmacy budget.

I also accept the logic that although the system we have ended up with, in which we give each pharmacy a fixed establishment payment, may well have been suitable when we had a very controlled regime, under which a licence had to be got to open a new pharmacy, it probably did not fit well with the old 100-hour regime, under which there was a vast expansion in the number of pharmacies across the country. It is right to look at that system. It may also be right to look at the 100-hour pharmacies to see exactly what the rules for them should be.

I welcome the pharmacy access scheme, which is a very welcome improvement on what was originally suggested for this round of cuts. Two pharmacies in my constituency will benefit from it. I met both pharmacists when the cuts were first announced. Those pharmacies provide the only health provision in the villages they serve, so it is vital for them to be saved.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is a false economy to cut services, given that the knock-on effects on GP services and the NHS will cost more, and that it will do nothing to alleviate the problem of health inequalities in this country?

Nigel Mills: It would clearly be a false economy if it resulted in losing pharmacies in areas where we need them. Equally, we would have to say to GPs, "I'm sorry. We can't take the money off the pharmacies. We are taking it off you instead." That would make it harder for them to deliver the services that they want to deliver. I do not think there are any easy answers. The system is under so much financial pressure that we must find savings wherever we can.

I have a few areas on which I want the Minister to comment when he winds up. The first is the hub-and-spoke model. Such a model would have been a complete disaster for community pharmacies. If the system is to work, we need pharmacists who know and are trusted by their patients so that they can deliver to patients the extra services that they need. If we moved to a hub-and-spoke model, in which the pharmacy knows almost nothing about the patients—the drugs are just prepared in a factory somewhere and then turn up for the patient—we would not have the community advantages from the pharmacy network that we all want. I hope that that idea, which may have been raised by some management consultants, can safely be binned—where most such ideas are probably worth sending.

The second area is the provision of services by pharmacists. I know that my local pharmacies are very keen to deliver more value-added services. They see that as right for the NHS and in the best interests of their patients. As I found out five years ago, when we went through the clinical commissioning group reform, they are not quite so sure that local GPs are keen on

commissioning new services from pharmacies, rather than carrying out those services and taking the revenue themselves. We know that there is pressure in the GP sector, so we can see the point of that.

We need to have a vision throughout the country about what core services should be commissioned from pharmacies. I think the word the Government use about the minor ailments scheme, which I generally support, is that we should "encourage" all CCGs to commission such a scheme. I hope we can do something a little stronger than encourage, and that we can have a broader list of services for CCGs to commission from pharmacies. I have seen great work done on that in my constituency. Permission has been given for syringe driver services to be carried out by some pharmacies, rather than hospitals, so that they can be got to the patients needing them much more quickly and cheaply. Some pharmacies do warfarin testing, because it is much more convenient for patients to go to their local pharmacy than to have to trek to the nearest hospital or to their GP. Those services are very patchy and do not even cover a whole constituency, so I hope we will draw up a core list of services that can be done better by pharmacies and which will be used.

I will quickly touch on the third area, which is the variety of opening hours. Quite rightly, we are to start directing patients from the 111 service to their pharmacy rather than to out-of-hours doctors as the first port of call for emergency repeat prescriptions. However, there is an interesting mix in that some pharmacies open for 100 hours a week—perhaps opening at 6 am and closing at midnight—and other pharmacies open from 9 o'clock to 5 o'clock from Monday to Friday and may open for a couple of hours on Saturday morning. How will we commission all pharmacies to carry out such a service if some do not open out of hours? On the flipside, we still require many of them to open for 100 hours a week, even though it is not economic for them to do so during many of those hours. There is therefore scope for a review of the hours during which we expect pharmacies to open.

2.54 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were to walk along a busy shopping street in Bedminster in my Bristol South constituency today, you would pass seven pharmacies within a mile or so. However, if you were to walk through the Knowle West estate or Hartcliffe, which are two of the most deprived wards in the country, you would see many fewer pharmacies.

I have spent time in pharmacies in Filwood Broadway and Bedminster, and like most hon. Members, I have been contacted by pharmacists and constituents who are worried about the plans. The greatest fear in my constituency, which has a relatively high density of pharmacies, is its severe problem with GP recruitment and with the sustainability of primary care. We stand to lose disproportionately from those twin concerns. As hon. Members have said, we all know the valuable role that pharmacies play in our communities. This is not just about the damage to healthcare as a result of some of the cuts, but about the impact on our wider economy in some of our most deprived areas.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were to wander around my constituency in two years' time, how many pharmacies—and, crucially, which ones—would still

exist? As hon. Members are aware, the NHS-wide process of sustainability and transformation planning is currently being undertaken with the aim, finally, of taking a strategic overview of the whole system. This is the first bottom-up, system-wide planning that has taken place since the disastrous Health and Social Care Act 2012. We are bringing back planning to the system, which is long overdue. This is also about saving a lot of money.

In that context, the delayed Government funding announcements on pharmacies, followed by rushed ones, are the opposite of the STP process. It shows an absence of planning, and a failure to include the vital role that the community pharmacy can play. Where is the sense, when communities need stability, in forcing through a cut of this magnitude at this time? The Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), said that earlier.

In my area, the local pharmacy committee is represented on the STP board. All the local players are working hard, collaboratively, in the best interests of patients, to find a solution to our local healthcare needs. However, as has been said by the chair of the LPC, Lisa Fisher, who runs a pharmacy at Whitchurch in my constituency, this measure is a “devastating blow”. It runs totally counter to the process that Ministers want to succeed.

The Bristol CCG reported earlier this year on the root cause of the waste of medicines, and made recommendations to address the problems in the system. The figures are eye-watering. It estimates that medicine waste amounts to £5.7 million a year in Bristol, and that we can save £2.8 million a year. It made 15 recommendations for such work, but none covers having fewer pharmacies in our community.

The Minister may stand in front of pharmacies and lament the way in which the market has produced clusters in some areas, but will a large supermarket chain housing a pharmacy decide the floor space is better utilised for a café, and will the pharmacy that does the most deliveries in areas of greatest health need and that offers the most self-care advice close? How does he know? He does not. Crucially, how will my constituents know, and how can they influence the service provided to them?

In Ministers' minds, is any consideration being given to starting from community need, not from market forces at such a time? If they were putting forward a new model that was genuinely built on pharmacies being at the forefront of Government thinking in addressing the challenges of our healthcare system, that would be good, but they are not doing so. This is not a modernisation package, but a fig leaf. It is a missed opportunity, and that is a great shame at this time.

2.58 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): During the past year, I have visited a number of local, independently run community pharmacies across Sutton. They add much to our local healthcare provision, and they have the potential to add so much more, as we have heard. We therefore need to tread carefully when looking at changes to funding and configuration. When I spent time in those pharmacies, I saw a steady stream of customers. The pharmacist knew most of them by name, as well as their background and wider circumstances. Such a special relationship takes time to build, but it can be so valuable in assessing health needs and pre-empting

any problems. We need to look at how we can develop community pharmacies further as a neighbourhood health and wellbeing hub, so that they become the go-to destination for support and advice and act as a gateway for other healthcare services.

As a number of hon. Members have done, I have been to A&E and seen people who have not had an accident or do not appear to be an emergency, so it is right to look at how we push people towards GP services. However, there seems to be less discussion in public about encouraging people to look to their pharmacist, rather than to their GP, for healthy lifestyle advice, minor ailments care and routine support. The all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy heard some great evidence from the LloydsPharmacy group about its diabetes foot service and inhaler check service, which enable people to get the most out of their treatment and can make their medication far more effective. Those kinds of extra services make community pharmacies incredibly valuable.

Oliver Colville: Does my hon. Friend recognise that we need to make greater use of things such as opticians as well?

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Independent pharmacies in Sutton conduct medicine reviews, which we have heard about, and often deliver to their patients' homes. They therefore see people in their own environment, rather than in a GP surgery. They get to see what is left in the bathroom cabinet, forgotten about or set aside. Ignoring or forgetting to take prescribed medicines causes such a lot of waste. There is an estimated £300 million a year that could go to other front-line services. By seeing the patient in their own environment, the pharmacist can make an assessment based on the patient's everyday life, rather than just a snapshot, which might be affected by things such as white coat syndrome.

Consultation room services, such as sexual health, smoking cessation and minor ailment services, have to be a good thing for the NHS and should be encouraged. From what I have seen in pharmacies, there is still too much of a disconnect in the exchange of patient information between GPs and pharmacists. If advice and treatment are to work, they must be done in full knowledge of the patient's background and medical history.

I understand the concerns that have driven the review and the changes that we are debating. The current funding system encourages pharmacy companies to open numerous low prescription volume sites, especially with the guaranteed fixed payment of £25,000 a year, regardless of size, quality or local demand. Some 40% of pharmacies are in clusters of two or more, with 20% being within 10 minutes' walk of at least two others. That is reflected in Sutton. There are three in Worcester Park, four in north Cheam and six in and around Sutton High Street.

My concern is that any closures that result from these changes are more likely to come from the independent portion—those pharmacists who go beyond the corporate approach, often offering services at no cost or at a loss, because it is the right thing to do; those who prioritise the service that patients need, rather than shareholder value. Responding to customers on a personal basis

[Paul Scully]

allows independent pharmacists to consider savings such as generic substitution. We talk about a seven-day NHS, but pharmacists need to be set free to offer a high street NHS.

The Government's changes recognise much of what pharmacists' bodies have been raising. The changes seek to move pharmacists away from being reliant primarily on dispensing income, which is more vulnerable in the long term, towards services. Repeat prescriptions and those who come in via the 111 service will be directed to pharmacies, rather than out-of-hours GPs. For the first time, pharmacies will be paid for the quality of the services they provide, not just the volume. There is much to be welcomed, but I urge the Minister to keep the impact of the changes on independent pharmacies, which are often family run, under constant review.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking very well for the independent pharmacy sector. It is those pharmacies that we should be protecting the most, because they are the first triage that saves the NHS money down the line. They can save a lot of money for the general NHS drugs bill by knowing their patients well, knowing the GPs and suggesting something cheaper. I am not convinced that the Government have looked into that aspect closely enough.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I have spoken about generic substitution and some of the things LloydsPharmacy and family-run services are doing in the consultation room. Those things are to be welcomed, encouraged and boosted.

I urge the Minister, in the coming months and years, to keep the impact of the changes on independent, often family-run pharmacists under constant review, because I and many others in this place certainly will.

3.4 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I support the Opposition motion and pay tribute to the great campaigning leadership shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher) and the shadow Health Secretary in bringing this matter to public attention and opposing the £170 million of cuts, the 12% reduction in funding and the further 7% reduction next year, and the threat to shorten the working hours in pharmacies and to strip out jobs in local pharmacies, which will have an impact, particularly in high-poverty communities. We are having this debate on the day that the Resolution Foundation reports that tax cuts since 2010 have taken £32 billion out of the Exchequer, so this debate is about political choice. It is about where we put public funds and whether we support the impact on high-poverty communities that the Opposition believe these cuts to pharmacies will engender.

I will focus briefly on the situation in Stoke-on-Trent. My constituency has a very good Miltons chemist in Stoke and the Norfolk Street pharmacy in Hanley, which is a former pub that was converted into an excellent community pharmacy. Those pharmacies are very concerned about the impact of the proposed cuts. Earlier this week in the Chamber, the Secretary of State for Health acknowledged the stress on healthcare in Stoke-on-Trent. He is coming to the city to see the Royal Stoke hospital because the closure of Stafford

hospital and the community hospitals at Longton, Cheadle and Bradwell, and the pressure on our GPs, are putting immense pressure on it.

Part of the answer has to be ensuring that we have primary preventive care, of which pharmacies are an essential component. Everything we have heard in this Chamber is about the enormous contribution they make and should make to healthcare provision, yet the trajectory of Government policy is to undermine that provision. We know that if people do not have access to pharmacies, they try to get appointments at the GP. We know that in disadvantaged communities, more and more people would seek to do that.

We have addressed the issue of clustering, with too many pharmacies being clustered together. However, we know from the Durham University report that this is a particular issue in high-poverty communities. As the shadow Health Secretary put it, pharmacies have a particular value in local communities in terms of the language skills they offer black and minority ethnic communities, their opening hours and the trust and confidence engendered by the professionals running these operations. To strip that out will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, wreak enormous costs down the line through the impact on healthcare.

I urge the Minister, who is financially astute, to understand that it will be a gross disservice if those who are hardest hit by these reforms are the family-run community pharmacies, while highly indebted, highly leveraged multinational pharmacies, whose taxes are not always located in the UK, somehow do not take the hit. Family pharmacies that contribute to the UK through their taxes and their community role should not be the victims of this change.

I agree with reform to the NHS. I do not have some Ken Loach fetishisation of the past. I believe in modernisation and reform. There was much that I agreed with in what the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said about reforms in pharmacies. However, we must ensure that this modernisation is built around progressive reform, particularly for low-income communities such as Stoke-on-Trent, and is not simply based on cost and political choice, which the Resolution Foundation has highlighted today.

3.8 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I will not go through the many arguments made by hon. Members, but the reason I do not support the Opposition motion is that I do not agree with their argument about funding. The current funding system for pharmacies in this country is not working. Pharmacies have grown organically in a haphazard way, not necessarily meeting the needs of patients or the changing demands of healthcare.

I find it extraordinary that Opposition Members are satisfied that big national companies such as Sainsbury's, Boots and Asda, many of which make profits of £1 billion a year, are being funded with NHS money, which goes to each and every one of their branches. That is completely unacceptable. [Interruption.] I will not give way because there is not enough time. I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the money that is saved through these changes must go to community pharmacies and away from big business.

I have severe concerns about the proposals on the table, however, and I have met the Minister to raise them. The first is my fear that the role of the pharmacist is not properly understood. As a practising nurse, I see at first hand every day the role that pharmacists play in safeguarding patients. Doctors often make out prescriptions that are wrong or do not take into account current medications a patient is on. That is where the pharmacist comes in. Thinking that pharmacists simply stand at a counter, pick a box off a shelf and put a sticker on it is misguided; they do a huge amount more.

Another concern is the proposal or recommendation that we move towards either GP dispensing or GP practices housing pharmacists. I know from talking to my GP practices that they are bursting at the seams. It is not as simple as installing a pharmacist at a practice; pharmacists need storage space for their medication, temperature-controlled rooms and space to make up that medication. I know that my GP practices do not have that space right now. I also have concerns about GPs' taking on dispensing; as I have said, pharmacists have a crucial role in safeguarding patients. Who will pick up those mistakes, or look at patient medication or drug interaction if no pharmacist is there?

My biggest concern—again, this point was made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire—is that this is a huge missed opportunity. We are doing things the wrong way round. We should be looking at the system and at patients' needs. We should follow the excellent model currently running in Scotland and learn from it, rather than thinking, "We need to save money. How can we best do that?"

As many Members have mentioned, there is some obvious stuff that pharmacists are doing now.

Jim McMahon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not—as I have said, time is short.

Right now, pharmacists are running clinics for asthma, blood pressure and thyroid issues. But we are not seeing what pharmacists could do. They are highly experienced and highly qualified. They should have registers of patients and be referring people to clinicians and hospitals themselves. They should be a second point of primary medical care. I cannot support the Opposition, because they are wrong that this is only about saving money. It is much bigger than that, and should be an opportunity to improve primary care overall.

3.11 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): My central argument is that this is a cut to preventive healthcare and as such is completely irrational, makes no sense and will be a false economy. It will end up with fewer people accessing pharmacies than at the moment, resulting in more pressure on GPs and A&E departments.

I have made the point to the Government before that, by all means, they should do more to get more bang for their buck, to ensure that money is working effectively and that people get good preventive care in their communities, but they should not cut the budget for preventive care. In response to my earlier intervention, the Minister said that the cut was compensated for by the extra investment in GP practices, but that is misleading because the total investment in GP practices for pharmacies

will be £112 million between now and 2020, yet in one year, by 2017-18, this budget will be down by £208 million. It is a massive cut to preventive care. It makes no sense at all and is the precise opposite of what the Government claim they seek to do on shifting resources within the NHS.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When I surveyed pharmacists in my community, they told me, among other things, that in what is probably England's most rural county, more than 80% of pharmacies do not qualify for the rural pharmacy access scheme, and for those that do, that money will be blown away by the larger cuts. Given that staff are already being laid off, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the greatest areas of damage will be to small, rural pharmacies in areas such as ours?

Norman Lamb: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point; it was the second one that I was going to make. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made clear earlier, the impact will be arbitrary, and disadvantaged communities and rural areas will feel it most. Only four of the 15 pharmacists in my community will benefit from the pharmacy access scheme; all the others will not, yet they are needed by their local community.

Greg Mulholland: There were some outrageous comments earlier suggesting that some of those smaller pharmacies are simply there for dispensing, when they have trained pharmacists helping people. As well as the important village and rural pharmacies—I have village pharmacies in Pool and Bramhope that do excellent work—communities in suburbs rely on smaller pharmacies; those communities will lose that service.

Norman Lamb: Absolutely. It is the arbitrary impact of the cut that concerns me so much.

The other aspect of that arbitrariness is—again, a point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire—that the big boys will be fine. They will survive. Surely, the Government should be addressing the excess profits of those organisations, rather than putting in danger—as their own impact assessment says—the small independent pharmacies and small chains. It is completely irrational and makes no sense.

The final issue I want to raise is that, instead of going about cutting preventive care, protecting the big boys and putting small pharmacies at risk, the Government ought to be undertaking a major programme to increase what pharmacies do. We heard earlier about what is happening in Scotland; that is the approach that should be taken. There should be more work on smoking cessation, on sexual health, on substance misuse and on screening and immunisation, and more should be done to promote independent living, encourage healthy lifestyles and support people in their self-care.

The Government's approach makes no sense. The bottom line is that, as the Government scrape around trying to find enough resources to prop up the NHS, which, as we know, is expecting to receive a reducing percentage of our national income between now and 2020, they are making stupid decisions such as cutting spending on health education, on public health and on community pharmacies. The Government are in a complete mess. We need extra resources for the NHS and a new long-term settlement. The sooner the Government recognise that, the better.

3.16 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): As many hon. Members have already described, our community pharmacies play a vital role in all our communities. When my mum was seriously ill and housebound, her local pharmacist and all his staff were amazing. Nothing was too much trouble, whether it was changing her medicines at the last minute and delivering them to her home, or offering to deliver things like toothpaste and loo rolls at the same time. That is what community pharmacists are all about—being at the centre of the community, wherever they are.

Being part of the local community is even more important in rural areas, especially for the elderly who are often housebound, or have limited access to cars and so rely on public transport. That is why I welcome the pharmacy access scheme that the Minister has put in place. It should safeguard those pharmacies that are more than a mile apart and, more importantly, protect their patients. The Minister has gone further by adding in areas with high health needs. That must be welcomed, but I would like more specific information to help to reassure pharmacies in my constituency.

We all know that pharmacists can and want to do more. It is imperative that every community pharmacy across the country plays its part in providing first-class healthcare outside the hospital setting. Pharmacists are highly trained professionals with a wealth of knowledge that must be used to its fullest. As we hear time and again, our GPs are under a great deal of pressure. Our pharmacists are a group of professionals who can and do shoulder some of that workload. To name just a few of the services they can provide, they can give flu jabs, test cholesterol, monitor warfarin and check blood pressure. There is no reason why they cannot carry out other simple tests, such as point of care C-reactive protein tests to distinguish between viral and bacterial infections, and so play their role in combating antimicrobial resistance.

I have a request for the Minister. He should be more ambitious with the timescale for roll-out of the minor ailments service. We have already heard from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about just how successful that service is in Scotland. We must combat any barriers that the CCGs put forward, as my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) suggested.

The 18% increase in the number of pharmacies over the past 10 years has in many instances led to clusters of three or more pharmacies within just one location. Each gets a guaranteed payment of £25,000 every year regardless of the quality of service they offer, the number of prescriptions they process or whether increased capacity in the area was needed when they actually opened. I am sure many of my constituents will think that is wrong and wonder whether it is the right way to spend taxpayers' money.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the hon. Lady recognise that pharmacies were allowed to open simply because they were willing to be open for 100 hours? The growth was random, and my concern is that this cut is random. Planning is the issue.

Maggie Throup: I completely agree that growth has not been controlled. We need to go back a number of

years to learn from what happened and ensure it does not happen again. We also need to ensure that we put the right reforms in place now.

It is important that the £25,000, just for opening the doors, is not offered to other retail stores on the high street. It is vital we get the best possible deal for the taxpayer and the patient. The patient must be at the heart of everything. We must also remember that every pound saved by these changes will be invested back into the NHS. We need to get the important message out that, whether it is for cancer treatment or other life-saving treatment, every penny counts.

If the proposed reforms reward quality, pay pharmacists for their value added services and fully embed community pharmacists into the urgent care pathway, they will be welcome. However, we need to ensure they do what they are intended to do, and that we do not, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, end up with what we have now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I give advance notice that, after the next speech, we will have to drop the time limit for speeches to three minutes. Even then, things will be quite tight if Members use all their intervention time.

3.21 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): In my constituency, there are 22 pharmacies. Some 60% are not eligible for the pharmacy access scheme, which, I understand, is based on distance between pharmacies and does not take into consideration deprivation and other health issues. It is predicted that of the 22, six will close. In the Durham, Darlington and Tees area, there are 271 pharmacies, issuing 2.5 million prescriptions a month and covering a population of 1.2 million. The Government want to take £170 million out of community pharmacies, which is equivalent to £14,500 a pharmacy. That is a total of a third of a million pounds out of community pharmacies in my constituency or £4 million across the Durham, Darlington and Tees area.

A new pharmacy integration fund has also been announced. This was originally allocated £300 million over five years. I now believe that the figure will be £42 million over two years. The Government have admitted that these proposals in total will lead to the closure of 3,000 community pharmacies. Pharmacy closures will only place further strain on those pharmacies that remain open. More people will use GP surgeries and A&E departments when they need not do so. Pharmacies could be forced to scale back services, while being under increased pressure.

The proposal to encourage people to contact the 111 service for emergency referrals on repeat prescriptions, which will then be referred to a chemist, was described by one pharmacy in Trimdon in my constituency as “ludicrous” because

“It will place an extra burden on the 111 service, and ignores the fact most people who require an emergency supply of their regular medication will go to their local pharmacy who have their records, and who will bend over backwards to help. In the case of people from out of the area needing an emergency supply of regular medication in Trimdon this only happens around three or four times a year. Ultimately, the 111 service is designed to help people who do not know what is wrong with them, not to assist those who know exactly what is wrong with them and are already being treated for it.”

The Government's impact assessment states:

"there is no reliable way of estimating the number of pharmacies that may close as a result of this policy".

However, the figure of 3,000 has been mentioned and the question then arises: is that figure a minimum? Pharmacies offer important services to their local communities, the elderly, the disabled and those with long-term illness, and offer vital support to overstretched GPs and hospitals. I looked at the statistics: there are 11,700 community pharmacies and 1.6 million people visit a pharmacy every day. Some 79% of people have visited a pharmacy at least once in the last 12 months, with 75% of adults visiting the same pharmacy, and 2.7 million items are dispensed every day.

Pharmacies are increasingly seen as a referral mechanism to GPs for patients with possible early symptoms of cancer. Two in five of the pharmacies in my constituency may be protected—I say "may be"—but three out of the five will not be. They face an unsettled and uncertain future in an area with some of the worst health, deprivation and disability statistics in the country. More importantly, the tens of thousands of my constituents who use pharmacies will be affected the most. They will feel that uncertainty the most and will feel unsettled the most. With all that in mind, only this Government would introduce a strategy to close the pharmacies on which so many of my constituents rely.

3.25 pm

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): The first time I became involved in this area of policy was in the 1990s. I was working commercially for pharmacies on the Community Pharmacy Action Group resale price maintenance campaign. One of my very great friends who was very much involved in that campaign, Sharon Buckle, is on the English Pharmacy Board and has been incredibly helpful in providing me with advice. I am vice-chair of the all-party pharmacy group and the Government's pharmacy champion, which is a great honour and privilege.

My concern is that we seem to be discussing buildings and pharmacies, rather than talking about how we can protect pharmacists. I understand that the Department of Health and Keith Ridge, the chief pharmaceutical officer, are very keen to ensure the pharmacists, the people who serve and have the expertise, are looked after, rather than the buildings. That is very important. We need to ensure there is significantly better integration between the NHS and pharmacies, including on summary care records, when the Government will deliver on decriminalisation for dispensing errors and so on.

Finally, if the likes of Boots will be expected to release their leases, could they kindly have a condition that those leases cannot be re-let to other pharmacies? What we do not need is to end up replacing one form of pharmacy with another. If that is not possible, it is very important that those leases are given to independent community pharmacies rather than the big boys.

I represent a constituency with real deprivation. There is an 11-year gap in life expectancy between one part of my constituency and another. I therefore know at first hand what the issues are. We need to ensure that pharmacies work more closely together, so they can work together on delivering medicines.

3.28 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): As many colleagues have pointed out, not just today, but in previous Westminster Hall and other debates, cuts of £170 million to pharmacy funding will decimate NHS primary care. It could force up to 3,000 pharmacies to close their doors to the public. In Lancashire alone, 387 pharmacies are at risk. I am deeply concerned about that. It will put an intolerable amount of pressure on front-line NHS services. When we look at the evidence, we find that 25% of the 2 million people who normally seek advice from their community pharmacy would visit their GP instead if they could not get it from their pharmacy. Other NHS services, which are already facing sustained attack from the Health Secretary, will become even more stretched.

I am particularly concerned about the impact on innovative and pioneering models of primary care that are provided through pharmacies. My local pharmacy in Baxenden, for example, is a healthy living pharmacy, ensuring that its provision is localised and preventive. I believe that all pharmacies should look to achieve such added value. This tiered commissioning framework, of which healthy living pharmacies are part, has been praised by the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee for its successes in reducing smoking, alcoholism and obesity. The majority of users do not have to go elsewhere for their health advice; they can use their local pharmacy instead of their local GP. Indeed, 70% of people who visit pharmacies do not regularly access other healthcare services. The healthy living pharmacy framework should be rolled out across Lancashire and should be part of the primary care review.

Jim McMahon: Does my hon. Friend agree that the pharmacy access scheme is more about the Tories buying off their Back Benchers than delivering the services that he mentions?

Graham Jones: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, which was also made by our Front-Bench spokesperson, who rightly observed that most of the cuts will fall in deprived areas, while the exemptions will be mostly in wealthy areas. The Government must address why they favour those who have the fewest health issues and are almost punishing those who face the greatest health challenges. The cuts will do precisely the opposite of what the Minister claims. The value-added local pharmacies in those areas will be undermined completely by the cuts. As a result, community centre provision in some of the most deprived areas might well be eroded, reduced or lost altogether. The personal relationship between patient and pharmacist will be lost, which brings me to my final point.

If these cuts go ahead, what will be the future of primary care? My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) has stated on several occasions that an Amazon model of delivery could take the place of community-centred pharmacies. Remote warehouses with box shifters driven by profit are proliferating. They are unable to provide a localised service and are unwilling to carry out primary care. They could be a dangerous replacement for community pharmacies, and that is on top of the cuts that the Government are making. This is a double whammy. Instead of promoting a primary care model that includes pharmacies at the centre, we are undermining it with these cuts.

[Graham Jones]

Pharmacies in my constituency have expressed concern about this trend. They inform me that some of the warehouse pharmacies have already used patients' personal data for marketing purposes. I have seen evidence from a company called Pharmacy4U—a mail order company—of feigned official NHS letters targeting repeat prescription users, many of whom were vulnerable. In reality, these letters were switch approval forms. This is a worrying sign of things to come if the cuts go ahead. I urge the Government to think again.

3.32 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Last year, when the Government put out to consultation the proposed cuts to pharmacies, I went out to speak to many of the small pharmacists in my constituency—in Kearsley, Over Hulton, Little Lever, Farnworth, Deane and Daubhill. What they all said—most are individually owned pharmacies—is that they do a number of things for which they are not paid. Completing all the pill boxes for the elderly and long-term unwell people is one example. We know that there are increasing numbers of old people, so there are a tremendous number of boxes to prepare every day and every week, yet they get paid nothing for doing that. People come to them to ask about various ailments and health issues, and the pharmacists often recommend non-prescription medications, thus saving enormous amounts of GPs' time and, of course, helping to prevent people from going to A&E. On the one hand, we might save a few hundred million pounds from the proposals, but on the other, expenses for GPs, A&E and hospitals will go up, so it is a completely false economy.

Such pharmacies also deliver the medication to many long-term unwell and elderly people. I am told by my pharmacists that they are often the only people whom such people ever see and talk to. Often people talk to their pharmacist about other health issues, and other minor ailments are dealt with. Pharmacists will contact the GPs or alert somebody in their surgeries to what is happening. The pharmacists are providing all these services, but they will not be able to do any of it if they face cuts, because they will not have the necessary financial resources.

Pharmacies provide a lot of advice, as I mentioned. The only people who will benefit from these cuts will be the big companies such as Boots and others, because they can buy their medication at wholesale prices. The NHS may pay them £20 per medication, but they have probably been able to buy that medication for £5, thus benefiting by £15. A small pharmacy will probably pay £20 and be paid £20, so it will make hardly any profits. As a result, most of the small pharmacies that are responsive to local needs will be forced to stop operating, and customers will have to travel further to find alternatives. It is possible that the only remaining pharmacies will be those owned by Boots and other big companies. I ask the Government to think again about their policy, because it will not save money, and it will do a disservice to people.

I thank the pharmacists in my constituency for all their work. Let me make a personal declaration. My mother, who is 84, lives near one of the nicest pharmacists in the area, who regularly provides the many different

types of medication that she takes and who looks after her. He is not an exception, however; many other pharmacists do the same for people.

3.35 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking Greg Burke of County Durham & Darlington local pharmaceutical committee for his valiant efforts in bringing the issue of cuts in community pharmacies to my attention. I also thank him for arranging my visit to Bowburn pharmacy, where I met Phyllis Whitburn, Nigel Nimmo, Len Britten and Hieu Truong Van. The visit reinforced my view that community pharmacies are vital to our communities, and especially to those in the ex-mining villages in my constituency, where they often provide a lifeline. The Minister has said that many pharmacies are within a 10-minute walk of two or more others, but that is simply not the case in many parts of my constituency.

I had hoped that all the lobbying that took place earlier this year, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), would remind the Government of the excellent services that community pharmacies offer and how much money they ultimately save the NHS, and that that might persuade them to abandon the cuts agenda. It was therefore with great sadness that I listened to the Minister's statement on 20 October, in which he outlined the cuts. No rationale for them was presented, and it seems odd that the Government have instigated them without waiting for the outcome of either the King's Fund review or the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's review of community pharmacy services.

Let me also draw the Minister's attention to the large body of research on community pharmacies that has been carried out by Durham University. It has established that they are very well placed to address health inequalities, that they are most prevalent and most used in the most disadvantaged areas, and, indeed, that 100% of people in most deprived areas could have access to one. It is very odd that the Government are cutting services that benefit those areas. The same point has also been made by the Local Government Association, the Pharmacists' Defence Association and others. According to the LGA, the closure of community pharmacies could leave many isolated and vulnerable residents struggling to gain access to pharmacies, particularly in deprived and rural areas. The LGA has also drawn attention to the knock-on effect on local government services, which are suffering cuts as well.

The Minister ought to take up some of the points made in the PDA briefing that was sent to all of us before the debate. The Government should be thinking about regulating the wholesale margins, reviewing the margins of some of the larger companies, and reviewing the way in which community pharmacies and the pharmaceutical wholesale industry are organised. They should not be making these cuts in community pharmacy services.

3.38 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): We in Scotland recognise just how important community pharmacies are. They are part of the fabric of our local communities, providing crucial access to the NHS and

support for some of our most vulnerable people. In fact, the community pharmacy model that has been adopted in Scotland has been recognised by the Health Minister as one to aspire to, which makes the mess that the UK Government have made of community pharmacies all the more difficult to understand.

Community pharmacies in Scotland not only have a vital role in dispensing medicines, but provide other important services. Simply popping in to have their blood pressure checked can give people an early warning of other possible health concerns. The SNP in Scotland has a coherent vision for the pharmaceutical sector, and we want pharmacists to play a crucial role in the wider health team. Ensuring that pharmacists, including those who work in community pharmacies—as well as Community Pharmacy Scotland—are consulted is a key priority for the Scottish Government.

Unlike the UK Government, we would be looking to ensure that any decisions that would have a major impact on the industry were for the benefit of the industry as well as the patients. By contrast, the UK Government appear determined to alienate as many medical professionals as possible. Much of the Government's argument for these cuts appears to be based on their objection to "clusters" of community pharmacies. Rather than take a planned approach to the spread of services and the levels of provision needed in specific areas, their solution seems to be to slash the funding and see who stays afloat.

When vital services are provided on a commercial model, it is disadvantaged communities that suffer the most. To take such an attitude to an entire industry at the same time as trying to get it on board with providing more of the services that free up time in GP surgeries and A&E departments suggests that an extremely short-term view is being taken to the provision of care. It also suggests a complete disregard to savings in the NHS in the long term.

It would seem from the rhetoric used by the Government on this issue that they know community pharmacies are part of the solution to England's creaking health service, but they just cannot stop themselves treating them like they are part of the problem.

3.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This issue is about a very important cog in the grand scheme of our health service. Some might look at pharmacies as small businesses who get most of their custom from the NHS, but that is not the case. The reason why they are funded is that they are vital organs in the body of the NHS. Local community pharmacies take some of the pressure from GP surgeries. Some 14.2 million people had to wait over a week to see their GP in 2015; without the minor injuries service, how many more people would be waiting that long? How much of the doctor's time would be taken up with issues that could be handled by a pharmacist?

There are 549 registered pharmacies in Northern Ireland and 2,300 pharmacists. They dispense both medication and advice, and that advice is important. The widespread locations of community pharmacies across Northern Ireland, where people live, shop and work, means that they are readily accessible to the public. Each year community pharmacies in Northern Ireland safely dispense approximately 40 million prescription items, including through the repeat dispensing service.

They provide advice to help us look after and care for ourselves and help patients take their medicines more effectively by improving patient knowledge and adherence and use of their medicines. This service has initially been commissioned for patients living with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes, and it is hoped that it will be extended to other long-term conditions in the future. So the role of pharmacies can be even greater than it is at present.

The minor ailments service supports the use of the community pharmacy as the first point of call for health advice. Pharmacists can use their professional skills to provide advice and if necessary recommend appropriate treatment or refer to another healthcare professional. Other services include the smoking cessation service, which supports nearly 70% of quit attempts every year.

For constituencies such as Strangford which contain rural areas where GP surgeries are few and far between, the provision of a pharmacy is essential. If every mother with a young child takes an appointment with the doctor because the child has a cold and they are rightly worried, our surgeries, which prioritise child appointments, would never have time to check the lady with a small lump under her arm or the man who has had a problem with toileting needs, both of whom are too embarrassed to push for an appointment when everyone is too busy.

These cuts are too harsh. We need community pharmacists to play their vital role in order to allow GPs to focus on what they need to do. I say yes, make savings; yes, trim the fat if there is any; but do not ask for cuts that can only be achieved by cutting vital services. I support the Labour motion.

3.44 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is my pleasure to respond to this interesting debate. I was not feeling very well today so on my way here I called at my community pharmacy, and I am feeling much better now. This is a very important subject. I wish first to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher) for his sterling work in standing up for community pharmacy, and to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), for ensuring that the contribution of pharmacy is always recognised.

I have to say that this subject is very dear to my heart. I worked with my husband, who is a pharmacist in community pharmacy, for 24 years. I must make it clear that I no longer own a community pharmacy, but I do have a clear understanding of the contribution that community pharmacies make to patients, communities and the wider NHS. Many members have spoken powerfully today about the pharmacies in their constituencies and how much they mean to the people they serve. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Sedgfield (Phil Wilson), for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods).

Make no mistake, community pharmacy is for many the gateway to the NHS, providing far more than prescriptions and paracetamol. As my hon. Friend the

[Julie Cooper]

Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) pointed out, it is a lifeline for many people. The Minister spoke last week about the need to move to a focus on quality and not just on the volume of scripts dispensed. He also spoke of the desirability of community pharmacies becoming an integrated part of the primary care team. I say to him that that has been happening for years. The fact that he does not know this is in itself proof that he needs to take his plans back to the drawing board.

The typical community pharmacy, whether it serves a rural or an urban population, provides a wide range of services to support the sick, the elderly and the disabled, together with a host of initiatives to promote health and wellbeing in the community. Community pharmacies have close working relationships with other members of the primary care teams, including GPs. Of all those health professionals, the community pharmacist, who employs a no-appointment-necessary approach, is the most accessible and often provides the only continuity of care in a health service that is struggling to recruit and retain staff.

On the subject of NHS staff, the promise of more than 1,000 additional pharmacists in GPs' surgeries is a red herring. It is a separate issue and will do nothing to mitigate the loss of local community pharmacies. The Minister spoke last week of the need for pharmacists to move to a more clinical approach to healthcare. Again I say to him that that has been happening for years. All community pharmacies have consulting areas where patients can speak privately. They also provide a perfect space for the provision of a variety of important services. There is an ever-expanding list of services, which a number of Members have described in their speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) mentioned the fact that pharmacists often go above and beyond the call of duty, sometimes delivering prescriptions at 8.30 in the evening. I well recognise that situation. The list is limited only by the Government's unwillingness to engage and the clinical commissioning groups' lack of funding to commission services.

Let me make it clear that community pharmacies, far from being a costly drain on NHS resources, actually save the NHS money through a variety of schemes, some of which have been mentioned today. The minor ailments service is already available in some areas, and I welcome the Minister's suggestion that it will have a full roll-out. Medication use reviews carried out in the pharmacy often identify medicines that are routinely ordered but are no longer taken, and wasteful stockpiling of such items can therefore be avoided. In addition to the specific services, every prescription item dispensed presents the opportunity for a productive health intervention. Given that the average community pharmacy dispenses thousands of prescriptions each month, the potential impact is enormous and the professional advice of the pharmacist is undoubtedly invaluable in the promotion of health and wellbeing. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) rightly identified the prevention work that pharmacists do, and mentioned the fact that the promotion of health and wellbeing can reduce demand on the NHS overall.

Despite statements to the contrary, community pharmacies have been making substantial efficiency savings in recent years. The vice-chair of the all-party

group, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville), mentioned a 40% increase in funding over the past 10 years, but he omitted to mention that prescription numbers have increased by 50% during the same period and that pharmacy funding has been static for the past two years.

Under the Government's current plans, pharmacies would have to implement a year's worth of cuts in four months with only six weeks' notice. As someone with considerable experience of community pharmacy, I know that the plans will force the closure of many pharmacies and a service reduction in others. I do not know how many will close and neither does the Minister. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) suggested that the number could be as high as 3,000, and I can assure the Minister it will not be the large pharmacy chains that close but the small independents, the owners of many of which have put their heart and soul into providing an excellent service to the community.

Those that do not close will reduce services. An NPA survey of 250 pharmacies found that 76% are likely to reduce services from April 2017 if the cuts go ahead. The assessment of the financial impact of the closures is flawed and provides no evidence to support the Department of Health's claim that access to services will not be compromised. It is clear that community pharmacies satisfy an ever-growing demand for services. When they close, that demand will not just disappear. Where will all the patients go? Some will pack out their GP surgery and others will head straight to A&E. The NHS is already in the throes of a staffing and funding crisis. Forcing community pharmacies to cut back services and close down is short-sighted in the extreme and could be catastrophic in the long term.

The Minister has frowned on the growth of pharmacy clusters, but he really needs to understand that clusters have grown, often in the most deprived areas, in response to considerable demand. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West outlined examples of such areas of deprivation. Is the Minister really suggesting that forcing the closure of such pharmacies is the most effective way to reduce demand for healthcare in deprived communities? The Minister has got this wrong. The proposals on the table are short-sighted and will do more harm than good. They will have a negative impact on patient care and will force extra demand on already stretched GP surgeries and hospitals. The proposals will not save money. They will not reduce the number of patients with long-term conditions or the number of medicines they require.

It is right to review the situation. I agree with the Government Members who said that it is right to examine the funding issues, but instead of forcing through damaging changes to a service that the Government clearly do not understand, I ask the Minister to listen to pharmacists and sit down with them to discuss how pharmacies can help to ease the burden on the wider NHS in a planned and cost-effective way. I ask the Minister to listen to his Conservative colleagues who spoke against these simplistic cuts, which have not been properly planned. I ask him to recognise that the access scheme will do little to protect the long-term future of urban or rural community pharmacies.

The Government have shown time and again an unwillingness to listen to professionals. I urge the Minister to listen to community pharmacists, to the pleas of

Members and to people across the country, and to rethink the funding cut. I ask him to sit down with pharmacists and their representatives and work with them to develop and extend services that will take the burden off GPs and off the NHS. I ask that he do so now before he makes a decision that will devastate a whole sector and bring even more pressure to bear on our overstretched health service. I ask Members to support the motion.

3.53 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper). I was interested to learn of her personal experience in the sector. She gave a well-informed speech that was in stark contrast to that of her boss, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). She was generous to contributions from Opposition Members, but it is only fair to say that Members on both sides of the House expressed considerable support for the work done by community pharmacies up and down the country. There is unanimity in the House on the importance of not only pharmacies' current work, but their increasing role in supporting the NHS and providing services in future.

I am grateful for the contributions made today by 24 hon. Members, in addition to the Front-Bench speakers. I wish to start my remarks by referring to the impact that these proposals will actually have on the typical pharmacy, because I am sorry to say that there has been considerable confusion, mostly among Opposition Members, about what the proposals deliver. The average pharmacy will see a reduction in taxpayer subsidy of £16,000 a year. The largest element of that is a reduction in the establishment payment, which is a fixed payment of between £23,000 and £25,000 that most pharmacies receive just for being there. It will be reduced by 20% from 1 December, which equates to a reduction of just over £400 per month, or £100 a week. From April, it will decrease by a further £400 per month, to £200 a week. Those are not huge reductions for private businesses. This element is a 40% reduction in the only fixed taxpayer subsidy that I am aware of that is paid to private businesses up and down retail high streets in England.

Meanwhile, pharmacies will still receive £1.13 for every prescription item they dispense, with the average pharmacy dispensing 87,000 items a year, as was said by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who is, sadly, not in her place.

Luciana Berger: I am here.

Mr Dunne: Oh, she is—I apologise. We are also introducing a new quality payment scheme worth up to £6,400 a year, so that the amount of NHS funding community pharmacies will be receiving will remain very significant.

In addition to payments from the NHS, pharmacies can earn extra income from a range of sources other than dispensing fees. About half the clinical commissioning groups in England already commission minor ailment services from pharmacies. These services include: flu vaccinations, which are topical today; stop-smoking schemes, which were topical last month, in Stoptober; and emergency hormonal contraception. All of those provide an additional source of income for community

pharmacies. I believe the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) referred to healthy living pharmacies, and they will now qualify for this new quality payment, whereas they have not in the past—I hope he will welcome that. The Local Government Association's briefing ahead of this debate echoed that fact, saying that

"there are significant opportunities for councils to commission public health services from community pharmacies as a key element of their health improvement strategies."

In addition to those two alternative sources from NHS and non-NHS public bodies, in many cases pharmacies get a whole section of private sector income from non-publicly funded elements. That has not been referred to at all, but it is a significant element in the profitability of many pharmacies.

The Government's vision in these reforms is to bring pharmacy into the heart of the NHS. The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Leicester South, gave what appears, from his early outings at the Dispatch Box, to be becoming a trademark speech in his new role, seeking to scare the public about the proposals without demonstrating a genuine understanding of how community pharmacies are funded or owned, or of what is proposed by the measures. Since 2005-06, there has been an 18% increase in the number of pharmacies, so that today some 1,800 more operate in England than did so 10 years ago. Next year, pharmacies in England will receive £2.6 billion in funding from the NHS. NHS England supports the developments that we are proposing. The suggestion is that we will decimate NHS services because we will push a large number of people out of community pharmacies to their GP, but that is not the belief of NHS England. This is not about pharmacy closures—the point made by almost every Opposition Member who spoke—but about securing better value from the funding that we provide, modernising the way in which we do it so that pharmacies are not the only sector in the country that receives direct taxpayer subsidy for opening premises on the high street, and encouraging them, through increasing payments in the future, to provide more services to help patients in every community.

Community pharmacies are already much more than the place to which we go to get our medicines. They are an essential front-line service, providing care direct to patients and increasingly advising on a wide range of public health issues, for which, as I have indicated, they are paid separately from their dispensing fees. In doing so, they can relieve, and are relieving, pressures on other parts of the NHS.

Our package of reforms are about advancing that agenda, by rewarding quality for the first time, and moving to an enhanced role for the community pharmacy network in providing value-added services, as well as dispensing prescriptions. Yes, it does include making efficiencies in the way that these pharmacies are funded—I am talking about a reduction of £200 a week from next April—but those savings can be made within community pharmacies without compromising the quality of services or the public's access to them. A key element of our proposals is that we will protect those pharmacies on which communities depend the most through the pharmacy access scheme, which has been supported by many hon. Members. A review of eligibility will assess the impact on those pharmacies in 20% of the most deprived areas, close to the one-mile test. That review opened yesterday and lasts for six weeks.

[Mr Dunne]

The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) referred to the pharmacy access scheme. He admitted that, by his calculation, 40% of the pharmacies in his constituency will benefit from the scheme. I can update him on that. Nine out of the 20 pharmacies—or 45%—in his constituency will benefit. Indeed, his constituency will be one of the biggest beneficiaries of this scheme.

In summary, the reforms are what the NHS needs and what patients and taxpayers expect. I am confident that we will see a community pharmacy sector that is more efficient and better integrated with the rest of the healthcare system and delivering better services for patients as a result. I urge colleagues to support the amendment to this motion.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 211, Noes 305.

Division No. 75]

[4.2 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	David, Wayne
Abrahams, Debbie	Davies, Geraint
Alexander, Heidi	De Piero, Gloria
Ali, Rushanara	Debbonaire, Thangam
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Doughty, Stephen
Ashworth, Jonathan	Dowd, Jim
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Dowd, Peter
Barron, rh Kevin	Dromey, Jack
Beckett, rh Margaret	Dugher, Michael
Benn, rh Hilary	Eagle, Ms Angela
Berger, Luciana	Eagle, Maria
Betts, Mr Clive	Efford, Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Elliott, Julie
Blenkinsop, Tom	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Blomfield, Paul	Elmore, Chris
Brabin, Tracy	Esterson, Bill
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Evans, Chris
Brake, rh Tom	Farrelly, Paul
Brennan, Kevin	Farron, Tim
Brown, Lyn	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Flelo, Robert
Bryant, Chris	Flint, rh Caroline
Buck, Ms Karen	Flynn, Paul
Burden, Richard	Fovargue, Yvonne
Burgon, Richard	Furniss, Gill
Burnham, rh Andy	Gapes, Mike
Butler, Dawn	Gardiner, Barry
Byrne, rh Liam	Glass, Pat
Cadbury, Ruth	Godsiff, Mr Roger
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Goodman, Helen
Chapman, Jenny	Green, Kate
Clwyd, rh Ann	Greenwood, Lilian
Coaker, Vernon	Greenwood, Margaret
Coffey, Ann	Griffith, Nia
Cooper, Julie	Gwynne, Andrew
Cooper, rh Yvette	Haigh, Louise
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hamilton, Fabian
Coyle, Neil	Hanson, rh Mr David
Creasy, Stella	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cruddas, Jon	Harris, Carolyn
Cryer, John	Hayes, Helen
Cummins, Judith	Healey, rh John
Cunningham, Alex	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Hermon, Lady
Dakin, Nic	Hillier, Meg
Danczuk, Simon	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon

Hoey, Kate	Phillipson, Bridget
Hollern, Kate	Pound, Stephen
Hopkins, Kelvin	Powell, Lucy
Howarth, rh Mr George	Pugh, John
Hunt, Tristram	Qureshi, Yasmin
Huq, Dr Rupa	Rayner, Angela
Hussain, Imran	Reed, Mr Jamie
Jarvis, Dan	Reed, Mr Steve
Johnson, rh Alan	Rees, Christina
Jones, Gerald	Reeves, Rachel
Jones, Graham	Reynolds, Emma
Jones, Mr Kevan	Reynolds, Jonathan
Jones, Susan Elan	Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Kane, Mike	Rotheram, Steve
Keeley, Barbara	Ryan, rh Joan
Kendall, Liz	Shah, Naz
Kinahan, Danny	Sharma, Mr Virendra
Kinnock, Stephen	Sheerman, Mr Barry
Kyle, Peter	Sherriff, Paula
Lamb, rh Norman	Shuker, Mr Gavin
Lammy, rh Mr David	Siddiq, Tulip
Lavery, Ian	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Leslie, Chris	Slaughter, Andy
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Smeeth, Ruth
Lewis, Clive	Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Lewis, Mr Ivan	Smith, Angela
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Smith, Cat
Lucas, Caroline	Smith, Nick
Lucas, Ian C.	Smyth, Karin
Lynch, Holly	Spellar, rh Mr John
Mactaggart, rh Fiona	Starmer, Keir
Madders, Justin	Stevens, Jo
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Streeting, Wes
Mahmood, Shabana	Stringer, Graham
Malhotra, Seema	Tami, Mark
Mann, John	Thomas, Mr Gareth
Marsden, Gordon	Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Maskell, Rachael	Thornberry, Emily
Matheson, Christian	Timms, rh Stephen
McCabe, Steve	Trickett, Jon
McCarthy, Kerry	Turley, Anna
McCartney, Jason	Turner, Karl
McDonagh, Siobhain	Twigg, Derek
McDonald, Andy	Twigg, Stephen
McDonnell, rh John	Umunna, Mr Chuka
McGinn, Conor	Vaz, Valerie
McGovern, Alison	Watson, Mr Tom
McInnes, Liz	West, Catherine
McKinnell, Catherine	Whitehead, Dr Alan
McMahon, Jim	Williams, Mr Mark
Meale, Sir Alan	Wilson, Phil
Mearns, Ian	Winnick, Mr David
Moon, Mrs Madeleine	Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Morden, Jessica	Woodcock, John
Mulholland, Greg	Wright, Mr Iain
Nandy, Lisa	Zeichner, Daniel
Onn, Melanie	
Onwurah, Chi	
Owen, Albert	
Pearce, Teresa	
Pennycook, Matthew	
Phillips, Jess	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Vicky Foxcroft

NOES

Afriyie, Adam	Atkins, Victoria
Aldous, Peter	Bacon, Mr Richard
Allan, Lucy	Baker, Mr Steve
Allen, Heidi	Baldwin, Harriett
Amess, Sir David	Barclay, Stephen
Andrew, Stuart	Barwell, Gavin
Argar, Edward	Bebb, Guto

Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartledge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Dineneage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael

Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 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
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema

Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Liddington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will

Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, 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, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 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
 Wood, Mike

Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Christopher Pincher and
Chris Heaton-Harris

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that community pharmacies are valued assets that offer face-to-face healthcare advice which relieves pressure on other NHS services; welcomes the Government's proposals to further integrate community pharmacy into the NHS, including through the Pharmacy Integration Fund, and make better use of pharmacists' clinical expertise, including investing £112 million to deliver a further 1,500 pharmacists in general practice by 2020; supports the need to reform the funding system to ensure better value for the taxpayer; and welcomes the establishment of a Pharmacy Access Scheme which will ensure all patients in all parts of the country continue to enjoy good access to a local community pharmacy.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Has the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs given notice of whether she intends to make a statement to this House in the light of today's High Court judgment, which found against the Government for the second time on the matter of being in breach of air quality standards and putting in place an inadequate air quality plan? I am sure that you will appreciate the level of interest in the outcome of those proceedings, given that between 40,000 and 50,000 people in our country die prematurely each year as a direct consequence of the Government's failure to reach those air quality standards.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I understand the hon. Lady's concern about the matter and thank her for raising it, but she and her colleagues will understand that it is not a matter for the Chair. If she wishes a Minister to come to the House, the correct procedure is to submit a request for an urgent question. I am sure that if the hon. Lady believes that she has sufficient grounds for asking for an urgent question, she will submit a request and Mr Speaker will give it due consideration.

Police Officer Safety

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.20 pm

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

That this House notes with concern the estimated 23,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales each year; and calls on the Government to implement statutory guidance on sentencing uniformly across the country which reflects the seriousness of the issue, to accurately record the number of assaults on police officers in England and Wales and, noting the fall in numbers of police officers by 20,000 since 2010, to ensure that police officer numbers and funding are not cut further.

The Opposition have called for this debate because the question of assaults on the police is an important matter that has received too little attention, and we are happy to begin to correct that. For too long, police victims of violence have felt like second-class victims, but there is no more important duty than their duty to protect our citizens, and there is a social contract between the public and police officers, which can be summarised as follows: society as a whole confers on policemen the unique powers of detection, prevention, arrest and detention in order to uphold the rule of law and all our rights; in return, police officers are entitled to all reasonable co-operation from the public, free from violence and the threat of violence. Any assault on any police officer is a breach of that social contract and an injury to all of us.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend surprised to learn that, in relatively peaceful Devon and Cornwall, there were 267 assaults on the police in the last year, more than doubling the associated costs in one year? Does she agree that one of the reasons that the police and other services are so vulnerable is that, because of cuts, they are increasingly operating on their own and not in pairs?

Ms Abbott: I thank my right hon. Friend for his important intervention. I agree with him and will come to cuts in police numbers later.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that another problem is that we are simply not robust enough in collecting data on the number of assaults on police, and that we need to do that in order to find a solution?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I will come to the question of data later.

I must acknowledge the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who raised this issue in an earlier debate and has arranged for representatives of the Police Federation to be here today.

Sadly, the police are not the only group of dedicated public service workers who are coming under physical attack. Violence against NHS staff has rocketed in the past five years, with 186 attacks on doctors, nurses and paramedics every day.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Fire crews, which attend emergencies and save people's lives, are also coming under attack. It is outrageous that our police, fire and emergency ambulance services, which are all on the frontline, are being discussed not because of the positive work that they do, but because people think that it is fair game to attack them.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend must be clairvoyant, because the next thing I was going to say was that fire crews in the UK have come under attack 1,000 times in the past two years, and attacks on ambulance workers are also on the rise. Although the main purpose of this debate is to discuss violence against the police, I could not let it pass without referring to other blue-light services with similar issues. All assaults on the police are unacceptable, and we will discuss how to address them. The sad thing is that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said, there is no clear, reliable evidence of the number of assaults on the police, because the data are still recorded in a haphazard and irregular fashion.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): On Merseyside, the most recent figures equate to almost 16% of the entire force being subjected to an attack in one year. Not all those attacks would have resulted in injury, but very many of them did. Does my hon. Friend think that it is an urgent matter for the Government to collect proper statistics on such assaults?

Ms Abbott: It is indeed urgent that the Government collect proper statistics. We need reliable, uniform data so that we are clear about the extent of the problem, the trends over time and the differences between forces. To address a problem, it is first necessary to identify it correctly.

There is a further point in relation to the collection of data. Even without data that are as robust as we would like on assaults, there are things that we could do now to address violence against the police to the benefit of the police force and for the reassurance of the public. One of those things is the adoption of body-worn cameras by all police officers who come into contact with the public. I will return to that subject later.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I will make a little more progress. There were 9,055 recorded assaults on police officers in 2015, and the number of convictions was 7,629. That represents an increase on the 2014 figures, but the 2014 total was the lowest that it had been for a number of years. However, according to the Home Office there were 23,000 assaults on police officers in 2015-16, including assault without injury and including the British Transport police. There are big discrepancies in those data. No one claims—I do not imagine that the Minister will do so—that the data are wholly reliable. Obviously, we hope that the latest rise in assaults may possibly be a consequence of higher levels of reporting, and that the long-term downward trend will resume. The data on assaults without injury to a constable are more robust, because there is more uniformity in their collection across forces. They have fallen over the long term, even though there was a rise last year. It would be surprising if assaults without injury fell consistently, but assaults resulting in injury were on the rise.

One thing we can be sure of is that the data need to be more reliable and robust. There is a clear and simple reform that we can introduce. We can insist that all police forces, working with the Home Office and the Office for National Statistics, provide the highest quality data on assaults on the police. It is a serious matter, and it needs to be taken seriously.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): May I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her outstanding work in bringing this debate to the Floor of the House of Commons? In the West Midlands police service, where the statistics are sound, 2,000 police officers have gone, violent crime is up by 20% and three police officers a day are being assaulted. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) agree that the price being paid, as a consequence of Government cuts, for the thin blue line becoming ever thinner is not just putting the public at risk—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The point about interventions is that they are meant to be short. We have a very large number of people who want to make speeches this afternoon. If people make interventions, it prevents other people from making speeches. May I also point out that if someone intervenes in this debate, it is expected that they will remain in the Chamber for most of the debate and be here for the wind-ups? I am not looking particularly at the hon. Gentleman, who is an extremely well-behaved Member of Parliament, but I am just pointing out that it is extremely discourteous to take up time in a very short debate by making a long intervention and then to leave. Nor am I criticising the hon. Lady, who is perfectly right to take interventions because that is what makes the debate interesting.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there is a correlation between cuts in police numbers, the rising tide of crime and the increasing number of assaults on police officers. Whatever the precise quantum of the data on assaults and whatever the precise trends over time, we have a duty to foster the social contract between the police and the public—I mentioned that at the beginning of my remarks—and to protect them both.

I want to tell the House about the very important eight-point plan recently adopted by the Metropolitan police. It reflects an initiative by the Hampshire Police Federation, and the Met has called it Operation Hampshire. We hope that this very important plan will be rolled out across all police forces. The Met's plan states that a member of the operational command unit's senior leadership team should be informed of all assaults; a MetAir form should be filled in for every assault; the total victim care and victim codes of practice should apply to officers and staff, just as they do to the public; officers should not investigate their own assault; officers should not write their own statements; the best evidence must be presented; learning from each assault should be captured; and being assaulted should not be seen as part of the job. It is excellent that the Met has adopted this plan, and I hope it will be rolled out in every police force around the country.

In the light of that plan, I am interested in the new developments with body-worn cameras for police officers. The Metropolitan police, under the leadership of

[Ms Abbott]

Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe and my former right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has embarked on a programme of rolling out body-worn video across the London boroughs. Where that has been trialled elsewhere, there has been a sharp reduction in the number of complaints against the police. There can be little doubt that the presence of a camera will lead to an improvement in behaviour by all parties in what are often stressful or even dangerous incidents. The police can be reassured that any assailant will be recorded, and of course members of the public should be reassured that the actions of the police officer are also being recorded.

As a party, we believe in investment, not austerity. We believe that capital investment in our policing will improve it. Investment in body-worn cameras will save money by reducing the number of complaints against the police and the costs of evidence collection. There is of course a need for safeguards on the use of body-worn cameras—in relation to civil liberties, such as whether their use should be compulsory, and who has access to what is filmed—but the principle is correct. Body-worn video leads to better policing and fewer complaints against the police.

There have been several studies on the use of body-worn cameras, and I will give a flavour of some of the results. One US study showed a 50% reduction in the police use of force. A UK study showed greater levels of prosecution in cases of domestic violence. In a Scottish study, there was a higher incidence of early guilty pleas. In many cases, there has been a reduction in the number of complaints against the police, while in many others, there has been a lower level of assaults against the police. That is why we are raising this question in this important debate. We need better processes and procedures—that is what the Metropolitan police is seeking to introduce—but we need capital investment, in the Met and in police forces up and down the country, in things such as body-worn cameras. *[Interruption.]* This is not humorous; this is about police officer safety and the public being reassured that Ministers are doing everything they can to keep our police officers safe.

The most recent figures show that the number of assaults on police is falling, but the fact is that there are increasingly fewer police to be assaulted or to protect us. Home Office statistics show that there were 19,700 fewer police officers by March this year than there were when the coalition came to office in 2010. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said, the numbers are falling in the west midlands. Police officer numbers have fallen every year under the coalition and under this Government: one in seven police officers have been lost. I recently met Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe of the Metropolitan police, who told me that, at this point, the cuts imposed by this Government have largely been absorbed by a reduction in non-police staff, selling old police stations and asset shortfalls. Now, however, for the first time, the biggest police force in the country is looking at a reduction in police numbers. It seems to the Opposition that under this Government the thin blue line keeps getting thinner.

In cases of serious assault involving injuries to police officers and in the extremely rare incidents of firearms or deadly weapons being used against officers, we believe that the culprits should expect the stiffest sentences.

We believe that the issue of assaults on police officers is very serious. It needs to be taken seriously, including in the gathering and collating of reliable data that are consistent across all police forces. While that is in progress, we should address measures that will tackle such assaults now, such as the introduction of body-worn cameras across all police forces in England and Wales, and encourage our colleagues in the devolved Assemblies to do the same.

Before I conclude my remarks, I congratulate the chair of the Hampshire Police Federation, John Apter, on his work. I am sure that we will not always agree, but his campaigning on the issue of violence against the police deserves the commendation of the whole House. We need to protect the protectors. The Opposition are glad to have brought this issue to the Floor of the House and we urge Ministers to consider some of the measures that I have suggested.

4.36 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “notes” to the end of the Question and add:

“that any assault on a police officer is unacceptable and welcomes the work of the independent Sentencing Council in producing guidelines that specifically highlight the increased seriousness of an offence committed against anyone providing a public service; further welcomes the Government’s commitment to accurately record the number of assaults on police officers in England and Wales to better understand the scale of this issue; and further notes that the Government has protected police spending in real terms over the Spending Review period.”

I welcome the opportunity to debate such an important subject as police safety. I join the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and others in congratulating the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on the work she has done. I am sure that the Adjournment debate on this subject played a part in bringing about this debate. It is important to raise this issue, and she is right to stand up for her constituency force.

As I told the House in a recent debate on police assaults, called by the hon. Member for Halifax, this is an area that I have great concern about. I am determined that we have a clear position that unites us across the House. I want to ensure that we are doing all that we can to support front-line police officers and police staff, as well as the public sector more generally. There needs to be a clear message that assaults on and bad behaviour towards people who are serving the public is unacceptable in any form.

I was delighted a few weeks ago to join the Home Secretary in celebrating achievements in all areas of policing at the annual Ferrers awards, which celebrate the achievements of special constables, cadets and the whole police volunteer family. Along with the police bravery awards, they are undoubtedly among the highlights of the policing calendar. Both events give us the chance to pay tribute to the brave men and women and the cadets for all they do, whether in a voluntary capacity or as full police officers and staff, day in, day out, to keep our country and our residents safe.

Just last night, I attended a police training exercise in Wiltshire, where I saw at first hand how officers prepare to deal with attacks against them by protesters. I was hugely impressed by the way in which officers handled themselves in fast-paced scenarios based on spontaneous

public order situations and was struck by the level they must train to, to be ready for the kind of attack that can come upon them from members of the public. It was a stark reminder of the way in which they put themselves at risk every day for us.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that in such situations, police dogs and horses are sometimes attacked and that police officers can be bitten and spat at? Does he agree that people who spit at and bite police officers should be automatically given blood tests to check whether they have transmittable diseases and that there should be sanctions for people who attack police dogs and horses?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman's point relates to something that may be considered by the Backbench Business Committee as part of the petitions process following the petition on Finn's law. I am keen to meet the organiser of that for a conversation. Any kind of assault on police officers or on the animals and people who work with them is completely unacceptable. He mentioned spitting and there has been coverage recently of the view that the Mayor of London has taken on that. I think that any such behaviour is completely unacceptable.

I have talked quite a lot in recent speeches about the value we should place on policing as a profession. It should attract not just the bold and the brave but the brightest and the best. The new recruits taking their first steps in policing following the tremendous recent recruitment drive made possible by this Government are doing so at an exciting time.

I am afraid the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington got her figures a little confused in a few areas. I suggest that she look at the difference between recorded crime and actual crime, and crime and assaults against police officers rather than overall crime—and indeed the figures on police funding, which I will come to directly in a minute, where I am afraid her facts were a little off.

The crime survey of England and Wales shows that crime is down by more than a quarter. It is at its lowest level since that independent survey began some 35 years ago. But we recognise that crime is changing. Although this Government have always been clear that we do not seek to run policing, nor to decide from the centre how many officers are needed in Hackney or in Halifax, we want to make sure we are playing our part in helping the police to do their job. Where it is right for Government to act, we will, and have done so.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): I want to raise the increase in assaults on police officers at the Notting Hill carnival. What can the Minister do to make that event safe for our good thin line, which works so hard at it?

Brandon Lewis: Public events such as that one pose an extra challenge for our police forces. That is the exactly the kind of event I was seeing police officers, from a number of areas, training for last night. That training has been going on over the past few weeks, so if the people of Wiltshire have been seeing flashing blue lights recently they do not have to panic—they were for training exercises. It is important that we make sure the police have the support and funding they need to continue

not just the recruitment drives to make sure their forces are at the right level—London is at the right level, as, in effect, the highest funded police force in the country—but that sort of training. The College of Policing has a hugely important part to play, which I will come to in a moment. Changes in crime bring with them a need for officers who can adapt—who have up-to-date skills and the energy and innovation to keep renewing them, who are committed to protecting the most vulnerable in our society, who can follow criminals online as well as they can on our streets and who put victims at the heart of what they do.

I do not underestimate the job of our police forces. They are widely and rightly acknowledged as the best in the world. Policing is a hugely challenging career. Police officers will see more than most people would ever wish to. It is clearly not a job for the fainthearted; it needs strength, resilience and a commitment to making our society a better and safer place. But that does not mean that getting assaulted in the workplace is part of the deal or that being abused or hurt while doing the job should be part of the cost of doing business as a police officer. It is not and must not be.

Only this morning, a police officer was seriously injured after an incident in Lancashire. My thoughts—and, I hope, those of the whole House—are with the officer involved and his family. Just yesterday, it was reported that officers were attacked with fireworks by a group of youths in north London. That incident is obviously now being investigated by the police.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Minister has just raised a really interesting point—namely, attacks by youths. Will he comment on the fact that sentencing guidelines with respect to aggravated offences for assaults on police officers do not apply to young people under the age of 18?

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will come to sentencing in a few moments.

Those kinds of assaults, and assaults of any kind, are unacceptable at all levels. Unfortunately, they happen in all parts of the country: whether in Worcester, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire or Warwickshire, there have been examples in just the past few months of assaults that people should not have to put up with and we should not tolerate as a country. Let me be very clear, then, that assaulting a police officer is completely unacceptable, and anyone found guilty should expect to face the full force of the law.

I assure the hon. Members for Hackney North and Stoke Newington and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that tough penalties are available to the courts for those who assault police officers. Sentencing guidelines rightly provide for assault on a police officer to be treated more severely in appropriate cases. I note the hon. Gentleman's point about youths, and I will touch on that in a moment. However, it is right that we remember that courts are independent and must have discretion to take account of all the circumstances of each case in determining an appropriate sentence.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Why, if there is no discretion in relation to victims of knife crime, does the Minister believe the police deserve less protection than that?

Brandon Lewis: I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that the point I am making is that the police deserve our protection and that the sentencing is in place to ensure they have the right protection. Sentencing is not only about protection, but ensuring people who commit an unacceptable offence against a public servant feel the full force of the law. I will come on to that in a bit more detail.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity and fine words, but there is a gap between them and the reality. Today, I spoke to Bryn Hughes, the father of Nicola Hughes, who, as the Minister will know, was murdered in Greater Manchester a couple of years ago. I do not know if he has seen the *Daily Mirror* today, but the headline is "Cop killer's life of luxury behind bars". What message does he think that sends out to people who commit these appalling acts against police officers? I do not doubt his sincerity, but he needs to act on the reality, which is that those people are not being treated harshly enough.

Brandon Lewis: I will hold my hands up and say I have not read the *Daily Mirror* today. I appreciate that that might be a shock to the right hon. Gentleman, and I will make sure I read it later. That offender is in prison. I am happy to look at an individual case and talk to colleagues at the Ministry of Justice about what is happening in that prison, if he thinks that there is an issue, but it is clear that the offender went to prison and it is right that people face the full force of the law. I was slightly surprised by comments made by the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. If the right hon. Gentleman speaks later, perhaps he could outline why the data she referred to as being haphazard were not dealt with in 13 years of Labour government. I will come on to that in more detail in a moment.

We will continue to provide the Sentencing Council with data and evidence on assaults on police officers, as the council reviews its guidelines. We need to better understand the circumstances surrounding assaults. The College of Policing has provided financial support to fund a project, as the hon. Lady rightly outlined, led by Hampshire police to gather and analyse a sample of internal records of assaults against officers. I am working with ministerial colleagues across the Government, such as the Solicitor General, on a range of these issues to ensure that individuals are appropriately prosecuted to the full extent of the law. I fully agree that we need better data to help us to understand the scale of assaults on police officers. We have been working for some time to improve the numbers available.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister mentions 13 years of Labour government. When Labour left office, there were 143,734 officers. There are now 124,000 officers. I should know that because I was the Police Minister in the last Labour Government. I will tell him this, too, while I am on my feet. Under the Labour Government, body cameras were trialled and introduced, with a plan for them to be rolled out in full. I know that, because I was the Police Minister in the last year of that Labour Government. Why do we not have body cameras on all officers, when the plans were there in 2009 to achieve that objective?

Brandon Lewis: I will come on to body cameras in a moment, but I can only confirm what the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said, which is that the data are not there. I do not know what the right hon. Gentleman and other Labour Ministers were doing in not collecting the data, but I will come on to that.

Mr Hanson: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I will finish answering the right hon. Gentleman's question. He can stand up all he likes, but I will finish answering his question whether he likes it or not.

As a first step, we published provisional statistics on officer assaults in July, despite the limitations of the data. The figures indicated that there were an estimated 23,000 assaults on officers across all forces in 2015-16. The data also indicated that nearly 8,000 of those assaults involved injury reported by officers, with 270 reported by police community support officers. On the right hon. Gentleman's initial point, he might be right about the police numbers, but he has to accept that crime is down since 2010, when he left office.

Mr Hanson: The Minister should know, in his role, that policing is not just about crime. Policing is about public order. Policing is about flooding. Policing is about dealing with public issues on the streets with people who are alcohol-intoxicated but have not yet committed a crime. Policing is not just about solving criminal activity. If there are fewer police on our streets, that is more dangerous, particularly if shifts are not working double-manned because of the cut in numbers.

Brandon Lewis: Crime is down; the police are working more efficiently and effectively; they are finding new and different ways to work. That is a good thing, and I think the police should feel proud of their work.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) rose—

Brandon Lewis: Let me make a bit of progress before taking some more interventions.

We are publishing these provisional statistics because it is important to shine a spotlight on this issue and help to encourage the sort of discussion we are having here today. However, to improve the accuracy of these data, the Home Office has continued to work with police forces to build on this work, and I can announce that from next year we are asking police forces to provide data on the number of assaults with injury on a police officer as part of their recorded crime data. Creating this new crime classification is an important step in providing a more complete picture of assaults experienced by police officers. This additional information will help chief officers to understand what is happening in their forces and to protect their officers and staff.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that here in Westminster we are often accustomed to seeing police officers dressed rather as we would have expected Jack Warner to dress in Dock Green. However, what I think is encouraging is that when we come across police officers out in Hampshire, for example, we find them dressed and protected against the very assaults to which my right hon. Friend has referred. That is vital.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, which goes part of the way to answer an earlier point: it is important that we do not control policing centrally; we should resist the urge to centralise everything on the assumption that we know best. It is for local police forces and local chief constables to know their areas best and to look at what they need to do with their police forces for the benefit of their community and indeed their staff.

It is the responsibility of chief constables, as employers, to keep their workforce safe. In that aim, we fully support their making best use of new technology, wherever possible. Although it is an operational decision for chief officers, the use of body-worn video can be a powerful tool. As rightly outlined by the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington—we do not often agree, but we agree on this—it can provide reassurance to both the police and indeed the public about the way in which both parties are working and acting.

In this vital task of keeping their workforce safe, chief constables are held to account by their democratically elected police and crime commissioners, and supported by the College of Policing, which sets the standards that the chief constables are charged with implementing. That is why I have written today to Chief Constable Sara Thornton, the chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, to encourage forces to adopt the new crime classification as soon as possible. In my letter, I have taken the opportunity to stress the importance that this Government place on police officer safety, as I did in my conversation with her earlier today.

Jack Dromey: Will the Minister for Policing put right what he said a few moments ago? It is not true that crime is falling; crime is changing. The Office for National Statistics includes online fraud and cybercrime in its figures. The figures are clear: crime is near doubling on the one hand, at a time when the police service is being cut by 20,000 on the other hand. This is the legacy of the Prime Minister from when she was Home Secretary.

Brandon Lewis: I know that the hon. Gentleman would not consciously get something wrong, so let me suggest that he look again at the facts. He is completely wrong. The ONS is for the first time publishing the figures on cybercrime. This is not extra crime; it is crime that has never been published in the figures before. I have to tell hon. and right hon. Members that recorded crime going up is a good thing, showing that the public are gaining more confidence in reporting crime. The reporting of crime is getting better, but actual crime is down since 2010.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I apologise to both Front-Bench teams, as I will miss their closing speeches on account of my son's parents' evening. I would like to press the Minister on what the Government are doing about body-worn cameras. Given the evidence that such cameras not only reduce the incidence of assaults on police officers about which we are all so concerned, but improve detection and make for a better response to victims of crime, and in light of the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) that plans were in place to try to roll out the provision, what is going to be done now and how fast will it be rolled out everywhere?

Brandon Lewis: I agree with the right hon. Lady, in that I believe body-worn cameras could be a vital tool, providing a good example of a technology that can help. However, it is a matter for the police and crime commissioners and chief constables to decide what is right locally. We do not run policing from the Home Office. Although the transformation fund comes from the Home Office, and is enabling police forces, chief constables and police and crime commissioners to work together closely on IT development for the future, it is for them to decide how to do that, and how to spread the fund and share best practice.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Brandon Lewis: I will take some more interventions in a few moments.

I welcome the work that is being led by chief officers, and by the College of Policing under the leadership of Deputy Chief Constable Andy Rhodes, to consider the broader health and wellbeing of officers who are undertaking a stressful and demanding job on a daily basis. It is encouraging to note that all forces have signed up to the workplace wellbeing charter, and to hear about DCC Rhodes's work with the charity Mind to give officers better access to the care that they need. Last week I was delighted to meet Gill Scott-Moore, chief executive officer of the Police Dependents' Trust, to discuss, among other things, the mental health and wellbeing of police officers. Home Office officials will continue to work with those organisations and with the Department of Health, and to consider what more we can do.

There has already been a great deal of talk about resources today. I am proud of the Government's record on tackling the deficit, and I am clear about the fact that policing has its role to play in meeting that challenge. I remind the House that in 2016-17—notwithstanding what the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington may believe—police spending has been protected, and no police and crime commissioners who maximised their precepts have seen a reduction in their cash funding. That is a good deal for policing. Moreover, on top of that protection of direct resource funding for PCCs, counter-terrorism police funding increased in real terms to £670 million in 2016-17, and transformation funding provides an opportunity to invest in digitalisation, a diverse and flexible workforce, and new and more efficient capabilities to tackle cybercrime and other emerging crimes and threats. Ultimately, all decisions about local policing resources and roles are for chief constables, held to account by their directly accountable police and crime commissioners.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I commend the Minister for telling us that the funding situation is great while keeping a straight face—it is an admirable performance—but how can he possibly square that with the fact that chief constables, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, borough commanders and the Mayor of London all agree that funding and resources are the key challenge to tackling street crime and the other crimes about which my constituents complain?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman has raised a key point. First, we have protected funding in real, cash terms, as is clear from the spending review, so if PCCs are using their precepts, they have that opportunity.

[Brandon Lewis]

Indeed, in certain areas we have increased funding. What really matters is not the tired old debate about officer numbers, much as some people may want to engage in it. What people should be thinking about is the way in which officers, staff and volunteers are deployed, and the results of that approach are showing in the fall in crime that has been taking place since 2010.

Mr Hanson *rose—*

Brandon Lewis: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is very keen to intervene again. I look forward to the speech that he is bound to make later this evening.

Chief officers also have their sights set firmly on how effectively they are using their resources. We should, I think, be focusing on what the police are doing with their time. The proportion of officers in front-line roles has increased across England and Wales since 2010 to 93% in March 2016, and more than 50% of all police officers now work in local policing functions. We have seen forces across the country collaborating to make savings and pooling resources to improve effectiveness without sacrificing local accountability and identity, and they should be proud of having done that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the Minister not recognise the following description? According to the Nottinghamshire Police Federation, officers

“are more often on their own dealing with these situations with back up miles away and with no TASER resources anywhere near them”.

Is that not the reality? Front-line police officers are trying to deal with things, but they do not have sufficient numbers to be properly backed up.

Brandon Lewis: Obviously, the crewing and structure of any organisation is rightly the responsibility of the chief constable, along with the police and crime commissioner. We have ensured that the necessary funding and protection are there this year.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my feeling that some Opposition Members might have benefited from reading last year’s Public Accounts Committee’s report on the demands on the police, which shows that those demands are not related to crime?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are a few areas where Opposition Members might want to look at some of the facts and figures, and not confuse them as much as they seem to be doing.

The tremendous fall in crime I have mentioned already this afternoon was achieved while bearing down on budgets. Central Government funding for the police has fallen in real terms, and we and the police should be proud of the fact that it has saved £1.5 billion of taxpayers’ money.

I am aware of some great examples, such as the strategic alliance between Warwickshire and West Mercia Police. The alliance can now more effectively surge resources to deal with unexpected demand; 24-hour cover is available across more policing functions; more officers and PCSOs are based in safer neighbourhood

teams than in pre-alliance days; and a wider pool of expertise and experience can be tapped to respond effectively to policing challenges.

Robert Ffello: The Minister paints a rosy picture, but what about the families who have lost loved ones because of drivers using mobile phones at the wheel? The Minister clearly does not read newspapers, but quite a few papers today are carrying pictures of drivers using mobile phones. Drivers are killing people, and they are not stopped because there are no traffic police out there to stop them. What does the Minister think of that? Is that somebody else’s responsibility as well?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman should check his facts and have a look at what I said earlier. What I said was I do not read *The Mirror* and I have not read it today. That is not quite what he was saying. He is right, however, that people who commit an offence of any description against an officer should be feeling the full force of the law. That is why I am working with colleagues across other Departments. We have sentencing guidelines, and an offence against a police officer is an aggravating factor. Even with the sentencing of youths, the fact that it is an offence against a police officer is taken into account. The difference in the sentencing systems does not mean that such issues are not taken into account.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that all Members of Parliament who have any concerns about police being attacked have a responsibility not to address organisations that claim that there is a problem with police brutality, as some Members of the Opposition Front Bench have done?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has front-line experience of what police deal with every day, and I congratulate him and everybody who takes on these roles both in that capacity and any other. That goes to the heart of why the changes I announced earlier today are so important. I told the Police Federation what I would do when I first met it just a few months ago, and I am delighted that we will be able to deliver on that. It will give us the information and the certainty the police need and want.

I have been impressed by the speed at which policing has taken the lead in driving the police transformation fund, which provided £23 million for transformation work in August and £13.8 million in October. It is right that the sector takes ownership of law enforcement transformation, shaping the needs of the future. The fund provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform policing through direct investment into a wide range of projects from body-worn cameras to workforce diversity to increasing digitalisation and technology.

As I have said, the Home Office does not believe it runs policing—nor should it. It is for police and crime commissioners and chief constables, working together in the interests of policing as a whole, to lead and implement the next stage of police reform. The Government will continue to provide support to the police, doing what only we can, such as making the important change I have announced today. We will look to police leaders to play their full part in keeping the police, as well as the public whom we all serve, safe. That is why I ask the House to support the amendment.

5.4 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): First, I want to thank my Front-Bench colleagues for putting this issue into the spotlight by making it the subject of our Opposition day debate today. I also want to join the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) in paying tribute to the brave officer who was attacked in Lancashire only this morning. That attack is a stark reminder of just how important today's debate really is. To those who attended my Adjournment debate on police officer safety on 11 October, I apologise for repeating myself.

My interest in this issue stems from the time I spent with West Yorkshire police in my constituency over the summer recess. On Friday 5 August, I joined the police in Calderdale for a 2 pm to 10 pm shift to get front-line experience and to see how the demands on our local police are changing. I was keen to see for myself how well police officers on the frontline in West Yorkshire were coping with cuts of £160 million over five years, resulting in the loss of 1,200 police officers—a reduction of 20% of the force. I spent the afternoon visiting community projects with neighbourhood policing, but I moved over to response policing in the evening, where I joined PC Craig Gallant in reacting to 999 calls.

I had already discussed with the Police Federation and senior officers my concern that, due to a combination of reduced numbers and the ever-expanding responsibilities of the police, officers are regularly being asked to respond to emergency calls on their own as a single crew. Only days before my shift, a female police officer had responded to a domestic call in my district and, disgracefully, been head-butted by an offender, breaking her eye socket and knocking out her teeth. It was not long into my time with PC Gallant before we attempted to stop a vehicle and speak to the driver. The driver initially sped away but after a short chase he eventually stopped. When PC Gallant got out of the car to speak to him, the situation quickly escalated and he was surrounded and forced to draw his baton. I was so concerned for his safety that I rang 999 myself, believing that that was the fastest way to make contact with the control room and stress just how urgently he needed back-up. Thankfully, other officers arrived at the scene to help to manage the situation. Amazingly, no injuries were sustained on that occasion, but I saw for myself just how quickly situations can become dangerous and just how vulnerable officers are when they are out on their own.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The danger that our brave officers face was brought home to me when PC Suzanne Hudson was shot at point-blank range in Headingley in my constituency in 2013. Thankfully she survived and is now back at work, but the impact on her and her brave colleague, PC Richard Whiteley, has been huge. PC Whiteley saved his colleague but was then threatened himself. If they had not been working together as a pair, goodness knows what would have happened. Does the hon. Lady agree that working in pairs should be part of operational police procedure?

Holly Lynch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I think we will hear similar stories from MPs all around the Chamber in the debate today.

During the 30-minute Adjournment debate, to which the Minister referred, I had so much to say, and took so many interventions from hon. Members, all keen to share stories from their own constituencies, that I left the Minister only six minutes to respond, and even then I could not stop myself intervening on him. So I again thank my Front-Bench colleagues for facilitating this opportunity for the Minister in this debate, although I must confess that I am disappointed with the content of the Government's amendment and with the Minister's remarks, which simply did not go far enough in addressing this issue.

An assault on a police officer is an assault on society. It is totally unacceptable that public servants who are working in their communities to protect people and help the vulnerable should be subject to assaults as they go about their jobs. Since taking up this campaign, I have been contacted by police officers from all over the country, most of whom have themselves been on the receiving end of violent attacks. They feel that the failure to take the incidents seriously has just compounded their frustration. I shall give the House some examples. A man who assaulted four officers in the south of England earlier this year, causing serious injury to one officer in particular by gouging his eyes, was ordered to pay compensation and received a two-month suspended sentence. In Nottinghamshire, an officer was punched unconscious while trying to arrest a prolific offender who was already in breach of a suspended sentence. The offender was detained only after assaulting a second officer. He received another 15-week suspended sentence and was ordered to attend a "controlling violence in drink" course.

Increasingly, and terrifyingly, we are seeing acid being used as a means of assaulting police officers. Last year in Warwickshire, a PC was patrolling alone on her bicycle when she saw three men breaking into a property. When she stopped and identified herself as a police officer, she was attacked by the men who pushed her from her bike, kicked her and poured acid on to her face before other police officers could arrive. In my force, a police sergeant who responded—again, alone—to a dispute at a garage in Bradford had acid thrown in his face by an offender who was trying to evade arrest. The offender had nine previous convictions for 19 offences and was already on licence for a four-and-a-half-year jail term. He was sentenced to 20 months, yet the officer was lucky to keep his eyesight.

Police officers who are assaulted deserve the full backing of the justice system. Since my shift with West Yorkshire police, I have been made aware of at least five more assaults on officers in my constituency in the days that followed. What shocked me, and what thoroughly depresses police officers, is that sentences handed down to offenders for assaulting the police often fail to reflect the seriousness of the crime or, more crucially, serve as a deterrent. We make the laws in here, but we ask the police to uphold and enforce them out there. To assault a police officer is to show a complete disregard for law and order, for our shared values and for democracy itself, and that must be reflected in sentencing, particularly for repeat offenders. I therefore ask hon. and right hon. Members to support the motion today, which calls on the Government to implement statutory guidance on sentencing to reflect the seriousness of the crime.

In west Yorkshire—this has been reflected in comments about forces across the country—the police have had to

[Holly Lynch]

weather staggering cuts at a time when their case load is becoming increasingly complicated. I have seen the thin blue line stretched desperately thin as the demands on officers continue to grow. Any officer will say that one of the biggest challenges that is putting additional pressure on the police is the changing nature of dealing with vulnerable young people and adults. In the 24 hours leading up to my time on duty, Calderdale police had safely recovered nine vulnerable missing people, and they were involved in looking for an additional seven the following day. The weekly average for missing people in Calderdale is 43, with 416 a week going missing across the force, 114 of which are deemed to be high-risk individuals.

I have done a series of shifts with front-line services in my constituency and I would recommend it to all MPs. Just last Saturday I spent the evening with out-of-hours mental health services—a whole other debate for another day—and two people were detained under the Mental Health Act, with police crews unable to leave either patient. One patient who had already been assessed required an appropriate bed, and the second required an assessment suite. With neither available owing to pressures on mental health services, the police officers were tied up all night, putting extra pressure on their colleagues who had to prioritise 999 calls on a Saturday night on Halloween weekend.

We have a responsibility to the most vulnerable people to keep them from harm and away from exploitation, but the police cannot be the catch-all for every problem. That is simply not sustainable with reduced numbers. To be honest, they are also not the most appropriate agency to be doing that work. The reality of not having the right answers to such questions is that the police are stretched like never before and, as a result, lone officers—single crews—are regularly asked to attend emergencies and potentially dangerous situations on their own or with fewer officers than are necessary to safely manage the situation.

I want to return to the unpleasant issue of spitting, which I covered in my Adjournment debate. I am all for informed debate about the use of spit hoods as a means of protecting officers from spitting but, to reiterate what I said in that debate, if we are politically uncomfortable with the use of spit hoods, I promise that a police officer somewhere right now will be being spat at and is even more uncomfortable. As well as being thoroughly unpleasant, spitting blood and saliva at another human being can pose a real risk of transmitting a range of infectious diseases, some of which have life-changing or even lethal consequences. We have a duty of care to protect officers from that, wherever possible. Hon. Members may be aware of the tragic case of a policewoman in Kiev in Ukraine, who died earlier this year after having contracted TB from an offender who spat at her while she was arresting him. Only this week in West Yorkshire, a man with hepatitis C was jailed for eight weeks for spitting in the eye of a police officer. If the answer is not spit hoods, it could again be tougher sentencing, but let us have that debate. Let us have it quickly and let us ensure officers on the front line are protected.

Finally—there is a lot more that I could cover, but I want to give others the opportunity to speak—having taken up the “protect the protectors” campaign, I have

been contacted by those behind the Finn’s law petition, which was referred to by the Minister and has now secured well over 100,000 signatures. Finn is a police dog who was stabbed in the head and chest last month while chasing a suspect. I was not aware until now that if a police dog or horse is assaulted, the offender can be charged only with criminal damage. I am delighted that the Petitions Committee has allocated time for a debate on reforming the law to look at ways of giving police dogs and horses more protection to allow them to continue their vital duties of supporting officers and keeping us safe.

It worries me that the ever-growing demands on the police, combined with cuts in numbers, are undermining their ability to do even some of the basics. I call on the Home Secretary and the Minister for Policing to recognise that officers are routinely deployed on their own. When an officer calls for back-up, only boots on the ground will do and numbers matter. I urge all hon. and right hon. Members to support the motion and help to keep our police officers safe.

5.14 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I rise to support the Government’s amendment, and in doing so I mean no disrespect to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is a good person leading a good campaign on police officer safety. As a barrister, I have represented numerous police officers in courts and tribunals, which has brought me into contact with many police officers and cases where they have done work in exceptionally challenging circumstances, day in, day out. Since becoming an MP, I have focused my work with the police in Kingston, and I wish to put on the record my thanks to the Metropolitan police officers there, led by borough commander Glenn Tunstall. They do an amazing job keeping us safe, day in, day out, and this year Kingston became London’s safest borough. We are not as good as we should be at publicising the everyday heroism and excellence of our police officers, which I saw when I went on a ride-along with PCs Donna Hatton and Sarah Skultety, two fine officers who are a credit to policing.

Police officers volunteer to do a fundamentally dangerous job—to walk towards danger where most of us would run away—but they are entitled to have the best protection possible, through kit, training and legislation, and through the full weight of the law being felt by those who assault them.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Kent police and our excellent police commissioner have ensured that all police officers have body-worn cameras to ensure that their safety is taken into account and that those who commit the crimes we are talking about are brought to account. As a result, the number of complaints against the police has also been cut. Does my hon. Friend think all police forces should do that?

James Berry: I most certainly do; this is a matter for local police and crime commissioners, but there has been a reduction in the number of complaints against the police when body-worn cameras have been used, because people know that they cannot try it on when there is evidence. These cameras also provide fantastic evidence in court when a police officer is assaulted. There has been a big improvement in the personal

protective equipment available for the police, although there has been an issue with procurement, which I am glad the Home Office is looking at. When I see people from the Police Federation, one issue they raise is that officers want to be armed more routinely with Tasers, so that they can protect themselves. There is sometimes a misunderstanding about Tasers, as they are not non-lethal weapons, but less-lethal weapons. Unfortunately, people have died after being tasered, but Tasers are to be used only where the officer faces a lethal threat.

Another piece of police protective equipment that has been in the press recently is the spit guard. It is clear to me that if an officer faces being spat at in the face, they should be able, where appropriate, to use a spit guard. Liberty describes spit guards as “primitive, cruel and degrading”, but what I think is primitive and degrading is a police officer being spat at in the face. Perhaps the hon. Member for Halifax would like to send a copy of the *Hansard* report of her speech to the Mayor of London, who seems to have the same problem that Liberty has with spit guards.

The quality of training is another issue that police officers raise with me. Our police officers want to do a first-class job, and to do that they need first-class training so that they can do their job safely and well. I see an increased role here for the College of Policing, which currently validates training. That role would include registering officers who work in specialist areas, and providing syllabuses, validation and re-validation. I hope that that will be done under the banner of a royal college of policing, so that our professional police officers have the professional badge that many others working in professions have.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Police officers also raise the issue of police numbers. Does the hon. Gentleman think the last Labour Government were wrong to increase police officer numbers by 14,000?

James Berry: I think this Government were right to preside over a regime that has seen crime drop to an all-time low, which is why I come on to the subject of budget. All of the things that I have just mentioned and which the hon. Member for Halifax mentioned do require money—there is no getting away from that. This Government have difficult decisions to make about the policing funding formula, which they are currently considering. It is important to remember that, in the last Budget, police funding was protected. The police said that they were grateful for that, and I am pleased that Conservative London Members were able to meet the Chancellor and put their case at this time of unprecedented threat from terrorism. Yes, I accept that the police need money, but as well as money they also need us in this House to give them the tools they need to do their job.

As a Member of Parliament, I stood on a platform of giving the police the tools they need to do their job. We did that in this House with the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. We have all heard stories from police officers in our constituencies about having to deal with somebody who has taken a novel psychoactive substance, has gone berserk, been impossible to restrain and assaulted them. We provided the police with the tools to do their job there, and we are trying to do so again with the Investigatory Powers Bill. We want to give them the tools to tackle the current technology that criminals are using.

I hope that when the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) winds up, she will reflect on how the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) came across to police officers when she made a litany of complaints about that Bill at the Dispatch Box yesterday. How will police officers have felt about that when this Government are trying, through that Bill, to give them the tools they need to do their job—the powers that they have asked this Government to provide for them? For my part, I will continue to support our brave police officers, and I know that the hon. Member for Halifax will as well. I will continue to ask the House to give the police the tools they need, and I will support the Government’s amendment tonight, to do our bit to keep our brave police officers safe, so that when those officers face danger, they know that our laws and our politicians are behind them to keep them safe.

5.21 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech.

I was not elected in a conventional way, and it was in the darkest of circumstances, through the loss of my friend and inspiration Jo Cox, that I came to be here. What happened was not only an attack on a woman, a family and a community; it was an assault on the principles and basis of our democracy. That is why I must first pay tribute to all the political parties that did not stand in the by-election out of respect. There will be many occasions when I passionately disagree with them about a whole host of issues, but today is not that day. I also thank the voters in Batley and Spen—those who normally support my party and those who do not—who lent me their vote this time because, as one woman said with quiet determination:

“We can’t let them win.”

As the manager of a local bar told me while fringe parties leafleted outside her pub:

“That’s not who we are, or what we believe.”

The loss of all those deposits on election night confirmed it, and I will stand tall against those whose only mission is to divide our community.

The election result was a victory for democracy, and the acts of kindness that I saw along the way defined this campaign. Many in this House came to help with the campaign, and they will have seen our vibrant and dedicated voluntary and community sector, which shines even brighter than ever before. They will have seen it in the cups of tea; the cake; the pakoras and samosas; the smiles and the tears; the people in the polling station who donated that day’s pay to Jo’s charitable fund; the stories of Jo’s kindness; and the quiet determination of our community to not let hate divide us. So many groups give support, friendship, assistance and opportunities to others. As one woman from the local Salvation Army put it:

“We have two hands, one to help ourselves and one to help others.”

That is the attitude of our constituency. We understand and enjoy our obligations to each other.

One special highlight during the election campaign was the Walky Talky community event organised by leaders of all faiths, Kirklees Council and Batley Bulldogs.

[Tracy Brabin]

People of all faith and none walked alongside each other, chatting in the sunshine from the town centre to the rugby stadium. When it was finished, people did not want to leave; they were hanging around, not ready to let this warm moment of community connection end. It was in her maiden speech that Jo said that

“what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

It was true then and it is even more the case now. We will never forget the difference that Jo has made and, through her legacy, continues to make. She was and is unforgettable. One gentleman from the community reflected, “Jo was a small woman with a big kick.” I witnessed that kick campaigning alongside Jo and the community to successfully defend Batley and Birstall’s local libraries.

This was a personal campaign for me. As a child growing up in a two-bedroomed council flat, those libraries were my solace, and anyone who is a fan of Ken Loach’s films will notice that more often than not, the turning point for the hero is always when he or she goes to a library to find the information they need. As the world gets ever more confusing and decisions taken about our lives seem further out of our hands, we need those libraries now more than ever.

I also think back to the time when I was six and our local council prevented my family from becoming homeless. Dad had been unemployed for a while and we had fallen behind in the mortgage repayments, so my mum had to hand back the keys to the building society. We would have been homeless had it not been for the council, who found us a roof over our head. But that was not an act of charity. It was a combination of political will and solidarity from local and nationally elected representatives. Today, there are now 14,000 people on the council house waiting list in Kirklees. Affordable housing is further out of reach than ever, and I will work hard to ensure that other families do not suffer the stress and anxiety that we did.

As someone with unique experience in the arts, as an actor and writer, culture will be of particular interest to me, and I know that it can be an engine of change for communities, bringing regeneration and jobs. Our young people in particular deserve nothing less. During the campaign I visited West Yorkshire Drama Academy, watching many working-class kids find their confidence and their voice. I saw myself there.

When I was a young actor and I went to castings, I would be asked where I was from. When I said, “Batley”, more often than not people would say, “Oh yeah, Batley Variety Club!” The fact that this little club could attract international stars such as Louis Armstrong, Shirley Bassey and the Bee Gees meant that there must be something about us that others want! Young people’s futures are more uncertain than ever, but whatever their ambitions, we must give them hope and belief that they can be the best. We have the power and responsibility in this place to help.

I am determined to use my time in this place to do everything I can for our community, whether campaigning to retain access to local NHS services, pursuing policies to end the need for food banks, or doing whatever I can to bring decent jobs and new investment to the

constituency. Like so many in this House, I want to create a society where everyone can contribute and reach their full potential.

Jo continues to inspire me and so many others every day, as does the dignity shown by her husband Brendan and her loving family. I am among her friends, of whom there are many in the constituency, her trade union and this House.

I make this speech during a debate on policing, so I wish to finish with a tribute to the brave officers of West Yorkshire police, who reacted so swiftly and professionally on that awful day in June. A community that could have become overrun with panic, with such a terrible act taking place in broad daylight in the sleepy village that I grew up in, was looked after admirably by our police, in no small part because of the swiftness with which they made an arrest. What happened in Batley and Spen was a violent attack on a Member of this House, but I would like to take this moment to thank the police officers themselves who put their lives on the line every single day. I would also like to congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her hard work on raising this issue.

I take this moment to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your excellent leadership in the aftermath of Jo’s tragic death. Coming to Batley, recalling Parliament, arranging ceremonies and giving people space to grieve and mourn together was a kindness much appreciated by all in this House and beyond.

I am honoured to have the opportunity to do my bit and give a voice to my constituents through this Parliament of ours. That day will stay with everyone in Batley and Spen for the rest of our lives, but Batley and Spen will be defined not by the one person who took from us, but by the many who give. [*Applause.*]

5.29 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). I think I speak for the whole House when I say that that was a truly outstanding maiden speech, and done in the best traditions of the House. Thinking back to my maiden speech, I wish could have made it as well and as competently as that.

I also ought to say that the hon. Lady showed a massive amount of dignity in the election campaign she fought—not just in the campaign itself, but particularly at the count, when she faced some deeply unpleasant barracking during her speech, which she should not have had to experience. She should probably get used to that in this place, but she certainly should not have had to put up with it then.

Having listened to the hon. Lady’s speech, it is fair to say that Jo Cox could not have hoped for a better successor, and I am sure the people of Batley and Spen feel that they could not have hoped for a better successor to Jo Cox. She clearly is going to be a rising star on the Labour Benches, and somebody the Conservative party will have to watch out for in years to come. I commend her on an excellent first speech.

This is a very important subject for me. I asked for a debate on assaults on police officers in business questions a few months ago, and on the back of that I wrote an article on the issue for the *Yorkshire Post*. Therefore, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Halifax

(Holly Lynch), who has done a fantastic amount of work on the issue—I commend her wholeheartedly—has persuaded her party to have a debate on it, and I commend the Labour party for that.

I have to say right from the outset that I am rather sad that the Government have tabled an amendment to the Labour party motion; it seems to be rather splitting hairs, if I may say so. This was an opportunity for the House to speak as one on police assaults. I welcome the fact that the Government have committed not to cut police funding any further, but I do not really see why they could not have supported the motion. Therefore, if we do divide on this issue, I will happily vote for the Labour party motion, because I cannot see anything in it with which I disagree.

I should also say at the start that I actually voted against any cuts to the police budget every year when cuts were proposed, because I believe that the first duty of the Government is to protect the public, and the police budget was not the budget the Government should have been cutting. I therefore endorse everything that the Labour party has said on this issue.

Like the hon. Member for Halifax, I have spent an awful lot of days going out with West Yorkshire police—about 60 or 70 since I first got elected. I have the greatest respect for the officers and the sacrifices they make on a daily basis keeping us safe. One of the most serious consequences of being a police officer is the threat of personal injury, or actual injury, and occasionally worse, in the line of duty.

As has been mentioned, the recording of assaults is not necessarily uniform, and is clearly a bit haphazard. The charging procedure also makes it difficult to follow through on the number of assaults that there actually are. An assault on a police officer will be charged as an assault on a police officer only if it meets certain criteria; otherwise, it could be charged as another violence against the person offence, even though the facts show that the victim was a police officer.

I put in a freedom of information request about two months ago to the Metropolitan police, which showed that there have been broadly 2,000 assaults on police officers in the Metropolitan police area every year for the last three years. When we take those in which injury occurred, there seems to have been an increase from 536 in 2013 to a worrying 869 in 2015, and that is just in London. The figures also show that the most serious incidents—wounding or grievous bodily harm—have increased from 81 in 2013 to 211 in 2015. I have been trying to establish the relevant number in West Yorkshire but have not had as much joy. I have also been wondering whether there should be a specific offence of assaulting a police officer that would cover all assaults and not just some. The name of the offence could encapsulate all offences against police officers. This would certainly make identifying the numbers involved easier, so at least we would know the true picture.

Crucial in this is sentencing. My biggest concern is that while we want to get the numbers right, it is also very important to make sure that the sentencing of such offenders matches the seriousness of the offence. I called for a debate on this not long ago. Again, having one offence could help, but whatever happens, we need tougher sentences. The sentencing guidelines relating to assaulting a police officer were amended a few years ago. We should all be concerned about those guidelines.

At the time, I was told that someone who committed an assault on a police officer that involved a punch to the stomach that winded the officer, where there was an attempt to evade arrest, and where the individual had previous convictions, could in theory be punished only with a fine. I was concerned about that then and I am concerned about it now.

David T. C. Davies: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: Yes, briefly.

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend and I have spent probably 10 years calling for tougher sentences and often being rubbished and criticised by Members in various parts of this House. Is he surprised that so many people are now calling for tougher sentences and saying that prison works and offers a deterrent?

Philip Davies: I am delighted that people are calling for more people to be sent to prison. I have been arguing that case for an awfully long time, and I am delighted that I seem to be getting some traction on it.

The problem with the sentencing guidelines is just the tip of the iceberg. I have asked parliamentary questions about this for a while, and have been shocked to find out that only one in seven criminals convicted of an assault on a police constable in the execution of their duty received a prison sentence at all. In the latest year shown in the figures, 7,829 assaults on police officers were recorded as being dealt with in our courts where the offender pleaded guilty or was found guilty, and yet only 1,002 of the offenders were actually sent to prison. That is completely and utterly unacceptable.

Other parliamentary questions I have asked revealed that someone with an astonishing 36 previous convictions for assaulting a police officer managed to avoid being sent to prison for a further assault on a police officer.

Rehman Chishti: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: I am going to press on, if my hon. Friends do not mind, because other people want to speak and I want to crack on.

This kind of soft, lily-livered approach to sentencing is simply not on. I want to mention a recent example of a case before Bradford Crown court that was not charged as an assault against a PC because of the nature of the incident. It demonstrates the problem that we have. The hon. Member for Halifax mentioned this issue, but I want to emphasise it. Sergeant Andrew Heald, who was arresting a criminal who had an armful of previous convictions and was out of prison on licence, had acid thrown in his face and feared that he had been blinded or disfigured. I cannot imagine how frightening that must have been for that police officer doing his job of protecting the public. The sentence handed down to the lowlife who threw the acid in Sergeant Heald's face was 20 months for the attack and a further 10 months for the offence for which he was trying to arrest him.

I want to be clear that this derisory sentence was not the fault of the judge, as having looked carefully at the sentencing guidelines, it is obvious that he had acted to the best of his ability given the constraints that the guidelines placed on him. This meant that because he

[Philip Davies]

was out on licence, this thug, who should not even have been out of prison in the first place, will serve just 10 months in prison for this vicious attack on a police officer doing his job. There should be a clearly defined additional sentence for anyone who attacks our police officers, and generally the sentences need to be much more severe. The police put their lives at risk to protect us, and the least we can do in this place is to make sure that the law better protects them.

I have also been looking at the use of Tasers by the police. It seems to me that Tasers are currently underused and that if more police had them they might be better able to prevent assaults on themselves in the first place. According to my recent FOI request, just 13% of police officers in West Yorkshire are authorised to carry a Taser. If the police want to carry a Taser to better protect themselves, we should make sure that that is facilitated.

The motion touches on police numbers. As I have made clear, I have voted against cuts to the police budget every year they have been proposed. This should be a priority for the police. If the Government had to save money—which they did—they would have been far better off cutting the overseas aid budget, which lines the pockets of corrupt politicians around the world than cutting the police budget when the first duty of the Government is to protect the public. The fact is that police officer numbers in West Yorkshire have fallen from 5,817 in May 2010 to 4,552 today. That is just not good enough or at all helpful. We need more police officers.

In conclusion, every attack on an officer should always act as a reminder of the bravery of our police and the price that they sometimes pay to protect us. It is only right that the Government and Parliament totally support them in return. Clearly, establishing how many police officers are assaulted is helpful, but toughening up the sentences of those who attack the police as they do their duty is the best thing that this House could do, and this debate is a very good start. For those reasons, I support the Labour motion.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank very warmly the hon. Member for Batley and Spennings (Tracy Brabin) for a quite outstanding maiden speech, and I would like in turn very warmly to thank the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for a typically gracious and poignant response to it.

I am afraid that it will be necessary now to impose a very tight time limit to try to accommodate colleagues, for which I apologise. Some senior Members are affected, but I think they are gracious in acknowledging the need. Four minutes.

5.41 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The outstanding speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings (Tracy Brabin) was a truly memorable parliamentary occasion, as was the fine speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I do not often say this, but the other side of the Pennines has a lot to be proud of, including even the hon. Member for Shipley

(Philip Davies). To elicit from him an emotional reaction and support for the Labour party is a truly big achievement, and my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spennings has managed that today.

This is an important and well-timed debate, because it provides me with an opportunity to put into proper context the recent work that I have been doing on policing. I am sure that some people might see challenging past injustice as in some way anti-police, but nothing could be further from the truth, and I am glad to have the chance to say that. I am pro-police, and I want to do whatever I can to strengthen the position of those out there on the frontline.

There are three ways in which we can do that. The first relates to police numbers and funding, and the second to protecting police officers through the powers we give them and through sentencing. The third is that we can build public trust in our police force by challenging past misdeeds. Unresolved past injustice can infect the present and unfairly leave a cloud hanging over officers on the frontline. It is right to remove it.

I want to touch on each of those three issues briefly. First, on funding, I am afraid that the Minister is wrong to say that the police budget has been protected. It has not been protected; it has been cut in real terms. Greater Manchester police's revenue support grant was cut by £8.5 million this year, and the precept powers that it was given raised only £3.5 million. Let us get these facts straight, because otherwise the public will get confused. About 1,800 officers have already been lost from the frontline. We cannot take these cuts anymore. A story in *The Mail on Sunday* over the weekend said that the thin blue line of Greater Manchester is the thinnest of them all—it is the thinnest in the country. The cuts cannot continue. We need a commitment from the Government to honour their promise of no real-terms cuts to police budgets, because that has not happened.

Secondly, on protection for police officers, body-worn cameras need to be introduced now, because they can protect police officers today. We need a debate about the greater use of Tasers, and we really need to look at sentencing. I have mentioned the Dale Cregan situation previously, but there are other examples. An off-duty police officer, Neil Doyle, was killed in Liverpool. His attacker also committed a violent offence against two other individuals, but he only got three years and will soon be moved to an open prison.

Rehman Chishti: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one area that really affects police officers and the public is drink-driving and driving while disqualified? Repeat offenders can only be given sixth months' custody—it does not matter whether it is a second, third or fifth offence—so we have to review the sentencing on that. My previous private Member's Bill was designed to increase the maximum sentence to two years. Does he think that that is a good idea and that we should do it?

Andy Burnham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have always been too lenient on motoring offences, particularly death by dangerous driving.

I was talking about police officers, who need greater protection in law and in the sentencing guidelines. The Police Federation said today that the sentences that are handed out are often inadequate and inconsistent, and they simply do not provide the strong message that is

required. We must resolve across the House to strengthen those sentencing guidelines, and I want to make my support for that absolutely clear.

I will finish on the point of public trust in the police. I believe we are all sent here to challenge injustice wherever we find it. Where we have evidence of it, we have a moral duty to act. Failure to do so corrodes the bond of trust between public and police, and it damages policing by consent. The decision on Orgreave this week was, in my view, wrong, and it makes it harder for the South Yorkshire police to move forward. That decision does not help officers in South Yorkshire who are out there on the frontline, because it leaves a cloud hanging over them.

Let me give the House a quick quote:

“Historical inquiries are not archaeological excavations... We must never underestimate how the poison of decades-old misdeeds seeps down through the years and is just as toxic today as it was then. That’s why difficult truths, however unpalatable they may be, must be confronted head on”.

I could not agree more with those words—the words of our Prime Minister to the Police Federation this year. She is right, so what has changed? Why are we now pushing away those things and leaving them unresolved?

The Government have made their decision, but this House should make a different decision. I have today advanced the idea, based on the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), that a Select Committee should look at Orgreave. In my view, that is the right thing to do. I appeal to Members from all parts of the House to back that suggestion, so that we can build trust in our police and give them proper funding and protection.

5.46 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I am delighted to be able to speak in this important debate, and I am glad that the Opposition have secured it. I spent nine years as a special constable, during which time I was assaulted—once in a police station, of all places, although not by another police officer. I echo many of the comments that have been made by Members from all parts of the House.

I am particularly keen on sentencing. It is fantastic that Members from all parts of the House are saying firmly that they want stronger sentences for people who commit assaults on police officers. I have stood here many times over a decade or more, as a Government Member and an Opposition Member, and argued that prison works, prison is effective, prison keeps people safe and prison acts as a deterrent. Many times, I have been intervened on by Opposition Members—and, sometimes, by Government Members—who have told me otherwise. There seems to be a strong consensus here, however, and I thoroughly support that.

I thoroughly support the use of Tasers. At the moment, all police officers are equipped with pepper spray or CS gas, as was the case when I started, and a long, retractable stick of metal called an ASP, which is basically a long baton. The problem is that the baton has to be used quite close up, and there is a risk of causing a severe injury by striking somebody in any way with a baton. Police officers are trained to use a baton against the legs and arms, but that is difficult to do in the sorts of situations where those batons are pulled out. The advantage of Tasers is that people can stand 10 or

15 feet away and point it. The vast majority of times when a Taser is used, all the police officer has to do is to draw it and draw to the potential offender’s notice the fact that there is a red dot on their chest. The potential offender will very often desist from whatever they are doing and comply with the instructions they are given, without receiving any injury at all.

When I was a special, there was at one point a debate about the possibility of police officers being armed. I felt that I would never be able to do the job if I was armed with a firearm. I simply could not do that. I have the utmost respect for the highly trained officers who do, but the decision to use it is not something that I would ever want on my conscience. Using a Taser is something else. It is a far less offensive weapon than the retractable iron bar with which all police officers are equipped.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s argument, but he will be aware of a case earlier this year in Telford where the footballer Dalian Atkinson was killed in an incident. We do not know all the circumstances, and generally I support the use of Tasers, but does the hon. Gentleman not think that that case should give us pause for thought before we go for a major roll-out?

David T. C. Davies: It should. We could go into the details of why people sometimes die as a result of Taser use, and it is very rare for that to happen, but that should certainly give us pause for thought. If the alternative is a police officer waving around an iron bar, which could easily strike somebody on the head and similarly injure them very badly or kill them, we have to look at what is the lesser of two evils. For me, the use of Tasers is the lesser of two evils.

I want to go quickly through a couple of other points. I, too, support the use of body cameras. They will enable people to see the problems that police officers face and help to bring more people to justice. I worry, however, that some people may see them as another way of being able to criticise the police. It is very important that people understand two things. First, police officers are under stress when they are threatened by a large group telling them, “We’re going to kill you. We’re going to attack you now.” That has happened to me and, frankly, it creates a certain amount of fear. I could not have admitted that at the time, but it does. Police officers cannot get away from the threat in front of them, and one of the ways they deal with it is to become quite aggressive in their language, and certainly in their gestures and sometimes in their behaviour. People must understand that when they look at camera footage. Secondly, it is a fact that when police officers have finished dealing with such a situation, they sometimes go back into the station and make comments or use language that some people, taking that out of context, may feel is inappropriate. We will have to be grown up and understand that when we look at camera footage.

I worry that the use of cameras by protesters at demonstrations is quite often a means to criticise the police very unfairly. For example, I have seen pictures in national newspapers of police officers looking very fierce and holding up an ASP as though ready to strike somebody. They are doing that because that is what they are trained to do. By the time a police officer has to draw a retractable baton, they are expected to behave in

[David T. C. Davies]

an aggressive fashion. There is no point waving it gently around saying, "Excuse me, sir, would you mind going home now?" By the time that thing is out, people must realise that the police officer means business, and they very often do so. I am worried about the way in which such cameras are used.

I will not be able to sum it up in one minute and 20 seconds, but there is a wider issue, which is the need to consider the whole way in which the police force is structured. It seems to me that we take everyone and train them to be out on the streets, but we can give them only two days training a year in how to use handcuffs, restraints, batons and all the rest of it, which is not enough for those who are going to end up in conflict situations.

I can absolutely say from bitter and true experience—most officers would reflect this—that all the stuff taught during those two days in the gym soon goes out of the window. It all looks very good in training, but once it happens for real, there is just a mass of arms and legs and batons and heavens knows what flying around all over the place, and it does not look good. Yet many police officers frankly do not need to be put in such situations. Those who deal with cybercrime need to be IT experts; they do not need to be able to run after people and catch them. Those who deal with financial crimes need to be accountants. Even those dealing with and investigating serious crimes need to have a lawyer's mind, rather than be able to run 100 metres in 10 seconds. I sometimes think that we could look at the different jobs being done in the police force and consider whether we need police officers to have all the skills that we currently require them to have. I will not have enough time to go into further details, but I want to say one more thing. It behoves us all as Members of Parliament to support the police, not to pander to groups or organisations that are there to criticise them.

5.53 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her fantastic maiden speech? I want to tell her that I thought she did Jo Cox's memory a fantastic service. The integrity and honesty with which she spoke brought tears to the eyes of many people in the Chamber. The words she said about you, Mr Speaker, and everyone else shows her integrity as an individual and how outstanding an MP she will be for Batley and Spen. I am sure that Jo Cox, if she is looking down on us, and certainly Brendan and all the family will have seen her speech and will treasure it. Her fantastic speech moved all of us.

May I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on obtaining this important debate? I say that as the son of a man who was a Metropolitan police officer for 30 years.

The Minister has some very real questions to answer at the end of this debate. Let us remind ourselves that we are talking about 23,000 assaults on police a year, which is more than 63 a day. Of those assaults, 8,000 involve an injury, which is some 21 a day. In my police force in Nottinghamshire, there were 45 self-reported assaults and 267 assaults without injury. To me, each of those is an assault not just on an individual police

officer, as bad as that is, but on the symbol of the rights of us as individuals to live in a democracy under the law.

When the Minister responds, will she say whether she is satisfied that the law on police officer assaults is satisfactory? In particular, the hon. Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick) mentioned the Notting Hill carnival. Many of those assaults were by young people who are not covered by the sentencing guidelines on assaults on police officers, which refer to people who are 18 or over.

The House deserves a better answer to the questions from the shadow Home Secretary and others about the Government's policy on body-worn video cameras and how they will be rolled out. It is not good enough for the Government to turn around and say it is an operational matter. Surely the Government have a view on whether it should be accelerated or encouraged.

Andy Burnham: There were 864 assaults on police officers in Greater Manchester last year—a force that is seeing cuts to the frontline. To listen to the Minister this afternoon, one would think everything is rosy, but morale is very low. What does my hon. Friend think the Government need to do to lift morale, because I believe it is dangerously low?

Vernon Coaker: My right hon. Friend makes a really good point. The first thing to do is to listen to what police officers are saying. The Government seem to be living in a parallel universe. They say the funding is fine, there is no problem with police morale and there is no problem with police numbers, yet, like my right hon. Friend, we all see very real problems in our constituencies around morale and policing.

As my right hon. Friend says, we see the backdrop of huge cuts to police numbers, with nearly 20,000 cut since 2010. In my force in Nottinghamshire, the number of officers is down by 122 and the number of PCSOs by 62 since 2012. The only response of Ministers to that seems to be that it has no impact whatsoever on policing on our streets.

I want to draw the Minister's attention to an excellent article in *The Mail on Sunday* this week, which revealed the really low numbers of police on duty at night, when many of the most serious crimes are committed. It had a table obtained by a freedom of information request with the number of response officers on duty on the nightshift of 9 April 2016. Members of Parliament will be able to look up the figures for their own forces, but Nottinghamshire had just 75 or one per 11,000 people. That simply is not enough.

It is not good enough for the Minister to say that it is an operational matter. Do the Government not have a view on the number of front-line officers there should be protecting the public, rather than turning around and saying, "It's nothing to do with us. It's an operational matter"? Surely the Government should take a view on that matter and discuss it with chief constables.

It is important to draw attention to the article in *The Mail on Sunday* that refers to the number of response officers. It is clear that police safety is put at risk by the increase in police officers having to go out on their own. There are not sufficient officers and it is about time the Government took a view on that, rather than washing their hands of it. I look forward to the Minister's response on that.

5.59 pm

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I welcome this debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on her campaign to protect the protectors.

For the past year I have taken part in the police service parliamentary scheme, which I would wholeheartedly recommend to all Members of Parliament. It has given me a unique window on the world of everyday life in the police force and the tasks that the police have to undertake on our behalf. I have shadowed various departments in Essex police and seen the incredible work that members of our police service do daily, the challenges and dangers they face, and the frankly astonishing levels of commitment to public service they show. I put on the record my thanks to Essex police for helping me take up that opportunity.

Many of the brave men and women in our police recognise that we are in a challenging period for policing. At a time when the Government are asking them to do more for less, they have absolutely risen to the challenge. Front-line officers put their own safety at risk every day in order to keep people like ourselves safe. I have heard first-hand accounts of officers being punched, kicked, spat at and even bitten, not to mention receiving verbal threats.

Spitting has already been discussed. Although it is often not seen as causing physical harm, not only is it truly disgusting but, as has been mentioned, there are real health risks involved. I would like to have a wider debate on spit hoods. If anyone feels squeamish about them I encourage them to put themselves in the position of an officer being spat at.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I recently went out on a ride-along with officers from Essex police. I witnessed a suspect who was being restrained attempting to spit at a police officer. It was a really ugly thing to see. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must look more seriously at the option of spit hoods, because if we really want to protect our police officers we need to do something concrete?

Rebecca Harris: Absolutely unquestionably—spitting is a revolting thing to do. Often the last resort for someone being arrested is to try to spit, out of spite.

We have already heard about the around 23,000 assaults on police officers across the country. I was shocked to learn that there were just under 700 assaults in Essex alone. However, many more go unreported, sometimes because officers feel the offence is so commonplace it will not be pursued and, more worryingly, that the sentence will perhaps not reflect the assault's effect on the officer.

The innovation of body-cams has been very effective in its roll-out in Essex. The cameras have reduced assaults on officers and increased the possibility of prosecutions. But they do not in themselves deal with the inconsistency on reporting, sentencing or prosecution. I spoke to the chair of the Essex branch of the Police Federation about officer experience post assault. What I heard was largely very positive with regard to how the force itself supports its officers. However, the chair stressed again and again that there were incidents where

the psychological effect on the victim of an attack was not taken into account in sentencing, whereas it would be for many other crimes.

It is right that the courts, through the independence of the judiciary, have discretion to take into account the circumstances of each case in determining the appropriate sentence, but in cases of assaults on officers, courts really need to consider the implications for the officer's mental health. When a sentence is very low or non-existent, there is further psychological damage to the officer involved; they feel undervalued, unappreciated and not paid the respect they deserve for putting their lives on the line for us on a daily basis. That is not good enough. We must protect the very people who do so much to keep us safe. It must be clear that any attack on a police officer will be punished to the fullest extent of the law. The independent Sentencing Council produced the guidelines; it is important it recognises how seriously the public feel about attacks on serving police officers.

We should not fall into seeing attacks on police officers as a hazard of the job or as in some way so everyday an occurrence that they are less significant than assaults on members of the public. I urge everyone to take the contrary view: that such attacks ought to be judged more severely, as police officers deserve our protection and support in return. That point must be repeatedly stressed to the Crown Prosecution Service. Anecdotally, we know that there are concerns about the wide variation around the country in the approach taken by the CPS towards assaults on officers. The message needs to go out to the CPS loud and clear that assaults on police must be charged at the most appropriate gradation, and that that must be consistently applied across the country. Likewise, I would like the message to go to the judiciary that they must understand that we want the police to have the full support of the law behind them.

I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement that police forces will be required to record offences against officers properly as part of their crime statistics. Our police service is absolutely second to none in the world, which is why they need support from us that is second to none.

6.4 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank those on the Labour Front Bench for choosing this topic for debate today and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for championing this issue. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her brilliant maiden speech, which was very moving. We look forward to many more.

I put on record my thanks to hard-working police officers and support staff, both on the frontline and in the back office. From dealing with Gwent police as the local MP and from my time on the police force parliamentary scheme, I know just how hard police officers and support staff work. I know their complete dedication to serving the public and how tough their job is.

In the firm opinion of the people who contacted me prior to this debate with powerful stories to tell that deserve to be aired, the cuts have depleted numbers on the frontline and certainly impacted on front-line capabilities, as well as increasing the risks to officer

[Jessica Morden]

safety. In Gwent, we have 1,127 police officers, whereas in March 2010 there were 1,437 full-time equivalent officers—a 20% cut. I am pleased that this year Gwent is recruiting new officers for the first time in three years, but we have had a loss of hundreds of experienced officers. Cuts of that severity are bound to have an effect. It will take time to bring the new people through.

As has been reiterated in this debate, we lack reliable data on incidents involving officers. We need that data, so we are better able to tackle the problem. Police officers have told me that they agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax when she says that the thin blue line is stretched far too thinly. Single-crewing is common practice and there is a heightened risk of harm because of that. Officers also tell me that numbers on a shift may look fine, but they do not relate to the numbers available to deal with crime. Shift numbers often include those on leave, on sick or on secondment. If we take off those waiting in custody or with injured people, the numbers are significantly lower.

Injuries sustained in the line of duty are far too frequent. They are becoming an acceptable part of the job and that should never be the case. It is not just a hazard of the job: it is clearly unacceptable. Officers report a noticeable reduction in respect for police officers and assaulting a police officer is not taken sufficiently seriously. I support the call in the motion for statutory guidance on sentencing uniformly across the country, which reflects the seriousness of the issue.

Police officers cannot protect us if they cannot protect themselves. I will just finish with this: a woman who is married to a police officer contacted me to describe just how the injuries her husband sustains in the course of his work affect the family. It has got to the point where, to stop their children worrying, the couple lie about how he sustains his injuries. She says:

“According to my children he is the clumsiest dad ever, as we have had to tell them ‘dad fell over a bin chasing someone,’ ‘dad walked into a cupboard door in the station,’ ‘dad caught himself on the police car door.’ I am tired of seeing my husband come home injured and having to lie to my children about how he sustained his injuries. I worry every time he is late home and grateful every time he returns home safely.”

It is time that we did more—to say that that is unacceptable for such families and to support our officers who are out there on our behalf.

6.7 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): In 2003, PC Patrick Dunne was a Sutton resident serving in Wandsworth when he arrived in Cato Road in Clapham on his bike to deal with a minor domestic abuse call-out. Hearing gunfire, he rushed out into the street and was hit by a single pistol shot in the chest, which killed him instantly. His murderer, Gary Nelson, laughed with his colleagues and fired a celebratory shot in the air, before driving off leaving two dead bodies behind, including the victim of the original gunshot. Nelson was caught, prosecuted and sentenced to 35 years. Sutton’s serious crime office, which is attached to our main police station, is named Patrick Dunne House, reminding us every day not only of his bravery, service and life, but the threat our police officers face each day.

In 2009, PC Paul Dalton, a member of the Wrythe safer neighbourhoods team in Sutton next to where I live, was on shift walking close to a local funfair on a Sunday. He was stabbed in the neck with a wine bottle in an unprovoked attack. He bravely managed to chase his assailant and make an arrest. Fortunately, his stab-proof vest prevented a more severe injury, and the person was arrested and jailed for five years. In London terms, Sutton is a low-crime borough, and residents do not expect that sort of violence, but police officers know that, however unlikely, something could happen at any time. As well as policing more dangerous areas than Sutton, Met police officers have to police public events and demonstrations, and face constant terrorist threats.

I have seen demonstrations turn ugly here in Westminster and the pressure that police officers come under when that happens. Six years ago, I watched from Bellamy’s café as protesters outside, right in front of us, picked up rubble from roadworks with the clear purpose of throwing it at police officers. I can only stand in awe of how police officers keep their nerve, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), along with their patience and their discipline, and I have seen how pumped up they are at the end of their shifts. Parliament Square that day looked like a war zone, with fires all around.

Today, assaults on officers are still too frequent—frankly, just one is too many. Operational changes, as we have heard, as well as changes in sentencing and sentencing advice can help. Police officers face risks from spitting, including hepatitis, and may have to take courses of powerful anti-viral drugs, for up to three months, that can cause severe nausea.

I was very disappointed when the Mayor of London abruptly pressed the pause button at the last minute on the trialling of spit guards. As London’s equivalent of a police and crime commissioner, the Mayor is no longer a lawyer who represents people claiming against the police; he represents the police officers and their welfare, and he represents Londoners, so it is for him to maintain their safety. I hope he will look again at this issue.

As we have also heard, body cameras are a useful innovation for reducing complaints about police officers. I read an interesting report by the University of Cambridge, which suggested that incidents of assaults had increased for those wearing body cameras by 15%. The university acknowledged, however, that far more research needs to be done to explain what lies behind that.

A number of Members lobbied the then Chancellor of the Exchequer to protect the police budget and protect police numbers last time. We want to make sure that our brave police officers are out and about, acting as a visible deterrent, but also keeping us safe.

6.11 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today’s very important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on spearheading this cause and on the powerful case that she made. A very moving maiden speech was also given by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

In common with other hon. Members, I have the utmost respect for our police officers and for the job they do in keeping our communities and our country

safe. Over the past few months, I have had the privilege of taking part in the police service parliamentary scheme. I have always felt, albeit from a distance, that police officers go over and above the call of duty when carrying out their role. During my time on the parliamentary scheme, as I shadowed police officers in the course of their duties, I was impressed at first hand by just how committed and passionate they are.

It is alarming that, last year, an estimated 23,394 police officers were assaulted while undertaking their duty. This equates to 64 assaults every day. Police numbers have been much reduced since 2010, with the loss of about 19,000 officers. Clearly, this reduction puts added pressure on police officers and has a detrimental impact on morale and officer safety.

Most people do their jobs in safe surroundings, while police officers face dangerous situations and risk their own safety every day. As people who work hard on behalf of society to keep us all safe, police officers deserve to have the full backing of the law in the event that they are assaulted. That assurance will give officers the confidence that they will be fully supported and protected by the criminal justice system.

In my experience, the vast majority of the public do respect the police and the job they do. Luckily, most people do not have direct contact with police officers, but are reassured that the police are there doing their job to keep them and their communities safe. Unfortunately, a few openly attack or assault officers. We must all send a strong message that that is unacceptable, and those who seek to harm officers will indeed face severe consequences and robust sentencing on conviction.

We know that police officers put themselves in harm's way in the course of their duty, and they do it selflessly. However, the view that being assaulted is "just part of the job" cannot be right. An assault on a police officer doing their lawful duty is, as we heard earlier, an assault against society. Currently, such assaults are covered by section 89 of the Police Act 1996. However, although sentencing allows for a custodial sentence of up to six months, the reality of a conviction for assault on a police officer is rare. It is more common for a caution, a fine or a suspended sentence to be imposed. Latest official figures show that 7,829 criminals were convicted of assaulting police officers last year, but only 1,002 of them were sent to prison.

Most of my constituency is covered by South Wales police, but a third is covered by Gwent police. Both forces have recorded instances of assault, including biting and spitting at officers. As we know, the seriousness of assaults varies, but in many cases officers are off work for some time. Obviously much distress is caused to the individuals involved, but during the periods when they are off work an even greater strain is imposed on police workloads.

I support the motion, and I urge other Members to do so as well.

6.15 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate, and to have another opportunity to discuss this issue. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is a strong advocate for police officer safety and who, as we have heard, initiated an Adjournment debate on the subject in which I was happy to participate.

When people become police officers, they understand that they will face risks, and I well remember the risks that I faced during my 32-year career in the Metropolitan police. I received a few pokes myself, but I am glad to say that I survived them. In my view, however, an assault on a police officer constitutes an assault on our values, on our civilised way of life and on our society, and should attract the strongest punishment that the criminal justice system can offer. It is vital for the system to use the strong sentencing guidelines and the full extent of the law to punish those who assault officers. I am sorry, but a caution, a fine or a suspended sentence is not adequate or appropriate. We must send the clear message that any assault on a police officer—on our society—will be met with the full force of the law. Moreover, it is imperative that we take our duty of care with the utmost seriousness, and that means giving officers the proper equipment and protection to enable them to deal with the myriad threats that they now face.

Many of us have areas in our constituencies that are major night-time hotspots, and there are problems in managing such areas. There can be hundreds of pubs and clubs in small areas in a city, with long licensing hours and poor management of drunken and aggressive behaviour. That puts the police in direct confrontation with people who have been allowed to drink to excess, have been thrown out of clubs or have been involved in violent incidents. It must be said that that culture only grew under the Labour Government, with the 24-hour licensing laws and the so-called pavement culture that was fostered under Tony Blair. We need to look again at those laws, at the management of certain premises, and at the way in which pubs and clubs deal with people who are violent if we are to change the environment that causes a large number of assaults on police. It is vital that we do that if we are to have a serious debate about tackling such behaviour.

Long custodial sentences are imperative, not just for the purpose of punishment but, in particular, to protect society from this loutish conduct. However, for the sake of officers throughout the country, we must also try to tackle the behaviour—or the lack thereof—that is at the root of some of the problems. There are, of course, other problems, but I wanted to introduce that issue to the debate in the hope that it will be discussed further.

There is much to agree with in the motion, but we need to be clear about the issue of police numbers. It is, of course, incredibly important for us to have sufficient officers to tackle and prevent crime and antisocial behaviour. However, as one who has managed resources and police officers and who remains in constant contact with former and current officers, I know that it is far too simplistic to concentrate solely on the issue of numbers. This is about giving the police the proper technical resources and equipment, and about the correct management and deployment of those resources. Senior management must use the techniques and resources that are available to 21st-century police forces to manage their forces properly and deploy them in the right way if we are to continue to cut crime and tackle the root causes of criminal and antisocial behaviour.

In the case of police assaults, there is no substitute for strong custodial sentences. If we are to tackle assaults on those who protect and maintain our society—

[Byron Davies]

which, in turn, constitute attacks on that very society—we must ensure that the police are secure in the possession of the very best equipment, and are themselves protected by determined prosecutors who deal with these cases in a way that ensures that serious and severe custodial sentences ensue.

6.19 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The average police officer will be assaulted every five or six years that they serve. It is easy to forget that those officers, despite their exceptional work, are regular people; they go to work to earn a living, to put food on the table and a roof over their family's head. They should not have to put up with the threat of not coming home in one piece. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to all who put themselves in danger to protect us, and, as this debate has shown, we are extremely grateful for the work they do. However, it is our responsibility not only to recognise the problem before us, but to deal with it, too.

The Police Federation has claimed that lenient sentences given to those who assault officers are one of the main reasons that so many officers are harmed. Every force in the UK has incidents each week of police officers receiving punches to the face, bites to the arms, and cuts to the head, but the perpetrators are often let off without custodial sentences. On the occasions when a sentence is given, they can be woefully short. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) have already raised this, but it is worth repeating: in one instance, a man found guilty of throwing acid in an officer's face to avoid arrest was given a sentence of only 20 months. I do not think any Member of this House can contemplate how that must make the officer and their family feel.

Officers in our community have been clear time and again that they believe their safety is endangered by the weak sentences given to those who assault officers. We must take those claims seriously and consider tougher sentences for those who attack the police.

We should also consider the increased danger that officers can be in during single staffed patrols. I know that many officers are concerned that they are at increased risk while on their own and it is not right that they are so often forced into such situations. As police numbers have been cut under this Government, single staffed patrols have increased. By the end of the last Parliament, budget cuts meant that my police force, South Wales police, had 500 fewer officers. The result of this is increased single staffed patrols that put officers in danger, as well as those whom they work to protect. Single staffed patrols too often leave officers in serious peril. If we do not listen to the warnings about budget cuts and the consequential increase in officers working on their own, we will see the effects on police officer safety.

Over the course of this debate alone, some nine police officers will have been assaulted. There will always be instances of police officers being in danger, but those instances need not so often lead to our officers being physically harmed. The police are clear that there are solutions to improving police officer safety—and whether through less lenient sentences or increased funding—we should listen and take note of what they are saying; after all, they are the experts.

6.22 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) and also the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), which reminded me of 18 months ago when I was on this Bench listening to her predecessor, someone who was so full of energy, so full of passion and so full of life—a life that was, sadly, taken away. It is apt that we were reminded earlier today that more unites us than divides us when we are in the Chamber. It is the heart of our democracy, and we are surrounded by reminders of past Members who have given their lives for those principles.

This debate on police officer safety is welcome, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who has done so much work on it. Our police officers have a long history of dealing with difficult and violent individuals, and it is right that they should feel they have the protection of the law when they do so. I am thinking particularly of those who show bravery every day on the streets of south Devon and Torbay and those who have in many cases put their own lives at risk to try and save others, either when dealing with a criminal situation or when coming across someone in distress or need.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) talked about Devon and Cornwall being a sleepy area, and he may not have meant it in the way it came across, but although Devon and Cornwall have beautiful areas and villages, Torbay has its share of issues and difficulties, like many other coastal communities, and the level of assaults we have seen on officers is concerning, with 267 in an 11-month period and a—thus far unaudited—further 26 assaults last month. To see people who are serving the public being dealt with in that way gives all of us cause for concern.

I welcome the way in which this debate has been conducted. Most police forces around the world carry firearms for protection, and it is a huge compliment to our own police that they stand firm behind the principle that we police by consent and not at the point of a gun. We see far too many incidents in the United States that would never warrant the use of lethal force or firearms being drawn in this country. It is a real compliment to our officers that the vast majority of them go out there every day without being armed with a lethal weapon. That said, it is right that police forces in places such as Devon and Cornwall are considering the expanded use of Tasers and spit hoods to deal with those who use violence, those who will not co-operate when arrested and, crucially, those who put others at risk.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on what we ask our officers to do. Some contributions to the debate seemed to suggest that they deal only with crime. The nature of crime is changing, and last year's Public Accounts Committee's report drilled down into that subject. We considered the situations that we are now asking response police officers to go into. I ask the Minister to tell us when we can look forward to a revised funding formula, particularly in the light of the benefits that that will have for Devon and Cornwall. I also want to highlight the Bills dealing with animal cruelty that will be debated here on Friday 24 February. They might help to deal with some of the issues relating to assaults on police dogs and horses. It is bizarre that at the moment someone can be charged with such an offence and receive a

similar sentence to one that they would receive for damaging property. The Library notes show a worrying decline in the average custodial sentences given to some offenders, and I hope that the new sentencing guidelines will help to deal with that. I welcome this debate, and I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to the officers who show such bravery each and every day.

6.26 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her excellent maiden speech. I should also like to thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing this debate and for doing so much work on this matter. I am sure the House will appreciate that assaults on police officers cannot be brushed off as an occupational hazard. Figures obtained from South Wales police show that a total of 631 days were lost due to work-related assaults in one year. North Wales police say that assaults on officers are a daily occurrence.

The first problem that we should address is the lack of accurate recording of assaults against police officers. The Plaid Cymru police and crime commissioner for the North Wales police force, Arfon Jones, has secured sufficient budget allocation to ensure that he can realise his manifesto pledge to supply every police officer with body-worn video equipment while on duty. Body-worn cameras collect evidence that has proved beneficial in securing domestic violence convictions as well as protecting individual officers from malicious complaints and physical assault. There is thus a justice result in having these cameras. It became evident to me, during the time that I was lucky enough to spend with Sergeant Alex Baker and other North Wales police officers on the police parliamentary scheme earlier this year, that body-worn cameras were greatly welcomed for those very reasons. Powerful initiatives such as these should be extended as a matter of good practice. The Government cannot use the police and crime commissioners as an excuse for shrugging off such a fundamental responsibility.

The other point that I want to make is about cuts to front-line policing. It is not a fair response on the part of the Government to say that police spending is now protected. The police are suffering from the previous budget cuts, whose effects are now becoming statistically evident. We have seen a reduction in police officer numbers of 1,300 in Wales since 2010. Last year's police funding formula would have resulted in a £32 million cut to Welsh forces, which would have caused Welsh police severe difficulties, as I am sure Members can imagine. Last year's review of police funding sought to place greater emphasis on socioeconomic data and more general crime figures, but such a formula does not properly consider the workload differences of each force.

Figures provided by Dyfed-Powys police indicate that funding for Welsh forces in line with population would result in an additional £25 million for Wales. Of course, if policing were devolved to Wales—a position supported by all four police and crime commissioners in Wales—the overall Barnett formula for funding public services would indeed be based on population. As an aside, I would observe that Welsh forces are facing these significant cuts only because control over policing is retained in Westminster. This is particularly important when we consider that policing is devolved to Scotland and Northern Ireland, where the new formula will not apply.

When I have been out with the police, particularly the armed response and dog handler units, I learned about real concerns that the drive to work in alliance with neighbouring forces, arising from the long-term cuts agenda, would result in yet more police officers being put in dangerous situations without sufficient back-up. Of course, there are advantages to co-operation, especially for training, but there is also a tendency to locate officers in areas where the likelihood of certain types of crime is highest. That intrinsically disadvantages officers and the public in rural areas, where they can run the risk of finding themselves unreachable in emergency situations, which is beyond the pale.

In conclusion, I am in favour of the motion, but with one big caveat: that, in line with police and crime commissioners in Wales, policing is devolved and sufficiently funded to ensure that police officers are able to continue their excellent work in Wales.

6.30 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): This issue has always been of personal importance to me. For nearly 30 years, my father was a West Midlands police officer, serving in the mounted branch and the firearms unit. In the 1980s, I remember kissing him goodbye as he went off to police football matches and riots, city centre riots and, yes, Orgreave. Having seen all that makes watching footage of assaults on police officers that bit more real. It is even more devastating when the person going home injured is one's own father.

West Midlands police officers do a heroic job under consistent pressure to perform. Any assault on any police officer or PCSO is clearly totally deplorable, and those convicted of such assaults must expect a strong and lengthy prison sentence. Ever since the reforms of Robert Peel, we have policed by consent. It is right that the Minister reiterated what he said in the Adjournment debate called by the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) about the public having to

“understand that a police officer is to be respected and is there to serve the community.”—[*Official Report*, 11 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 283.]

Police officers are not there to stand by while they are abused and assaulted. Any use of force must be proportionate, but assessing that cannot be done with the cold rationalism of someone based in an office; it must be viewed from the standpoint of someone who genuinely feels that their personal safety and that of those around them is at risk.

During the summer recess, I did a night shift on patrol with West Midlands police around Dudley borough. The officers explained the difference that body cameras, 1,600 of which have been bought with co-funding from the Home Office, are already making as they get issued to all neighbourhood and response officers. Many Members will have seen the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology's briefing from last year, which highlighted several benefits from the initial trial that have now been backed up by the experience in the west midlands. In fact, since the camera roll-out there has been a 10% increase in cases proceeding to charge, a 9% increase in early guilty pleas and, staggeringly, a 93% fall in complaints against police officers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: I am afraid that I cannot.

Late last month, I attended the Dudley council for voluntary service awards, at which Chief Superintendent Richard Fisher of the Dudley local policing unit talked of a future in which new technology could not only allow officers to spend more time on policing rather than filling in their pocket notebooks, but enable body cameras to record automatically if an officer draws out their Taser or CS gas. Such technology would improve the safety of both officers and the public.

Our police officers put their safety at risk every time they go out. We owe it to them to do everything we can to keep them safe and to ensure that those who do cause them harm receive the punishment they deserve.

6.34 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her outstanding work in pursuing this issue and to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for her wonderful maiden speech today. She spoke with supreme confidence, sincerity and empathy, and I am sure she will be a great champion for her constituency, just as Jo was.

As we have heard today, the thin blue line keeps getting thinner, which threatens the safety of not only the public, but the men and women working all hours to protect us. Only today, the front page of my local paper, the *Ellesmere Port Pioneer*, pays tribute to officers who stopped a man setting himself on fire. The truth is that a cut in the number of officers of nearly 20,000 from 2010 to this year has led to the police sometimes being simply unable to attend certain incidents, and to response times at night getting longer and longer. Many constituents tell me that they no longer report incidents because they know the police do not have the resources to respond; this is creating a serious crisis of public confidence in the capacity of the police to respond to incidents.

Ahead of this debate, I asked a number of local officers for their views. One told me:

“Along with every officer that I know; I joined the Police to help people, even those people who hate the Police—we are there for everyone. I’m now surrounded by demoralised colleagues desperately trying to put a brave face on things, but completely overstretched and unable to carry out their jobs to the level that they would like to. This is not an accident; it is a political choice and one which I am concerned will lead to the injury and death of officers and members of the public.”

It should be noted that this officer sent their message during a week of night shifts working alone.

Another officer raised similar concerns about the numbers of officers, but also raised the issue of the impact of cuts to youth justice, diversionary projects, youth workers, social services and mental health services on the workload of the police. He told me that too often officers who should be working to protect the public are filling in the gaps left by the underfunding of other public services. The experience of police officers I have heard from is similar to that of those in the NHS and other areas of the public sector, where cuts to numbers are leaving services stretched to breaking point. This is perhaps most striking in the case of the NHS and social care, but it can be found across the public sector as a whole; we know that cuts to one budget often have an impact on many other services, and because it is often

left to the most expensive services to pick up the pieces, these cuts can often be a false economy. I hope the Government will reflect on that.

Finally, I want to discuss the estimated 23,000 assaults on our officers in England and Wales each year, each one of which is an attack on all of us. In my area of Cheshire, there were 442 recorded assaults on officers in 2015-16, which equates to one in every four and a half officers being assaulted during the year. If workers in any other profession were asked to face such a risk while going to work, there would be a national outrage, and we should look at our police officers no differently. We need to send the message out to the police and other public servants that we know they do a tough job, which is sometimes dangerous, but we value them and want them to be safe, and we want the full force of the law to be used against those who would use violence against them.

6.37 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for an excellent maiden speech? I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for pushing this important issue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for saving me from going through a whole lot of statistics in three minutes and 46 seconds, and I praise my hon. Friends the Members for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and for Gower (Byron Davies) for both having served in the police service. I pay tribute to Dorset police, who do the most fantastic job, in a part of the country that many people think is affluent but which is not; we have our share of problems and the police do a wonderful job down there.

I wish to talk briefly about police safety and then move on to police numbers. Before I say anything more, may I pay tribute to our Front-Bench team, who are doing an excellent job, given the financial problems that, as we all know, we face? My comments are therefore in no way aimed at the job they are doing; I make them because I simply must speak up on behalf of my constituents, as that is my job and my duty.

I spoke today to an officer of some 28 years’ service, and his view is that the charging standards have been watered down. His solution, which I am sure the Government would appreciate, is not more police officers, but simply upping the ante in the courts. All too often where police officers or other members of the public services—those in the fire and ambulance services, and prison officers—have been assaulted, they find that the police do a fantastic job getting their case to court, but the courts simply do not have the power to follow up and impose a suitable sentence. Perhaps when she sums up, the Minister could tell the House about using not a caution for assaulting a police officer, which is not acceptable under any circumstances, but the offence of aggravated assault, which of course carries a far more serious sentence, for any assault, including spitting. Unfortunately, if we do not do that, the yobbish element, or those who attack police officers and other members of our public service, will have no deterrent. They will not be discouraged from behaving in the way that all of us in this House find unacceptable.

On police numbers, there is no doubt that, in Dorset, we need more officers. What I hear from the police

officers on the ground, and from senior officers, is that the nature of crime has changed. There is less crime on the streets, and more crime on the internet. Sadly, we have to deal with more terrorism. More specialist officers are being trained and therefore taken off our streets to meet that threat, and quite rightly so. As a consequence, officers on the street in rural communities such as mine are few and far between. They have no axe to grind politically—they are simply trying to do their job professionally—but the police are finding that, on many occasions, they do not have the officers to do the job. One comment I hear is, “If you don’t see an officer, that’s good news.” I am afraid that I have to say to the House that I disagree, because if we do not see an officer, you can bet your life that the burglar, the thug or the yob will not see an officer either, and that opens up territory for them to exploit to the disadvantage of our constituents. What we need in addition to the specific resources and specialist officers are officers on the beat. That demand and need has not gone. In fact, if anything, as the world changes—often to the detriment of our constituents—we need them more.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): When I was a special constable traipsing the streets of Cheshire, the desk sergeant always said to me that walking the streets was reassuring to the public. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Richard Drax: I do. As a former soldier who, along with other Members in this House, served in Northern Ireland, I can say that all the information and intelligence that we got from the streets came from guardsmen, soldiers and riflemen or whoever was on the ground. No amount of cameras or specialist equipment could feed back what we needed to know—who was in the pub, what they were dressed in and why they were there. Personal checks—or p-checks as we called them—were about going up to someone and asking them what they were doing on the streets at the time. That all provided valuable information and acted as a deterrent to stop terrorists doing things against us and the civilian population. Similarly, more officers on the beat would do this and safeguard our constituents.

I end by paying tribute to the Dorset police force, which does a fantastic job, to all police forces in this country, and to all those who serve us in uniform. They should be protected, and I hope that we hear more from the Minister when she sums up.

6.42 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I join the whole House today in wishing the officer who was stabbed in Lancashire a very speedy recovery. I also add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her moving and poignant maiden speech. She has done the memory of Jo, her constituents and this House proud by her contribution today. She also made me cry.

In this place, we make the laws, but we depend on police officers to go out into our communities and enforce them. This relationship places a special duty on us all in this place, and indeed in the Government, to ensure that police officers can do their job safely and free from fear of attack. As demonstrated by the horrific stories that we have heard today from my hon. Friends

the Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), all too often we are failing in that special duty.

I was particularly affected by the story told by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) of the clumsy daddy. Nobody should have to experience that level of violence in their job and then have to lie to their children in that way.

A couple of weeks back, as I do every possible year, I attended a memorial service for PC Nina MacKay, who was attacked and stabbed 19 years ago when she went to arrest a wanted man in his home in my constituency. Her wounds were fatal. She was just 25 years old—a young woman with her entire life ahead of her, murdered as she went about her job.

Although police officer deaths are mercifully rare, almost all officers are violently confronted at some point in their careers. I have been looking at the case logs of attacks on police officers in the London borough of Westminster, to see the situation faced by the police working in the borough in which we sit. There have been 80 attacks on police officers in Westminster since May. Of these, 22 were classified as actual bodily harm and five as grievous bodily harm. The vast majority of the attacks were on the streets of Westminster, a few were in residential premises and 14 took place while the perpetrator was in police custody. I know that there were 80 attacks in Westminster since May because the Metropolitan Police Service has kept what are called the Operation Hampshire databases for each borough since April. Every time a police officer is attacked in London, there is now a strict protocol.

The incident is recorded as a crime and registered in the human resources log. A welfare officer—that is important—an investigation officer and someone from the senior leadership is immediately notified of the attack. The attacked officer is kept up to date with the progress of investigations. Most importantly, they are provided with welfare support, someone to ask how they are and provide support if it is wanted or needed. The process is designed to ensure that officers know that an assault on them is taken as seriously as an assault on any member of the public. Experiencing violence should not be accepted or expected as part of their jobs. They should not be considered second-class victims.

I was told by one officer about an attack that he endured when he was a young man and new to the police. It was long before these new protocols were even thought of. He was surrounded by a group of men. They punched him, kicked him and spat at him. He was shaken up. I can imagine that it frightened him, and it certainly dented his confidence. When he got back to the station the very next day, his colleagues congratulated him on a job well done and on the fact that he was in for the night shift, but one boss had the emotional intelligence to come to him, ask why he was there and encourage him to go home and spend the night with his family. He told me, “It was the smallest thing, but it was the most important thing.” I hope that officers in London are receiving that small but important thing now that Operation Hampshire is in place. If an officer in London is attacked, the protocol ensures that there is welfare support. They will not have to rely on the judgment and kindness of one decent boss.

[Lyn Brown]

Welfare care is important, but so is recording. We are told that there were an estimated 23,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales last year. As we have heard, this is a number that we can have absolutely no confidence in. I have been told that it is not much better than a back-of-an-envelope job. The Home Office says that it has

“worked with police forces to try and improve the data further”, as the Minister reiterated today. However, I heard him say only that he wants to add an additional category of assault with an injury to the recorded crime data. I would like him to go further—he is not a bad man. I want him to ask all police services to adopt the comprehensive and systematic approach taken by the Metropolitan and Hampshire police services. The Hampshire approach includes recording every incident in human resource logs, and integrating data collection with welfare provision. As my story of that young police officer shows, good systems are not just about collecting data, but about offering support.

Proper recording of assaults may give us a better idea of the scale of the problem we are facing, but it will not reduce the number of attacks. For that, Government action is necessary, so I come to sentencing. The Police Federation has raised concerns that a man who punched a police officer in the face and kicked them to the floor received just a 12-month community order. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax highlighted a case where a man assaulted four police officers, gouged their eyes and inflicted serious injury. He received only a two-month suspended sentence. Will the Minister commit to reiterating to the Sentencing Council, which I obviously respect the independence of, the seriousness with which we in this place treat attacks on police officers?

It would be wrong of me to speak on this matter without acknowledging the substantial cuts the police have had to absorb since the Conservatives came to power. There are 20,000 fewer police officers in the United Kingdom than in 2010—a reduction of 11.7%. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) told us how this is really stretching services in Greater Manchester, as it is elsewhere. That thin blue line has been getting thinner and thinner.

The cuts are leading to under-reporting by the public as their confidence is dented, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). There are concerns that the cuts are also leading to an increase in single crewing, which may well make police officers—particularly at night and when responding to emergency situations—even more vulnerable. But there are no reliable statistics on the amount of single crewing each police force is undertaking. We do not know definitively whether it is becoming more common and in which situations it is used. We do not know whether it has made officers more vulnerable to attack. PCCs and the Home Office need to know the answers to these questions if they are to make informed strategic decisions and, most importantly, keep our officers safe from unnecessary danger.

Today, we have had calls for the Government to improve the recording and reporting of these attacks. The Minister has been asked to work with the Sentencing Council to ensure that appropriate punishments are meted out. He has also been asked to look at the way

police cuts are stretching our services. I hope that he will take these requests seriously and act on them urgently. Our police officers deserve to know that their welfare is paramount.

6.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): This has been a lively debate on an important subject of great concern to us all. I have listened with great care to the thoughtful speeches made by Members on both sides of the House. Sadly, there is so little time for me to speak that I will not be able to address all the questions, but I will write to Members with answers.

I am sure that you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there has been one absolutely stand-out speech this afternoon, and that was the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). We will never forget the contribution that Jo made; she was, indeed, a small woman with a big kick. I am sure that the people of Batley and Spen will be extremely well represented by the hon. Lady, as we have seen from her speech today. I join her in paying great respect to West Yorkshire police for how they have dealt with an incredibly difficult time for her community and the broader community of West Yorkshire.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for persuading her colleagues to secure this important debate and for enabling us all to highlight this important issue. Like the hon. Lady and many Members we have heard this afternoon, I have spent time on the beat with officers in my constituency. My sister was a police officer, and my nephew—I am proud of him—is now serving our community as a special. I know at first hand of the dedication of police officers, keeping us safe, day in, day out, all around our country.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for his long and distinguished service as a special, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) for his more than 30 years of service as a police officer. I congratulate him on his recent election to the Home Affairs Committee, where I am sure that he will do an excellent job.

This afternoon, there have been calls for more and stronger sentencing. We agree that sentences must be tough. Although sentences are a matter for the courts, I want to assure all Members that sentencing guidelines already provide for assault on a police officer to be treated more severely. Assaults on police officers resulting in injuries will often result in a charge of actual bodily harm or an even more serious offence. In these cases, the fact that the victim is a police officer delivering this vital service is taken into account.

An assault can be treated more severely if the court so chooses, and there are offences relating specifically to police officers even where there is no physical harm. Right at the other end of the spectrum, in the most serious cases where an individual is convicted of the murder of a police officer in the course of his duty, a whole-life order will now be the sentencing starting point, thanks to the provisions introduced by the Government in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015.

As the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service stated, the Government will continue to provide the Sentencing Council with data and evidence on assaults

on police officers as it reviews its guidelines. We must make sure that any assault on a police officer is treated with the gravity it deserves. As he said, we will continue to work with ministerial colleagues across the Government, such as the Solicitor General, to ensure that individuals are appropriately prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Philip Davies: It has been agreed right across the House that sentencing for assaults on police officers is not sufficient. Would it not be a good idea for the Minister to send a transcript of this debate to Lord Justice Treacy, the chairman of the Sentencing Council, to ask him, on the back of this debate, to look once again at these guidelines to make sure that they are more appropriate?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will make sure that members of the Sentencing Council read the record of this debate and fully understand the strong feelings in this House about having really tough sentences for these absolutely appalling and totally unacceptable offences.

I will touch briefly on the issue of equipment to support police officers because that was raised by a number of Members. I want to underline the fact that the Home Office supports chief constables in their operational decisions. This includes the funding of research on and guidance about equipment that might be helpful, including body cameras and spit hoods. I am sure we all agree, however, that the police must maintain their operational independence. It is not for the Home Office to run the police from Marsham Street. Chief constables and police and crime commissioners are accountable to the local communities they serve.

Andy Burnham: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: I am afraid that I cannot because of the time.

I want to assure the whole House of the absolute seriousness with which the Government regard assaults on police officers, as demonstrated by the better data that are going to be made available, including the new reporting announced today, through the leadership of the College of Policing. I know that chief constables will continue to do whatever they can to keep their people safe. We will enable them to work confidently to tackle the challenges of modern crime, and we will absolutely continue to support them in doing so.

It is really important to go back to what my right hon. Friend the Minister said right at the beginning of the debate: assaulting a police officer is completely unacceptable. It is indeed an assault on us all and all our society. Police officers should be able to carry out their duties without fear of assault, and anyone found guilty of such an offence can expect to face the full force of the law.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 207, Noes 288.

Division No. 76]

[6.58 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Abrahams, Debbie	Ashworth, Jonathan
Alexander, Heidi	Barron, rh Kevin
Ali, Rushanara	Beckett, rh Margaret

Benn, rh Hilary	Hamilton, Fabian
Berger, Luciana	Hanson, rh Mr David
Betts, Mr Clive	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Harris, Carolyn
Blenkinsop, Tom	Hayes, Helen
Blomfield, Paul	Healey, rh John
Brabin, Tracy	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Hillier, Meg
Brake, rh Tom	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Brennan, Kevin	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Brown, Lyn	Hoey, Kate
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Hollern, Kate
Bryant, Chris	Hopkins, Kelvin
Buck, Ms Karen	Howarth, rh Mr George
Burden, Richard	Hunt, Tristram
Burgon, Richard	Huq, Dr Rupa
Burnham, rh Andy	Hussain, Imran
Butler, Dawn	Jarvis, Dan
Byrne, rh Liam	Johnson, rh Alan
Cadbury, Ruth	Jones, Gerald
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Jones, Graham
Chapman, Jenny	Jones, Mr Kevan
Clwyd, rh Ann	Jones, Susan Elan
Coaker, Vernon	Kane, Mike
Cooper, Julie	Kendall, Liz
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Kinahan, Danny
Coyle, Neil	Kinnock, Stephen
Creasy, Stella	Kyle, Peter
Cruddas, Jon	Lammy, rh Mr David
Cryer, John	Lavery, Ian
Cummins, Judith	Leslie, Chris
Cunningham, Alex	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Lewis, Clive
Dakin, Nic	Lewis, Mr Ivan
Danczuk, Simon	Long Bailey, Rebecca
David, Wayne	Lucas, Ian C.
Davies, Geraint	Lynch, Holly
Davies, Philip	Mactaggart, rh Fiona
De Piero, Gloria	Madders, Justin
Debbonaire, Thangam	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Doughty, Stephen	Mahmood, Shabana
Dowd, Jim	Malhotra, Seema
Dowd, Peter	Mann, John
Dromey, Jack	Marris, Rob
Dugher, Michael	Marsden, Gordon
Eagle, Ms Angela	Maskell, Rachael
Eagle, Maria	Matheson, Christian
Edwards, Jonathan	McCabe, Steve
Efford, Clive	McCarthy, Kerry
Elliott, Julie	McDonagh, Siobhain
Ellman, Mrs Louise	McDonald, Andy
Elmore, Chris	McDonnell, rh John
Esterson, Bill	McGinn, Conor
Evans, Chris	McGovern, Alison
Farrelly, Paul	McInnes, Liz
Fitzpatrick, Jim	McKinnell, Catherine
Flello, Robert	McMahon, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline	Meale, Sir Alan
Flynn, Paul	Mearns, Ian
Fovargue, Yvonne	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Furniss, Gill	Morden, Jessica
Gapes, Mike	Mulholland, Greg
Gardiner, Barry	Nandy, Lisa
Glass, Pat	Onn, Melanie
Godsiff, Mr Roger	Onwurah, Chi
Goodman, Helen	Osamor, Kate
Green, Kate	Owen, Albert
Greenwood, Lilian	Pearce, Teresa
Greenwood, Margaret	Pennycook, Matthew
Griffith, Nia	Phillips, Jess
Gwynne, Andrew	Phillipson, Bridget
Haigh, Louise	Pound, Stephen

Pugh, John
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Jamie
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir

Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 West, Catherine
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Phil
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Vicky Foxcroft and
 Jeff Smith**

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bruce, Fiona
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartlidge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex

Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Cleverly, James
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Sir Michael
 Fernandes, Suella

Field, rh Mark
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, rh Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heapey, James
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, rh Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg

Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rutley, David

Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 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, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin

Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 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
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and
Christopher Pincher

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).

Resolved,

That the House notes that any assault on a police officer is unacceptable and welcomes the work of the independent Sentencing Council in producing guidelines that specifically highlight the increased seriousness of an offence committed against anyone providing a public service; further welcomes the Government's commitment to accurately record the number of assaults on police officers in England and Wales to better understand the scale of this issue; and further notes that the Government has protected police spending in real terms over the Spending Review period.

Business without Debate

PETITIONS

Symmetry Park Logistics

7.12 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition organised by Mrs Gillyan Bailey and supported by two local councillors in Isham, Councillor Clive Hallam and Councillor Mrs Bone. Mrs Bailey has done an enormous amount of work. She has got virtually every resident in the village to sign the petition, which has hundreds of names on it. It concerns a completely unsatisfactory planning proposal, in the neighbouring constituency, which would create a logistics park twice the size of the village of Isham.

The petition reads:

The Humble Petition of residents of Isham, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the proposed planning application for the logistics development site known as Symmetry Park, outside, but adjacent to the village of Isham—planning application KET/2016/0606—is unacceptable, because it is twice the size of Isham, will very significantly increase the volume of traffic going through the village, increase noise, air and light pollution to unacceptable levels and is opposed by the vast majority of local residents.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Communities and Local Government to encourage the Borough Council of Kettering to reject the current planning application.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P001972]

Tenancy of St Michael's Gate, Parnwell

7.14 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of residents of the Peterborough constituency, who are very concerned regarding the eviction of residents of St Michael's Gate in Parnwell, Peterborough, by their landlords. This issue has received a lot of public attention. A similar petition on the Change.org website has gained more than 1,400 supporters, and a second further petition to Peterborough City Council has hundreds of signatures. I can make a copy of it available to Ministers. I thank all those who have signed this petition and similar ones.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Peterborough,

Declares that residents of St Michael's Gate are being threatened by eviction from their landlords Stef and Philips acting on behalf of Paul Simon Magic Homes; further that the private landlord who has recently acquired St Michael's Gate has entered into agreement with Peterborough City Council to house homeless people at the properties; further that as a result of this agreement, all current longstanding tenants will be evicted, and some former tenants, including families, have had to declare themselves homeless; and further that Peterborough City Council should be doing more to support residents against their eviction by the private landlords.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to put pressure on Peterborough City Council to ensure that residents of St Michael's Gate in Parnwell, Peterborough, are protected from eviction by their landlords.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001971]

EU Customs Union

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

7.16 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to have a short debate on the UK's membership of the customs union.

My constituents voted to leave the European Union, largely because of what they see as uncontrolled immigration, but also because of the slightly bossy tendency of some of the EU institutions, which I think can be taken as a rejection of the European Court of Justice. However, they did not foresee all the consequences of the vote, partly because a number of false promises were made—most notably that there would be £350 million extra every week for the NHS, and also that no jobs would be at risk.

In the circumstances, it is reasonable of the Prime Minister to work on the assumption that part of her mandate is to end the free movement of citizens from the EU to the UK. That, in itself, does not amount to a negotiating strategy. The problem is that we are hearing wildly different things from different members of the Government. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has just reassured Nissan and it is going ahead with significant inward investment. I welcome that. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary still seems to believe that it will be easy and straightforward to do free trade deals “very rapidly indeed”.

The Government continue to say that they will not provide a running commentary on the negotiations. I know they claim that that is because they want to maintain confidentiality, but it appears from the outside as if it is because they are finding it difficult to agree among themselves on what should be done.

What I find alarming is the Government's refusal to answer parliamentary questions. I asked the Minister a written parliamentary question about the Government's policy on the customs union. He gave a rather opaque answer. I can live with that, but I have also put down a large number of written questions that ask factual things, such as how much we export, what the value of it is and what would be covered by the rules of origin were we to leave the customs union. On those questions, I also received the answer, “We will not give a running commentary.” That is why I felt it necessary to have a debate and explore these issues in more detail. I am alarmed by this situation, because the risk is that decisions will be taken on the basis of rhetoric not facts and on the basis of ideology not analysis.

An intelligent negotiating strategy needs to meet the public's expectations, to be based on a hard-headed assessment of the national interest and to be deliverable. With that in mind, the Treasury Committee visited Berlin and Rome in September to find out what some of our counterparts might think. I am sorry to say that Brexit is not at the top of the in-tray for the other EU member states. They all see it in the context of their domestic political worries. Angela Merkel is looking over her shoulder at Alternative für Deutschland; Hollande is worried about Le Pen; Matteo Renzi is worried about Movimento 5 Stelle. Probably only the Irish take Brexit as seriously as we do. Over and over

again we heard the same word: precedent. There should be no reward for exiting the EU, and no precedents must be set.

I conclude from that that if controlling immigration is going to be part of the British position and we are to move to a more skills-based approach for managing migration, our EU partners are going to say that we cannot remain members of the single market. However, there has not been so much attention paid to our membership of the customs union, which I am beginning to think may be more important, especially if we want manufacturing industry to thrive in this country.

It is worth recalling the history. The customs unions was established in 1968. It is what we joined in 1973, and what the public affirmed with the referendum in 1975. It is what most people call the Common Market. Unlike high levels of immigration or the ECJ, it is rather popular with the British public.

The shadow Chancellor has rather pejoratively described the Government's approach as a “bankers' Brexit”. I know why he has done that. We must base what we are doing on some facts. I remind the House that we export more goods—some £285 billion-worth—than we do services, the figure for which is £226 billion. That is a ratio of 56:44. This is important. At the moment, we have a common external tariff, goods move freely within the EU and the Commission has competence for external trade negotiations. The customs union is not the same thing as the single market. Norway is in the single market but outside the customs union, whereas Turkey is in the customs union and outside the single market.

It is also worth recalling that the export of goods into the European Union comprises 48% of our exports. The EU is our biggest partner. Exports to Europe bring 3.3 million jobs. The next most significant partner is America, with 17% of our exports, and way down the numbers is China, our third biggest trading partner, with just 4%, or one 10th of the significance of our European exports. So what would happen if we were to leave the customs union?

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for calling this debate. She is precisely correct that this is what most of the debate in the House will be about. She said a little earlier that we joined the customs union when, effectively, we joined the European Union, as was reaffirmed in the referendum of 1975. Is that correct? If so, that sets the basis for what the Government have to argue, namely that in the referendum that we held this year we voted to leave the European Union and the directive is therefore to leave the customs union; we have to argue back from there. Will she clarify that point?

Helen Goodman: We joined the Common Market, which is the customs union, in 1973. Now we have voted to leave the European Union. People want to leave the EU, because of their concern about migration and perhaps about the ECJ. In my opinion, the move is not driven by concerns about the customs union, which in fact is very popular. That is what I am arguing.

Richard Fuller: We come from different points of view, I suspect, about the referendum—I supported our leaving the European Union—but there are very positive reasons for both sides regarding the customs union. We

have to understand where we are coming from after the referendum result. The presumption from that result is that we will leave the customs union. It is therefore beholden on people who may want us to stay in the customs union to argue what strong reasons there are for staying in—and there are strong reasons.

Helen Goodman: Let me come on to give some of those strong reasons. If we were to leave, we would face tariffs ranging generally between 5% and 10% on our exports. Even more significantly, our exporters would have to comply with the rules of origin. I think this is the biggest problem. I have the last television manufacturer in Britain, Cello Electronics, in my constituency. It imports a lot of components from China, puts the televisions together and sells them into the European market. The OECD estimates that the cost of filling in all the forms and complying with the rules of origin would add 24% to the export costs of selling into the European market. That would wipe out firms such as Cello, which, as I say, is in my constituency.

In Norway, which is outside the customs union, we know that some exporters find the bureaucracy of the rules of origin so burdensome that they prefer to pay the tariffs. This is really what the Nissan problem was. Belonging to the customs union was the first thing the Japanese Government listed in their hopes for what our deal would be, but the Government cannot take a factory-by-factory approach. Let us look at some of the big industries that would be affected: the automotive industry employs 450,000 people; aerospace 110,000 people; pharmaceuticals, such as Glaxo in my constituency, 93,000 people. All those industries have the same complex integrated international supply chains and would be badly hit were we to leave the customs union.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and making some very strong and powerful points. Does she agree with me that if we are outside the single market there will be a load of non-tariff barriers that would definitely hit those sectors, and so membership of the single market is just as important as the customs union?

Helen Goodman: We need to explore that and think about it in a little more detail.

A leaked document from the Treasury found that were we to leave the customs union, our GDP would fall by some 4.5%. Of course, I am not asking the Minister to comment on a leaked document, but it would be very nice if he could say how many jobs a fall of 4.5% of our GDP would translate into us losing. I think it would be hundreds of thousands.

It is true that staying in the customs union limits our capacity to do new trade deals on the goods it covers with third countries such as India and Australia. Some of the hard Brexiteers, such as the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), seem to think that this is a good thing. He made a speech in Manchester in which he hailed the “post-geography trading world”. Well I have heard of the end of history, but I have never before heard of the end of geography. I think he is being wildly over-optimistic. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer pointed out to the

Treasury Committee, world growth and growth in trade are both slowing. This is not a good background in which to initiate these deals. The Government's export target of £1 billion is bumping along at half that level and there would be a time lag. We cannot start the negotiations at least until our relationship with Europe is clear. That is obviously going to take three or four years, so we need to have transitional arrangements.

Finally, there must be a big question mark over whether we can get deals with third countries that are so much better that they more than compensate for what we would lose if we left the customs union. The UK is one tenth of the EU market of 550 million people. The Americans have already told us we would be at the back of the queue. The Swiss have found, in negotiations with the Chinese, that the Chinese get access to the Swiss market seven years before it gets access to the Chinese market. Ministers are at sixes and sevens on this, with the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy apparently on one side, and the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the other. Robert Peston has pointed out that the mere fact that the Department for International Trade exists makes it a fiduciary obligation for multinational manufacturers based in Britain to start thinking about moving investment and jobs to the rest of the European Union. I will not talk about the Irish dimension, because I have already taken interventions on it, but it does present a significant political problem.

What I am mainly saying to the Minister this evening is that millions of jobs depend on our staying in the customs union. I am sure that the Secretary of State for International Trade is delighted that his career is flourishing and that he is travelling around the world, meeting all sorts of interesting people and trying to do lots of deals, but those million manufacturing jobs matter more than his grandiloquent ideas. What we want from the Minister is some concrete evidence that decisions will be taken on a proper basis. My message is simple: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing this debate. My constituents, like hers, voted to leave the European Union, so I welcome her comments about listening to that vote. It is also important that we all work together to make this process a success, so I welcome her analysis.

Last week, she posed a question along similar lines to the Prime Minister about the EU customs union and Nissan. I am delighted that since that question was posed, Nissan has announced that it will produce the Qashqai and a new model at its plant in Sunderland. The hon. Lady welcomed that, and so will I. I want to join the chorus of approval that we heard in this place for that decision. It is a vote of confidence, which shows that Britain is open for business and that we remain an outward-looking, world-leading nation. The plant in Sunderland will be expanded through new investment to be a super-plant, manufacturing more than 600,000 cars a year. Some 80% of the plant's output is exported to more than 130 international markets. The decision is

[Mr Robin Walker]

a massive win for the 7,000 direct employees and 35,000 total British employees in the plant and the supply chain.

Turning to the core subject of this debate, the issue of the customs union is an important one. As with all facets of our exit negotiations, we recognise the need for a careful—what the hon. Lady called a “hard-headed”—analysis for a smooth transition that will minimise disruption to our trading relationships and seize the opportunities presented. This is an area in which there is excellent cross-Government co-operation, and I am pleased to be joined on the Treasury Bench this evening by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison). That shows how the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Treasury are working hand in hand on these issues.

I would like to be clear from the outset that—as, I think, we are all aware—no final decision has been taken on our broader future economic relationship with the EU, which includes our approach to the customs union. As with our decision not to trigger article 50 immediately, it is right that we take the time, as the hon. Lady said, to analyse our options carefully and seek to secure the best deal for the whole of the UK.

Richard Fuller: Can the Minister help me with the question I posed to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)? The ballot paper said that we are either leaving the European Union or remaining in it, and we voted to leave. We joined the customs union in 1973. Is not the presumption and the starting position for the Government the fact that we will leave the customs union, so arguments have to be made why we should not do that rather than accepting that that should be regarded as the opening position?

Mr Walker: I think it important to engage with arguments on both sides of this debate. The key thing is to secure the UK national interest, so before we take a decision, we will want to listen very carefully to the arguments for leaving the customs union and the arguments for staying in it.

I think we can all agree that the issue has numerous aspects. The hon. Lady speaks with considerable experience of complex economic issues, having been a Treasury fast-streamer serving on the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Committee, and a former Minister. She will appreciate that, as the Prime Minister said in her reply the other day, making a full assessment of the options of a customs union is more complex than it might seem when first described to the public.

First, it is important to understand exactly what a customs union is and is not. It is an arrangement that relates to trade in goods; it does not cover trade in services or free movement of capital or people. To facilitate trade, a customs union removes tariffs and customs controls on goods moving between its members. While services are not directly included—they are not subject to either tariffs or customs controls—they have become increasingly embedded in goods production, so a customs union could indirectly affect trade in services industries. For example, in parallel to exporting an aircraft engine, an engineering firm might

also provide maintenance services; or in parallel to exporting cars, an automotive firm might provide financial services.

To function properly, a customs union must have a common external tariff, applied equally by all members of the union. That supports the free circulation of goods within the customs union, preventing trade diversion by ensuring that no one trading with the members of the union can be given preferential access to any individual members relative to the others. In the case of the European Union, in practice, we have chosen to make a reality of the common external tariff through the common commercial policy under which the European Commission negotiates on trade on the United Kingdom's behalf, and in that way sets the common external tariff. In the case of members of the EU and the EU's customs union, 80% of the tariffs that are collected by member states on imports from non-EU countries are paid into the EU budget, with member states retaining just the remaining 20% to cover collection costs. The UK collected £3.1 billion in tariffs on non-EU imports in the financial year 2015-16.

However, a customs union is only one of the many ways in which countries have sought to minimise the impact of customs procedures and support the free flow of goods. There are numerous examples around the world in which co-operation between customs authorities has helped to reduce the costs of customs processes at the border, short of a customs union. Even in the case of the European Union, the customs union is only part of an approach that also focuses on strengthening systems and processes on the ground. For example, the vast majority of customs declarations in the UK are submitted electronically and cleared rapidly, with only a small proportion experiencing delays—for example, when risk assessment indicates that compliance or enforcement checks are required at the border.

Norway has been involved in customs co-operation with Sweden and Finland, both of which are EU member states and are therefore in the EU customs union, as they have been since the 1960s. Norway has an agreement with the EU to mutually recognise each other's schemes to impose less onerous checks on exporting firms with secure supply chains. It sits, as an observer, on some of the EU's committees that discuss customs issues. Notwithstanding the issues raised by the hon. Lady, and although our Prime Minister has made it clear that we are seeking not an off-the-shelf solution but a UK solution, it is important to note the collaborative agreements that exist in other countries. Switzerland and the EU have an agreement that recognises the equivalence of security checks at their external borders, and waives the need to make pre-departure and pre-arrival declarations. If we look more widely, we see that the United States and Canada also co-operate closely on customs issues, including schemes to expedite customs procedures for firms with secure supply chains and collaborative arrangements for operations at the border.

Helen Goodman: I am listening with interest to what the Minister is saying, but according to my constituents, who do a great deal of exporting, exporting to Switzerland is a nightmare by comparison with exporting to the EU, because of all the bureaucracy. Does the Minister not agree that the UK is in a different position from Norway?

Its major export is oil, and exporting oil is incredibly simple, but, as I said earlier, most of the goods that we export are manufactured goods, which have complex supply chains.

Mr Walker: That is a fair point. I shall say something about our engagement with some of those industries and the importance of supply chains later in my speech. It is worth noting, however, that many countries also have authorised economic operator schemes, which means that exporters with supply chains that are demonstrably secure are subject to fewer and less stringent checks. The EU has such arrangements with China, Japan, Norway, Switzerland and the United States, through which both sides recognise each other's authorised economic operators for customs purposes.

Turkey, which the hon. Lady mentioned, is one country outside the EU that has a customs union arrangement with it. That arrangement covers most but not all goods. Raw agricultural produce, for instance, is excluded. The EU and Turkey have been preparing to update the terms of their current customs union arrangements, which were always meant to be transitional, given that Turkey has applied to be a full member of the EU. I could go on, as there is a multiplicity of examples, but the point is that any decision about membership or otherwise is complex, and must take account of the full spectrum of options.

During last week's debate, the Prime Minister also said that the way in which one dealt with the customs union did not involve a binary choice. There are different aspects to a customs union, which is precisely why it is important to look at the detail, to carry out the hard analysis that the hon. Lady called for, and to get the answer right. We have made it clear that we will pursue what works for the unique circumstances of the United Kingdom, and we continue to analyse thoroughly what it might look like in order to ensure that we make the best choice for the UK. That includes the broad-based analysis of more than 50 sectors that my Department is undertaking in relation to the impact of the UK's leaving the EU.

As with the broader UK-EU negotiations, we recognise the need for a smooth transition that minimises disruption to our trading relationships and seizes the opportunities that are presented. The issue of a customs union has also been part of the Government's programme of stakeholder engagement. We have been discussing this matter with numerous companies, organisations and trade bodies, including the chemicals sector, car manufacturers, and the agriculture and food and drink sector. We want to ensure that their views are reflected in our approach. The Prime Minister has been very clear that the intention of the Government is to ensure a competitive market so that people are able to prosper here in the United Kingdom and add to our economic growth.

We are also aware of the specific circumstances faced by businesses in Northern Ireland, which I know the hon. Lady could have touched on if she had not taken the interventions. We had a common travel area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland many years before either country was a member of the European Union. Nobody wants to return to the borders of the past. I underline the will and commitment of ourselves, the Irish Government and the Northern

Ireland Executive to support the common travel area and to ensure that there are no hard borders. We must now work closely together to ensure that as the UK leaves the EU we find shared solutions to the challenges and maximise the opportunities for both the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which I expect will continue to be a close friend of the UK in years to come.

Helen Goodman: I am slightly nervous that the Minister might sit down before I ask him another question. He said his Department is looking at 50 sectors. My basic request tonight is that we should have more information and facts from the Department, so will he make a start by telling us which 50 sectors and how large they are, how much they export and how many people are employed in them?

Mr Walker: In the six minutes I have left, it would be a challenge to run through each of those 50 sectors, but we will certainly disclose that information in due course. It is important to emphasise this is a whole-Government effort. Our Department is engaging with those sectors and conducting the analysis and drawing it all together, but we are also working closely with colleagues at the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and all the other relevant Departments to each sector of the economy, because it is important we get this right and there is a role for every part of Government in informing that process.

Jonathan Edwards: I am slightly confused about one point. I welcome the announcement about the common travel area between the Republic of Ireland and the UK, but will that not mean there is an open border between the EU and the British state?

Mr Walker: I think both the Republic of Ireland in its communications with the EU and we in ours are very clear about the value we place on that common travel area, which existed long before the membership of the two countries to the EU. We have been clear in saying this is not necessarily a completely easy issue; it is an issue that will require some work, but we are determined to do that work and make sure we can make this work. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.

We must also consider carefully the position of the Crown dependencies and the UK's overseas territories. Just today, I have met in a joint ministerial council with the overseas territories and the chief Ministers of the Crown dependencies to hear their views. There are some interesting examples. Gibraltar, for instance, has benefited from the UK's membership of the EU but has not been part of the customs union to date.

I welcome this debate as part of the scrutiny of the Government's position by this House. That is an important process and the information the hon. Lady and others have brought forward can certainly be taken into account as part of our analysis. I also look forward to Monday's debate on exiting the EU and workers' rights. That is an important aspect of our policy, and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has been very clear about our determination to protect workers' rights.

[Mr Robin Walker]

That debate will be another opportunity for the House to discuss the important issues in relation to our exit from the European Union.

In summary, the Government fully recognise the importance of the question of a customs union with the EU in the context of our future relationship. It is a

complex, multi-faceted issue, and we are analysing carefully all the options available to us with the aim of securing the best outcome for the UK as a whole.

Question put and agreed to.

7.44 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 2 November 2016

[MR JAMES GRAY *in the Chair*]

West Sussex Schools Funding

9.30 am

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the funding of West Sussex schools.

Good morning, Mr Gray, and thank you very much. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in Westminster Hall. *[Interruption.]*

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Will one of the sound engineers deal with the echo? There is something wrong with the machine.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful to have the opportunity, with my West Sussex colleagues, with whom I have been working for a considerable period of time on this matter, to draw the House's attention on this occasion, which certainly is not the first, to the question of fair funding for West Sussex schools. I am fortified by the presence and support of my hon. Friends and parliamentary colleagues for West Sussex, who have been campaigning on this matter for a long time now. We have campaigned together and are wholly in agreement. Those of my hon. Friends who are able to be here will speak to explain the case further to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. I welcome her to her place and am delighted that she will answer on behalf of the Government. May I say to her at the beginning that the very rude things I will say about her Department are absolutely in no way aimed at her at all? I regard her, as we all do, as an exemplary and remarkable Minister—none of this happened on her watch.

For the 32 years I have been a Member of Parliament—I am an amateur compared with my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has been here much longer than me; he is not the Father of the House but practically the grandfather of the House—the treatment of West Sussex in local government finance terms has been unfair and indeed wholly unsatisfactory. The issue of today's debate is really the catharsis of 30 years of financial bad treatment for West Sussex. In respect of education, it is now a question of fairness.

The position is surgically plain. West Sussex has per pupil funding of £4,198, which is £438 per pupil below the national average and makes schools and academies in West Sussex the fifth worst-funded nationally. That is not acceptable to the West Sussex Members, it is not acceptable to our county council, and much more importantly it is increasingly unacceptable and causes great anxiety to parents, pupils, headteachers and staff. We look to the Department for Education to fix it.

The current situation puts us below our neighbours in East Sussex and Surrey, and well below the very well funded urban authorities of the city of London, which comes right at the top of the pile with double the

funding of West Sussex. Our position in West Sussex is therefore very bad. There is no other way of describing it, not least since we all agree that every child deserves the same chance in life when it comes to state-funded education. Frankly, they are not getting it. The figures graphically show that, in West Sussex, it is emphatically not the case. It is not even as if the results are anywhere near as good as they should be. Indeed, they are disappointing and must improve. Resources are a part but only a part of that equation.

The West Sussex Members of Parliament met Ministers in September last year and again in February this year to press the case. We met the Minister for School Standards 10 days ago for a useful meeting, and we are to meet the Secretary of State this very afternoon. The aim is to try to find a sensible way forward to resolve a crucial and unacceptable situation, and to try to understand the thinking of the Department for Education. It has big reforms to come and will look for our support. We need to fix the grassroots basis of the funding of local education before we move on to some of those more exotic, and indeed welcome reforms. They will require our support, but without this situation being fixed, it is difficult to see how that can occur.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is not only a question of long-term funding. As Conservatives, we were all elected on a manifesto commitment to fix fair funding for the future. I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees that there is a lot of concern about the immediate funding for schools and a requirement for transitional funding. I wonder whether he will come to that in his remarks.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to him for the work he has done in leading our group, and for the enormous amount of work he has done on behalf of headteachers and schools, not only in his constituency but elsewhere. He is quite right, and I hope that by the end of this inadequate speech, he will feel that I have dealt with some of those problems. It is not just the future but the now. We need to resolve the position between the now and the future—we all welcome strongly the introduction of the new funding formula.

All the West Sussex Members—I am sure those who speak will make this point—are entirely satisfied that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, the Minister for School Standards, the Under-Secretary who is here today and their officials accept that West Sussex schools are underfunded compared with the national average. As I said, the figures are there in stark reality. What we really need is for them to act now and restore some balance to a situation that is out of kilter.

As I say, we warmly commend the Government for bringing forward the new plan for the national funding formula, which will be introduced from 2018, and the release of a very small sum of additional money already given by the Department surplus. The Minister knows that West Sussex Members of Parliament, supported by headteachers and parents in all our constituencies, have lobbied vigorously for urgent consideration to be given to the adequate provision of transitional funding to help tide over hard-pressed local schools until the new formula can be introduced. West Sussex schools can thus get on an equal footing with those in other counties, which is surely only right and fair.

[Sir Nicholas Soames]

On 14 September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, when giving evidence to the Select Committee on Education on her roles and responsibilities, confirmed that her Department was approaching this matter in a sensible and rational way and that it was

“going to provide interim support.”

That was in her answer to Q221 in evidence to the Select Committee. It is that question on which we will press her this very afternoon, so that we can get to a better school funding system in an orderly and sane manner, based in future on pupil numbers, and less on some extraordinary and archaic formula based on past political considerations, which will recognise that West Sussex has been losing out for years.

As I have said, the present situation is both unacceptable and wrong, and we insist on its being put right. It is not correct or fair that a typical secondary school in the Mid Sussex or Horsham constituencies, for example, will receive more than 15% less than the national median funding for schools.

When on 7 March my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the then excellent Secretary of State for Education, announced in a written statement a consultation on national funding formulae for schools and high needs, she made the point that the transition to the new system should be manageable. It is that question that we look to the Minister of State, the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to help us resolve this morning. It is the collective judgment of all the West Sussex Members of Parliament, who have worked closely together and have gone carefully into the matter, that present levels of funding will, without transitional funding, inevitably have a damaging effect on local schools and children's learning. Each of us must speak for our own constituency—my hon. Friends will do so—but in Mid Sussex, as things stand, good schools are placed in the intolerable position of having to preside over further real cuts to school budgets that are frankly no longer sustainable.

The Government have rightly urged schools to achieve efficiencies, but those have already been adopted by the schools in my constituency and elsewhere, not least to meet the new costs arising from, among other things, increases to teachers' pension and national insurance contributions for 2016-17. Having listened to the concerns of parents, councillors, headteachers and teachers, and having consulted more widely, we all agree that school budgets are already squeezed to the limit. It is, I am afraid, understandable that headteachers are considering a number of dramatic measures, some of which I wholly disapprove of, to make ends meet. We therefore ask the Under-Secretary, and will ask the Secretary of State this afternoon, to allocate transitional funding to support our schools to meet those serious cost pressures until the national funding formula is introduced.

A powerful letter sent to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister by a number of West Sussex headteachers, with the support of a number of my parliamentary colleagues, sets out a request for £20 million of transitional funding. That would represent an increase of approximately £200 per pupil across West Sussex. That sum of money would put our schools back on a more or less even keel against the arrival of the national funding formula.

I want to mention the special concerns of special needs schools in my constituency and West Sussex more generally. They find it very hard going to deliver the education service that I know the Under-Secretary and her ministerial colleagues would insist be delivered to children who have considerable difficulties. They are trying very hard, but in some cases they will simply no longer be able to do it. The situation in West Sussex special needs schools is very serious. Woodlands Mead school in my constituency is a remarkable school, but is in an untenable position. Not only has the county council treated it extraordinarily badly and, in my view, dishonourably, over the question of new building to consolidate schools into one, but its financial situation is extremely serious. It is impossible for the children at the school to be educated properly without the necessary support staff. I make a plea today for children with special needs in West Sussex; they are not getting a fair crack of the whip.

My hon. Friends and I, and the county council, are well aware of the restraint required in public expenditure. However, we believe that the situation in our county is very serious. We all earnestly entreat the Under-Secretary and her ministerial colleagues to consider favourably the coherent, sensible and reasonable requests that we make on behalf of our constituents.

9.45 am

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing the debate and on his excellent framing of the argument.

As we look to our newly defined national future, the challenge of improving our national productivity is real and acute. Only through increased productivity will we deliver the public services and increases in the standard of living that every generation expects. Education and skills are among the most important drivers of that vital transformation in our national productivity. We need to continue the already positive improvement in science, technology, engineering and maths, and to my mind our trading future requires better results in foreign languages. Investment in education, properly targeted, is money well spent.

This is an important issue for the whole country, but the challenge is especially important for those of us who represent West Sussex, which is the worst funded of any county authority with funding of £4,198 per pupil. Under the current funding formula, the county receives £44 million less than the national average and some £200 million less than some London boroughs. I and my colleagues were pleased to stand on a manifesto that pledged a change in the funding structure of our schools, and I am delighted that the Government, having secured an overall majority, are pressing forward with far-reaching and long overdue reform. I await with interest the Government's response to the first consultation.

A wide range of factors was proposed for possible inclusion in the funding formula. I am sure the new formula will be better than the current system, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State described as arbitrary, unfair and out of date, but while the Government's aim of maintaining higher funding for schools with issues of deprivation is laudable, I hope they will recognise the need for all school places to have satisfactory and effective funding. I am sure they will.

There are pockets of deprivation in every town and rural area. Every school has problems to confront, and ensuring proper recognition of the basic costs of providing the teaching staff and delivering the curriculum will be key. That is especially difficult in areas within commuting distance—subject to Southern rail and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—of London. The cost of living in my constituency is very high, which makes it harder to recruit and retain the excellent teaching staff that children and parents rightly expect. That is especially true and worrisome in an area in which school infrastructure rarely seems to keep pace with population growth, adding to the strain placed on headteachers and staff. There is a worrying impact on class size, as at Tanbridge House school or Forest school in my constituency—at Forest secondary school, top set classes in core subjects already have 35 or 36 pupils. That obviously has a direct impact on teachers, but it also has practical consequences in classrooms designed for 30 pupils with a number of PCs to match. Schools that provide targeted support for struggling pupils used to do it in sets of 12 or 15, but now find that those sets have grown to 20, which means less effective lessons in which it is harder to focus.

Fair funding—redressing the balance—is critical. I look forward to the second consultation and what I trust will be an appropriate recognition of the high basic cost of education of every child. We are very proud of the good results generated by the schools in my constituency, but no one, least of all the Minister, would take that as a source of complacency. Excellent teaching, committed leadership and supportive parents all still need a solid underpinning of funding. In the immediate term, that foundation of solid funding is a source of real concern for headteachers across the county.

Costs have undoubtedly risen in the current year. I have had input from a large number of schools in my constituency; it would be invidious were I to go through every single one of them, but I will focus on one in particular. The Weald school in Billingshurst is an outstanding school. The current head has been in place for eight years. He started with 95 teachers and a senior leadership team of nine, including two deputy heads, and 1,440 pupils. He has managed to maintain 95 teachers, although the senior leadership team has been cut by a quarter, with now only one deputy; but the number of pupils has increased to 1,650—a 14% increase—and there has been a real-terms decrease in the per pupil funding of the school.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex said when proposing the motion, this has been a problem for 30 years. With extra costs in recent years, reserves have been eaten into and in many cases eliminated. As did other schools in my area, The Weald predicated its financing on fair funding being introduced from 2017-18. It and other schools have had to contend with particular issues that will arise in the current year. From April 2016 there was a 1% increase in teachers' pay, which meant a 1.23% increase for schools once national insurance is included. That equates to a £75,000 incremental cost to The Weald. For the past 30 years, schools have contributed 14.1% to teacher's pensions. From September 2015 that went up to 16.4%—for good reasons, but it has an ongoing annual impact of £170,000 on The Weald's budget. From April 2016, employer's national

insurance contributions were increased, which is an important and valuable change for the Treasury but will cost the school an estimated £120,000.

Looking forward, the impact of changes to the education support grant are expected to add an extra £45,000 of costs, while the apprenticeship levy will add an extra £30,000—and that is before any future increases in teachers' salaries. The sum of those figures amounts to an estimated deficit of £425,000 in the next financial year for The Weald school. That is why there is so much demand in the immediate term for transitional funding to help schools to get over the hump until fair funding is introduced.

To appreciate the gearing effect, my right hon. Friend referred to £20 million raising the West Sussex average per pupil funding from where it is now, at the bottom, to being halfway towards the average. That £20 million would equate to £250,000 flowing through to The Weald school. As the Minister will see, no one would say that is easy living or easy budgeting in the context of a forecast deficit getting on for half a million pounds, but £250,000 would make a real impact on managing the short-term costs until the introduction of the fair funding formula.

As my right hon. Friend said, in trying to work out what to do, headteachers have been setting out alternative options that they could pursue. The one that has generated the most attention has been the threat to modify school opening hours, which I do not believe is appropriate in any circumstances. None of the other options being considered has happy consequences either; they include larger class sizes where practical, curriculum shrinkage and further staff reductions. It would be particularly galling if reducing the syllabus or not replacing staff occurred on a temporary basis, only to be reversed as and when—we hope—satisfactory results come through from the fair funding of the schools.

I congratulate the Department for Education on pursuing fairer funding, which I trust will put appropriate weight on basic per pupil costs. I recognise the fiscal constraints under which the Department is operating, but I hope the particular funding pressures on schools are recognised. When announcing the decision to delay the implementation of fair funding, the Secretary of State for Education said she would take a sensible approach to transitional arrangements for 2017-18. She made similar statements to the Education Select Committee, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex referred. I look forward to the Minister's response, and I also look forward to seeing the Secretary of State this afternoon. This is an issue that I very much hope we can address.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)
rose—

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): I call the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), even though he was not standing up.

9.55 am

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing the debate on behalf of West Sussex Members, who are concerned about school funding in our county.

[Nick Herbert]

I will not repeat the case so ably made by my right hon. Friend and by my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) for redress to the unfair funding for the county over the mid to long term, because it has been perfectly well set out. I have also set it out before, in a debate in this Chamber last November, and I will spare my colleagues from hearing precisely the same remarks again. Another reason I am not going to set it out is because the Government accept that there is unfair funding in West Sussex. In response to the petition that has been organised by schools in West Sussex, the Government said:

“We recognise West Sussex is a relatively low-funded local authority.”

That is objectively the case—it is the third worst funded authority and is pretty much on the bottom as far as shire counties are concerned.

The Government have recognised the need to do something about that, so we do not just have warm words from them; we have a commitment to introduce the national funding formula. It is important that that is recognised and welcomed, because it is a brave step. Future funding should not be allocated to schools on a rather arbitrary and unfair basis but should be based on a proper assessment of need and with a view to ensuring greater fairness. That commitment was in the Conservative manifesto, the policy was announced by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and it has been reiterated by the current Education Secretary. I understand that the introduction of a national funding formula has cross-party agreement; perhaps we will have confirmation of that later.

We are not arguing about the need to move to a fairer system in the mid to long term, or whether that will happen. I should just say that I think it is important that those who are pressing for fairer funding in West Sussex acknowledge the Government's position on this and the commitment to introduce a national funding formula. It does not help when our county council issues statements on the matter and does not recognise that the national funding formula has been pledged, or when headteachers refuse to acknowledge it. I urge those whom I am supporting to take a little more care in ensuring that the way in which they present their case is balanced and is likely to be well received by those who have made a commitment to move in the right direction.

We are discussing the interim situation before the national funding formula is introduced, and the recognition that that formula has been delayed by one year, to 2018-19 rather than the year before as was originally pledged. On the expectation of fairer funding, it will be hard to introduce a fairer formula and not see some improvement for West Sussex, which is funded on the most palpably unfair basis at the moment, and for the situation to improve—but we should recognise that that improvement might be incremental.

In the meantime, schools in West Sussex face a particular difficulty. The Government have protected school spending overall, in the same way they have protected other key budgets, and that should be recognised. In a difficult fiscal framework, when there is a need to save money and when the country still spends more than it earns, the schools budget—a massive budget in the Government's overall programme—has been protected. Nevertheless,

the way in which that has been achieved means there has been flat cash for schools in West Sussex at a time when their costs have increased and costs have been loaded on to them. That was ably set out by my right hon. and hon. Friends.

It might help the Minister if I give a practical example, because I want to persuade her that the impact on these schools is real. In my constituency, we have a very good school, Steyning grammar school, which is in fact a comprehensive, not a grammar school. The excellent headteacher, who is presiding over an increase in standards year on year, has supplied me with figures, which I am happy to send to the Minister. The school has seen a real-terms cut in funding of around 10% since 2010 as a consequence of the increased costs it is having to meet and reductions in certain grants. As a consequence, the percentage of the school's budget that is accounted for by staff costs is increasing from around 80%, where it should be, to 84%. Teaching full-time equivalents have fallen from 132 in 2010 to 118 in 2016-17.

In budgetary terms, this meant that in 2015 the school's budget was just at break-even. In this financial year, 2016-17, the school has set a deficit budget of £600,000, which it will cover from reserves, but for 2017 it forecasts a deficit growing to £850,000 a year, which it will not have the reserves to cover. That will require the school to take action and to reduce its staff levels, which are at the national average in terms of ratios. Unlike schools in other parts of the country that are much better funded and have more generous staff-to-pupil ratios, that school does not have room to make those reductions without there being an impact on the delivery of education and, it fears, on standards.

I strongly urge the Minister to look at the funding and the impact on school budgets in counties such as West Sussex that are facing real-terms funding reductions because of these cost pressures. She must look at the impact on those schools' budgets on the ground, to recognise that they are not engaged in a game of playing bleeding stumps but face particular difficulty.

Jeremy Quin: Constituents of mine attend Steyning grammar school, which is an excellent school. With a deficit of £850,000 and staffing at 84%, 85% or 86% of the total budget, if there are forced changes in staff numbers, it would be particularly galling to go through the cost and the pain of reducing staff numbers by whatever means, only to be required as a result of fair funding coming through to then source and recruit new teachers to resurrect those posts and start delivering again for pupils.

Nick Herbert: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is much better at maths than I am and is able to point such things out. That is what underlines the whole case for transitional funding. I do not necessarily argue that there is a link between performance in the public sector and funding. We should never assume there is an automatic link between the two, such that any reduction in funding is unmanageable or will have an automatic effect on performance. It is incumbent on any public sector institution to run efficiently and to make savings, but by any objective measure the funding of schools in West Sussex is already among the lowest in the country, so there is no fat to cut without there being an impact.

If we still have to make national savings and the schools budget is to be included within that, that should be achieved on a fair basis, but at the moment, the situation is impacting disproportionately on schools that are poorly funded. That is unfair. I was Police Minister when we cut the policing budget by 20% in real terms, but the impact was felt across all police forces. Although there was some difference in how forces were funded, we did not have a situation where some forces faced no cuts at all and others faced reductions and therefore felt they were being treated entirely unfairly.

It is important to recognise the particular situation of these authorities. That lends weight to the case for some kind of transitional help. Again, the Government recognised that, because in announcing the national funding formula they announced a £390 million uplift nationally in school funding, which was then put in the baseline. That has been applied year on year and is a large sum of money nationally. I recognise that, but if we look at the practical effect, the uplift amounted to less than £1 million for West Sussex's budget, which meant the actual increase was something like £10 per pupil. The impact on schools' budgets was therefore relatively low.

Because it was very broad, the distribution of that sum in the transitional uplift did not give sufficient help to the areas of the country that most needed it and was not sufficient to cushion them against the increased cost pressures they are facing. To bring West Sussex up to the average level of county councils—never mind the average national level—would require an uplift of £15 million a year, and it has had less than £1 million. That is why the schools are in this position. To bring funding up to the national average, as my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham said, would require a much greater uplift of £40 million a year.

Because of the cost pressures, the reduction in funding and its effect on schools in the county, and because the national funding formula will not be introduced for two years, there is a strong case for interim funding for the worst funded areas, despite the Government's overall protection of the budget nationally. That would require taking decisions ahead of the introduction of the formula, which I appreciate would be difficult. It would require finding a basis on which to fund only those schools right at the bottom of the pile, rather than too broadly, which is what happened before. Again, that would be difficult, but it is necessary and right, or else schools in West Sussex will cut their budgets in a way that will see staff numbers fall. That is why I urge the Minister to look at this carefully and to recognise that a very fair and reasonable case is being made by schools in the county and that this deserves special attention.

10.8 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is very gracious of you to call me to speak, Mr Gray. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing this important debate. I echo his tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), who has led the very united charge by all West Sussex MPs. Of course, two of our number are slightly compromised in their support, one being the Minister for Schools and the other, my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), being a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Education. I am sure that their supportive sentiments are with us in spirit.

Those West Sussex Members are united with the county council, with every headteacher in every school in every constituency in West Sussex, and with the many thousands of parents who have written to us, signed petitions, joined us in presenting a petition to Downing Street just a couple of weeks ago and supported the "Worth Less?" campaign, which flags up the significant differences in the way pupils are funded and therefore treated and viewed in West Sussex, compared with so many other parts of the country. We are also united with all the local media, which is supportive.

This is a huge issue for all our constituents across the county. It comes on top of other huge issues such as the abject failure of our local rail service to deliver our constituents to their places of work and education remotely on time or reliably. The other huge issue is the work on the A27 in our constituencies. So this is a busy time for us, the issue is taking up a lot of time and resources and we need something to be done about it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham rightly praised the Government's efforts to reform education over the past six years, dragging this country's educational standards into the 21st century, but as it stands the way we fund our schools in West Sussex remains resolutely in the 20th century.

We all welcomed the Government's manifesto commitment, and their honouring in principle that commitment, to review the funding formula to ensure that we have a fairer funding formula to benefit counties such as West Sussex. Therefore, the Government's announcement last year was widely welcomed in our constituencies, where things have been very tight for some time, but, frankly, time is running out to come to the rescue. The news earlier this year that the review is being delayed by another year is a potentially fatal body blow. We do not know what fairer funding will look like, how fair it will be in cash terms to counties such as West Sussex, or how long it will take to phase it in. It is unlikely to happen overnight. It is not an easy exercise and there will be winners and losers in other parts of the country. Therefore, there is still a lot of uncertainty.

The then Chief Secretary to the Treasury said in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham that the

"Government wants to see every child achieve to the best of his or her ability regardless of their background or where they live."

That is something of a grammatical car crash, but it is a sentiment with which we wholeheartedly agree. He went on:

"At the March Budget, the Chancellor announced that the Government will accelerate the move to the"

national funding formula.

"Subject to consultation, the aim is for 90% of the schools who will gain funding to receive the full amount they are due by 2020."

We do not know what the full amount they are due equates to and we are now talking about 2020 at the earliest before that transition works its way in. That is almost another four years of pain, tightening budgets and difficult choices, to which my hon. Friends have alluded.

We have heard the figures and I will not go through them again, but it cannot be right that there is such a substantial anomaly between child funding of £4,196 per annum in West Sussex and, the most extreme example, child funding in Tower Hamlets of £7,014 per annum.

[Tim Loughton]

In our neighbouring county of East Sussex, funding is substantially more, at £4,450 a year. The difference just to bring us up to the average funding is £41 million a year.

The Chief Secretary mentioned in his letter an additional £500 million of core funding to schools over the course of the spending review. That is welcome, but £41 million just to get us to the average represents 8% of that £500 million, which is being spread among the whole country. For us, that £41 million would represent 1,518 additional teachers in our schools, which are losing places, having to make redundancies and are not filling vacancies. The result is that subjects are being dropped and class sizes are becoming larger. That is the realistic outcome of the present situation and it can only get worse until it is resolved.

Hon. Members have lobbied hard. We have met Secretaries of State and Ministers, and we have further meetings later today. We have met many teachers and have been lobbied by many teachers and many parents. I will read out some letters from schools. One school in Worthing wrote to parents: "School leaders have made every conceivable cut to our provision and now we are faced with reducing basic services still further, all to the disadvantage of your child. Our finances are so bad that we are all having to consider the following types of action: modifying school opening hours, increasing teacher-to-pupil ratios again, reducing basic services such as cleaning and site and premises work, stopping any investment in books and IT equipment, designing curriculum offers that fulfil only basic requirements, not replacing staff who leave. As you can imagine, such radical considerations are the very last thing that any school wishes to do but we are being given no option. We do not understand why children in our school are worth less than others around the country. Even when a national funding formula is introduced, it will take at least three years to have a really significant effect on our budgets. We cannot wait that long." That is a common cry across all our schools.

An excellent school in Worthing, Thomas A Becket junior school, is the largest primary school in Worthing; indeed it is one of the largest primary schools in south-east England. The head has written to me saying that its

"funding has been severely reduced by the reorganisation due to the Worthing Age of Transfer process."

That happened recently and was very successful. The head continued:

"However, the main point I would like to draw to your attention is that if Thomas A Becket Junior was located in a London borough the school would receive, on average, an additional £1.8 million in its annual budget, enough to employ an additional 65 teachers. I have no doubt that with this extra budget share my school could improve at the rate of London schools over the past few years... The facts are well known to you; schools are facing an 8% decrease in real terms funding due to unfunded NI and pension contributions over which we have no control."

Academies are also suffering. Shoreham academy in my constituency is rated outstanding. The head wrote to me:

"The huge difference in funding levels across the country mean that West Sussex schools are now at breaking point as a consequence and students are being treated unfairly and unjustly in terms of educational funding."

This is not just vague bleating. Outstanding headteachers are really concerned and worried about the future prospects for their schools and their children. We share those concerns. These schools have dipped into their reserves in recent years because they have faced years of accumulated deficit because of the way the funding formula is fashioned, and in many of our schools there is nothing left in the tank.

As I said, we have the support of the county council. Louise Goldsmith, leader of West Sussex County Council, wrote to the former Chancellor, saying that the teaching "profession has undoubtedly become less attractive in recent years and whilst we realise that there are a lot of new initiatives being promoted by the government to attract new teachers, and we welcome these, in the short term we need to be able to attract high calibre staff to West Sussex now. Unfortunately, due to the current low level of funding, the schools are having difficulty doing this, especially as they are unable to offer any enhanced salaries.

The government has stated that school funding is being protected in 2016/17. Whilst we obviously welcome that fact, in real terms the funding is in effect being eroded by unfunded cost pressures, such as the increase in employer's pensions contributions and national insurance contributions, pay awards, the national living wage, as well as any 'in-year' growth in pupil numbers."

The county council has had to top up a lot of money from its reserves and other areas, in a county where we are under severe pressure because of the high elderly population and the huge impact on the social care budget competing for increasingly scarce resources. In addition, as we have heard, West Sussex County Council has always generously recognised and endeavoured to fund the high special educational needs we have across the county. We have had shortfalls in the capital costs of new schools. We have an increasing population. There is the knock-on effect of Brighton: people moving out of Brighton into West Sussex because of cheaper property is raising costs in our county. There has been the cost of the recent age of transfer exercise that I mentioned, and there is the cost of living in West Sussex. It is one of the most expensive places to live in the whole country, yet our funding formula does not acknowledge that we have different cost pressures from other parts of the country.

We have support from the local media. All the local media have written editorials on the issue. For example, the *Worthing Herald* has written:

"The low funding, together with rising National Insurance and pension costs and the government's decision to cut £600 million from education grants, has left schools at breaking point.

This is no exaggeration—our headteachers, who have been called upon to absorb further cuts while already struggling to make ends meet, fear schools may have to consider not opening five days a week if the funding crisis is not addressed by the government."

It exhorts its readers to write to MPs and others. I exhort readers to write to the Secretary of State for Education and particularly to make submissions to the formal consultation on a fair funding formula that is being undertaken at the moment. We need examples of the real hardship that is happening here and now and can only get worse until this issue is resolved. We need those on the Secretary of State's desk.

There have been disappointing explanations of the situation from Ministers. A previous Education Minister, who is now the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah),

wrote back to the then cabinet member in West Sussex in slightly less than satisfactory terms. He wrote that the councillor

“mentions that schools in West Sussex are experiencing cost pressures as a result of increased pension and National Insurance contributions. It may be helpful if I explain the rationale behind our changes. We are asking schools, like other employers across the public sector, to contribute more towards their employees’ pensions to ensure that the costs of public sector pension schemes do not fall unfairly on taxpayers.”

Well, they are falling unfairly on taxpayers. Taxpayers in West Sussex are having to forgo other things from the county council because it is having to make up that money. The pension impact is considerable. Pension rates have gone up from 14.4% to 16.8%. That is an extra 2.4 percentage points added to the bill, and no extra money has been given to our schools to cover it. That is on top of the pay rise, which is only 1% but still adds £500 to the salary bill for the average teacher, and the increase in national insurance costs of some 2.3%, again for the average teacher.

The former Education Minister, in his helpful advice as to how we can do things to get round the funding shortfalls, goes on to talk about headteacher recruitment. He says that

“whilst the national headteacher vacancy rate remains fairly low at 0.2%, I do recognise that some schools are facing headteacher recruitment challenges. This was one of the reasons why we reformed leadership pay so that schools could pay more to attract the best headteachers. The government funds a number of targeted programmes that aim to address leadership supply, particularly within challenging schools. For example, Future Leaders aims to develop the skills of high-potential aspiring headteachers who want to work in some of the most challenging schools in the country. The Teaching Leaders programme develops middle leaders in primary and secondary schools in challenging contexts, putting them through a rigorous two-year training programme. A number of these middle leaders will go on to be the headteachers of tomorrow.”

We do not need the new, targeted teachers and headteachers of tomorrow; we need the basic subject teachers of today, and we are losing them. There are massive gaps in terms of teachers offering foreign languages, for example, across many of our schools. Those subjects are disappearing from the curriculum. The curriculum choice being offered to our pupils is shrinking simply because we do not have the teachers because we do not have the funding to attract them to one of the most expensive counties in the country.

There is no fat left. There is no money left in the reserves. There is virtually no leeway left for our headteachers somehow to juggle these finances. There is an urgent and critical need for the formula change, but also an urgent and critical need to recognise that we have a funding shortfall now and we have to have some help in the form of transitional funding to address that urgent situation now.

As I said, there is a shortfall of £41 million a year. The additional money that we have had in the past amounts to £930,000—a fraction of the reality of our funding shortfall. Yet again, West Sussex loses out. We lose out on central Government spend for the infrastructure in the county, yet our county is a large payer of taxes to central revenue. It is just not fair that our schoolchildren should lose out now and their whole future be compromised because we have an unfair funding formula that will still

take several years to resolve and in the meantime is inflicting potentially huge damage on the life chances of our young people.

I hope that the Government will look again at the possibility of funding the shortfall with a transitional relief package. It is very hard for us as constituency MPs to support the Government’s programme on things such as grammar schools, with which in principle I certainly have a deal of sympathy but which will divert funds when we need those funds now in order to plug gaps in all the schools, of whatever type, across our county. We need the Minister and the Secretary of State to look more sympathetically on a dire situation that will only get worse over the next few years.

10.26 am

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will have in front of her, either now or shortly, “Annex C: local authority schools block units of funding 2015 to 2016”, which is part of the guidance entitled “Fairer schools funding: arrangements for 2015 to 2016”. It lists every education authority in the country, and at the bottom, by £90, is West Sussex. In some charts, we are fifth lowest. Some say we are third lowest. This annexe C, issued by the Department, spells out that we are £90 lower than the next lowest, so I say to the Minister that in the transitional funding that is needed, she should ensure that that £90 at least is made up. When we start looking at the allocation of the £390 million to 69 unfairly funded authorities, we would expect that the lowest-funded authority would get slightly more than 0.2% of that £390 million. Bromley went up by 11%. Shropshire, the county of my birth, went up by about 7%. Why did West Sussex get not the 0.9% given to the Isle of Wight, which is funded more fairly than West Sussex, but less than one quarter of that? Those are the challenges.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend has done our area a great service by raising the issue in this way, but he is such an old silverback—in a gorilla colony, as he knows, the silverbacks are the ones to whom everyone listens—that he remembers the long-gone days when these formulae were fixed in the most abstruse and archaic manner. Does he agree that it is preposterous that, as our hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned, we are being funded in a positively 18th century manner to equip our children to do work for modern times? It is not on.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree with my right hon. Friend. I seldom correct him, but he may have said that I was the Father of the House. If I get re-elected next time and three of the five other people who were first elected before me do not, I might then have that role, but until then I shall look on myself as—

Sir Nicholas Soames: You are still a silverback. [Laughter.]

Sir Peter Bottomley: I will not regard that as unparliamentary.

We have heard mention of special needs, and in my constituency Palatine school and Oak Grove college do really well with their pupils. Both heads have written to me, and I have passed that on to the Department.

[Sir Peter Bottomley]

I bring up Palatine school because its aim is that every pupil should be empowered. How can the dedicated teachers empower their pupils, with special needs or not, if they do not have the funding? The message that we will take up with the Secretary of State, and will take up now with her colleague the Minister, is this: get on with some transitional relief, which will make a significant difference to the heads' burdens.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) talked about Steyning grammar school, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about schools in his constituency. In our part of West Sussex, people go to schools outside of their constituencies, so we are in this together. I hope the Minister comes down to meet some of the heads and the pupils, who behaved impeccably at that petition event at Downing Street. I hope they can be as proud of her as she would be of them. However, it does need money.

The issue is the historic negative. All funding up to now has been based on what happened before, and it gets worse and worse. I ask the Minister and her advisers, especially the statisticians, not to treble count deprivation. Everyone knows that high needs have to be met and that pupil premiums are justified, but if they affect so much of the grant for schools, we get a distortion. When we move past the transitional stage to the next fairer funding national scheme, no other education authority or school within an area—there is a possible exception of one outlier at the top and one at the bottom because there is always some exception—can be more than 35% from the highest or lowest. There has to be a narrower range than at present. The £8,000 per pupil in Westminster may be the exception because there are very few schools in Westminster, and we may find something at the other end that needs the least funding, but beyond those, we cannot allow a gap of 100% or 50% and must bring it down to about 35%. That can become one of the rules within which the exemplifications are worked out. I know perfectly well how local authority funding has been run and how health service funding has been run: exemplifications come in, Ministers arrange things and there are some anomalies that cannot be dealt with. However, they can be dealt with, and West Sussex is one of them.

I have said to you privately, Mr Gray, and I say to the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—I am sorry there is not a Liberal here for this important debate, but I am sure they would agree with us—that I cannot stay for the Minister's winding-up speech because I have a charity's trustees meeting to attend. However, I hope that my short remarks, especially the point about annexe C, which spells out that West Sussex is at the bottom, shows what the Minister needs to change.

10.32 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I will just point out the political geography of the room. I did a similar debate the other week with Merseyside MPs, and the Minister for School Standards was on his own on the Government side. Being a Greater Manchester MP, I thought I was probably more isolated from my

colleagues in that debate than I am today, but I will not go into those traditional rivalries when we are talking about West Sussex.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing this debate and on standing up, so eloquently and effectively, for the schools in his constituency and county. From my brief time in this place over the past two years, I know that politics can be like herding cats. To have so many—five—Members from the county pressing the Department and the Under-Secretary today is good to see. I would like to have seen the Minister for School Standards but if, as Woody Allen said, 80% of success is showing up, I am glad he is representing the other 20% today.

I want to make some remarks about the campaign and congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), who has clearly put in a shift, on organising it. Headteachers from 250 schools in the county have said that they need the transitional funding—the campaign has brought all of them together. The campaign has delivered a letter and petition with the names of 100,000 parents on to the Prime Minister—that is an incredible feat, so very well done. Headteachers are saying that they need the additional funding and cannot replace staff, which was alluded to by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who talked about retention and selection. They have campaigned very effectively and today we have heard the statistics about the differential levels of funding. Members have spoken with passion about individual schools in their constituencies.

The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex made two incredible points. One was that it is a fundamental basic in policy to fix schools funding—we have huge differentials across the nation. He also spoke with passion about special educational needs, which we do not do often enough. I hope, unfortunately, to find an ally with the education for all Bill, because clearly this issue is not mentioned at all. Any education Bill coming through Parliament should have special educational needs at its heart. I hope we can turn that around collectively.

Last week the Government U-turned in abandoning some of the education for all Bill, which would have included the fair funding formula. We now know, as has been alluded to by Ministers, that it is going to be kicked into the long grass for quite some time, which has created uncertainty. Back in July, the Secretary of State said that she would bring forward the next stage of the consultation

“once Parliament returns in the autumn.”—[*Official Report*, 21 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 969.]

That was on 21 July and, to the best of my knowledge, we still have not had that statement. It would be good if the Minister could say today when we will be hearing that because Members on both sides of the House want to know.

At the moment, a confused and chaotic narrative is coming out of the Education team on a number of issues. Labour Members support the fair funding formula, but as the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the Government have been really good in the past few years with subsidiarity in decision-making—the funding formulae for skills and apprenticeships are a completely devolved function to Greater Manchester. The hon. Member for Horsham

alluded to the fact that education and skills are vital to our national productivity. Traditionally, the precept has been set where local authorities could always top up the education resource that they were given from Government, which some counties and metropolitan authorities have done well. However, in the past few years, particularly with the London Challenge, they have had an enormous amount of resource, although I do not deny that that has come with an enormous amount of success.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham rightly talked about the Thomas A Becket junior school and the comparative differential. We probably know that the Thomas A Becket junior school has come from a lot further down in terms of its results and attainment, but the differential is still too large to be fair. We believe that, as with the London Challenge, we should invest in all our schools rather than take money from some to give to others—that is taking from Peter to pay Paul—which is what we do not want when the fair funding formula is introduced.

I disagree slightly with the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs about protected budgets. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that school budgets will have fallen by 8% over the course of this Parliament—the budget was protected only in cash terms rather than in real terms, meaning that the schools budget is at the mercy of rising pressures, pupil numbers and the impact of inflation on the true value. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham alluded to those pressures in his excellent speech. There are pressures on recruitment, selection and retention of teachers, particularly in areas such as his, which has rising house values and a heated economy, with people having to travel to London to work.

With inflation rising to a two-year high and many predicting it will rise again in the light of Brexit—if we have a chaotic Brexit, the situation could be worse—it looks as though schools funding will face even higher real-terms cuts. The IFS has said that, over the course of this Parliament, funding will fall for the first time since the mid-1990s, making it harder for us to secure funding for schools. It estimated in April 2016 that there would be a 7% real-terms reduction in per pupil spending between 2015-16 and 2019-20. In that context, how will the Minister secure fairer funding for schools? Will it come at the expense of schools in the most disadvantaged areas?

In conclusion, I pay tribute not only to all the Members who have stood up so effectively for schools, but to the schools in West Sussex and to West Sussex County Council, which is doing its best in difficult circumstances. We have a chaotic school funding system and the Government are dragging their feet on getting to grips with it. I hope the Minister enlightens us today about the way forward.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on introducing this really important debate on funding for schools in West Sussex. He presented it in his usual robust, assiduous and charming style. I also congratulate his colleagues from West Sussex, who present a formidable,

united front on this issue. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) are a veritable tag team to be reckoned with. I know that when they go and speak to the Secretary of State this afternoon, they will make their case powerfully and persuasively, as they have done today. I know we all share the same ambition: to see a country that works for everyone, where schools improve and where every child, no matter which county, constituency or part of the country they live in, has the opportunity to go to a good school, to get a great education and to fulfil their potential.

Let me start with the fundamental reason we are here today: to make sure that our children benefit from an outstanding education. We need good schools in every area of the country. Investing in education is truly an investment in the future of our nation as a whole. That is why we are committed to providing equal opportunity for all children to succeed, irrespective of where they come from in the country and where they happen to grow up. A fair funding formula is a fantastic way of achieving that and providing a crucial underpinning for the education system to act as a motor for social mobility and social justice, as we all desire.

As many of my hon. Friends have said today, the Government are prioritising investment in education. As pupil numbers increase, so will the amount of money for schools. This year the core school budget will be more than £40 billion—the highest on record—which includes £2.5 billion for our most disadvantaged children through the pupil premium. That funding is also protected for the rest of this Parliament. The current funding system is holding us back, though. I do not think anyone in this Chamber disagrees with that. It is preventing us from getting the record amount of money that we are investing to the parts of the country where it is most needed.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful for the constructive and helpful way in which the Minister is winding up the debate. To pick up her point about the welcome increase in education expenditure and the number of new pupils coming into schools, the excellent St Paul's Catholic college in Burgess Hill—a really good school in my constituency—has had a 31% increase in pupils, but there is so little money and room to manoeuvre in its staff budget that it does not have enough staff to cope with that 31%. It makes do, but it does not have adequate staff, which is one of the problems of the existing baseline and why the school needs the transitional funding to get through to the national funding formula being introduced.

Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will talk shortly about the transitional funding, which I know he and his colleagues from West Sussex are all very keen on.

We are clear that without reform the funding system will not deliver the outcomes we want for our children. As many Members have said today, it is outdated, inefficient and unfair. There are two reasons for that: first, the amount of money that local authorities receive is based on data that have not been updated for more

[Caroline Dinenage]

than a decade, so although local populations have changed the distribution of funding has not, and the impact of that is hugely unfair. We have heard many of the relevant figures today. West Sussex is receiving just under £4,200 for every pupil, whereas in Birmingham, for example, that figure is £5,200. Although there will always be variations in the amount different areas receive, because their needs and local costs vary, a system that creates such significant differences cannot be fair.

Mike Kane: Will the Minister enlighten the House about whether any areas will lose out because of the introduction of a new national fair funding formula?

Caroline Dinenage: We are still in the consultation period, the next stage of which will be announced shortly, so I am not able to comment on that today.

Different local authorities take very different decisions about how to distribute their funding. There are 152 different local formulae, so a primary pupil in West Sussex with low prior attainment currently attracts £863 in extra funding, whereas in Trafford, for example, they attract more than £3,000 extra, and in four local authorities they get nothing. My county, Hampshire, provides no extra funding for pupils in receipt of free school meals, whereas Warrington chooses to allocate more than £3,000 to each secondary pupil in the same situation. That is why we are committed to fixing the system.

Earlier this year we launched a consultation on the new fairer funding formula for schools. The second stage, including the details of the national funding formula, will be announced in the next few weeks. Our aims are clear, and I hope Members from all parts of the House will agree that they are worthy ones. We want to create a formula that is fair, objective, transparent and simple. It should be clear how much funding is available for each pupil and that should be consistent wherever they are in the country. From 2018-2019, we intend to begin moving towards a system where individual school budgets are set by a national formula and not by 152 locally devised ones.

The reforms will mean that the funding is allocated fairly and directly to the frontline where it is most needed. They will also mean that funding reflects the needs of pupils, so the higher the need, the greater the funding. The reforms will be the biggest step forward in making funding fair in well over a decade. It is therefore vital that we take time to get them right. We need to debate the important principles that will underpin this and listen to the submissions that are coming back as part of the consultation. We have a responsibility to ensure that the system we set up now enables schools to maximise the potential of every single child.

I am aware of the concerns raised by hon. Members today that fairer funding for schools in West Sussex and other parts of the country is very much overdue. We agree that the reforms are vital, but they are also an historic change, which is why we have to take the time to consider the options and implications very carefully. We cannot afford to get this wrong. Crucially, we must consult widely with the education sector before we make changes. We will carry out the second stage of

that consultation later this year and make final decisions in the new year. The new system will be in place from April 2018.

In the meantime, we have confirmed arrangements for funding in 2017-18 so that local authorities and schools have the information and certainty they need to plan their budgets for the coming year. That is so important, because a key message coming out of the first round of the consultation is about the ability to plan ahead and certainty about the future. Schools need to know where they stand.

Areas such as West Sussex, which benefited from the £390 million that we added to the schools budget in the previous Parliament, will have that extra funding protected in their baseline 2017-18, as they did in 2016-17, but I take on board the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West, who said that West Sussex received a disproportionately low amount. We will look into that.

The next stage of our consultation, which is coming out shortly, will set out the detailed proposals for the national funding formula and show how the formula will make a difference to every school and local authority budget in the country. We will explain how quickly we expect budgets to change. We have been clear that we want schools to see the benefits of fairer funding as quickly as possible, but the pace of change must be manageable for them. The strong message is certainty and the need to be able to plan ahead. We fully take on board the real-term impact on budgets of the recent changes to pensions and national insurance contributions that my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs mentioned.

All local Members have spoken about the transitional arrangements. I hear them and I know that they will make a powerful case to the Secretary of State this afternoon when they see her. The Minister for School Standards has been working hard on the arrangements. As usual, we will finalise school funding allocations for the coming financial year in December, taking into account the latest pupil numbers from the October census.

Reforming the funding system to ensure that areas such as West Sussex are fairly funded is only half the story. As hon. Members have pointed out, as with all public services, it is vital that schools spend the money that they receive as efficiently as possible. The most effective schools collaborate through academy trusts and federations, or as part of teaching school networks or clusters. They share knowledge, skills, experiences and resources to drive the important changes that support their school's education or vision. Schools are best placed to decide how to spend their budgets and achieve the best possible outcomes for their students. Lots of schools in West Sussex are already doing that, despite having very low funding compared with other parts of the country. We recognise that the Government have a role to play in ensuring that schools are supported to make every single penny of their funding count. That is why we launched a package of support for schools in January that includes new guidance and tools to help them make the most of the funding they receive, and we will continue to update and improve that offer to schools.

I am enormously grateful for the support that my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex and the other West Sussex Members have given to the agenda.

They have all raised important issues. I hope that they are reassured, more than anything, about the Government's long-term commitment to reform school funding so that there is a fairer system for children in West Sussex and across the country—a system where funding reflects the real level of need, so that pupils are able to access the same educational opportunities wherever they happen to live.

A fair national funding formula underpins our ambition for social mobility and social justice, and will mean that every pupil is supported to achieve the very best of their potential, wherever they happen to live. Although we should recognise that there are challenges currently, and that challenges will lie ahead, I hope all hon. Members give support to and work with the Government to achieve that vital aim.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the funding of West Sussex schools.

10.53 am

Sitting suspended.

Small Shops Regulation

11 am

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

That this House has considered small shops regulation.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. This is not a great new philosophical argument or something from Shakespeare, but it is far easier to regulate than to deregulate. Whether the regulation starts via EU institutions or is domestically derived, one need only look at the daily Order Paper of this place to see the direction of travel. For every perceived problem, the first call is for more government. This debate is perhaps a little unusual. It is an appeal for less government in order to free up our small businesses, which are so often at the heart of our communities, so that they can do what they are good at: serving the public, making a profit, operating efficiently, employing staff and, yes, paying taxes.

I refer to the 2016 “Local Shop Report” by the Association of Convenience Stores, which represents just a small part of the entire small shops sector. There are more than 50,000 convenience stores across the UK, with Scotland strangely having the highest density, with one shop per 995 people. Some 74% of these shops are owner-managed, and they have taken up many services that have been abandoned by state agencies or the more traditional post office, including mobile phone top-ups and bill payment services, such as PayPoint, that accept payments for a wide range of services that are important to Government, including council tax; they even accept payment of court fines and utility bills. Other valuable services are provided, such as sales of lottery tickets, newspapers, stationery, stamps, tobacco and alcohol, snacks and sandwiches and, of course, more traditional groceries.

More than half of customers walk to their local shop, with one in five visiting every day. Twenty-two per cent. of shop owners take no holiday at all, and 24% work more than 70 hours a week. Fully 70% of these shops open for more than 85 hours a week. The total value of sales is £38 billion a year, representing a fifth of the total grocery market, and the sector accounts for 390,000 jobs.

More than that, small shops are the heart of their community. Some 84% of these independent retailers take part in community activity every single year. By way of context, I am working with local traders and boat owners in Ramsgate in my constituency of South Thanet to make the Christmas lighting in and around Ramsgate's royal harbour even bigger this year than last year. There are no prizes for guessing who are offering the prizes for the best-dressed shops and boats. Yes, it is the local shops. Whether the local hair salon, the coffee shops or the restaurants, small shops are very much at the heart of every single community in this country.

Small shops are often the birthplace of enterprise, where entrepreneurs' dreams can become a reality. I come from a small shop background. My father had a small chain of greengrocers in north Kent from the 1950s until the 1990s. The rise of supermarkets caused a degree of suffering for such small shops, but who looks out for the elderly customer who comes in every day but

[Craig Mackinlay]

has not been seen for a few days? It is often the independent retailer. Such retailers now face new competition from the new giants of online sales such as Amazon.

Unfortunately, many of the regulatory hindrances are driven by increasing compliance demand, often from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the ever-changing tax code. Currently at 22,000 pages, the tax code is simply out of control. Just one part of the tax code, the annual investment allowance, started in 2008 at £50,000 a year before going up to £100,000 a year from April 2010; it then dropped to £50,000 a year from 6 April 2012; from January 2013, it went up to £250,000 a year, and then up to £500,000; and now, since 1 January 2016, it is back down to £200,000. How can a small shopkeeper or a small business keep track of that background of uncertainty when trying to make long-term investment decisions?

VAT thresholds have very hard edges, which can be a disincentive to grow lest the business gain a new administrative burden and, depending on the type of trade, face the potential loss of margin and profitability. I hope that Brexit will allow us to rethink the structure of VAT, with simplification at its heart.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that, although each individual new regulation may seem fairly reasonable in itself, the cumulative effect of all these new rules and regulations, such as the tobacco display ban and the plain packaging of cigarettes, is a problem for small shops?

Craig Mackinlay: There is a ratchet effect. One at a time does not seem too bad, and individually these regulations are often imposed for good reasons, but when they are put together as a framework for how small businesses and retailers have to operate, they become a true minefield of problems.

Adding to that minefield, small retailers face the new burden of pension auto-enrolment for their staff. I have no criticism of the Government's great ambition: auto-enrolment is essential so that people can build their own retirement funds in excess of the state pension. The roll-out thus far for larger business has been successful—I am a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which has looked at that—but for the smaller employer, and notably the smaller retailer, I have asked for a free software tool that overlays the freely available real-time information software for payroll management, and HMRC has steadfastly refused.

It is good to note that the latest figures, published just last week, show the greatest ever increase in the salaries of the lowest paid due to the rise in the minimum wage. However, for smaller shops there are concerns that as hourly rates increase ahead of inflation in the years to come, the owners of these businesses might earn less than the staff they employ.

Of all tax and regulatory reforms, business rates relief has been the most welcome among smaller businesses. There has been small business rate relief, charitable rate relief, rural rate relief and enterprise zone relief. However, because of the high value of business premises in London

and the south-east, new valuation assessments are in some cases creating huge increases to the business rates of businesses that are already paying higher salaries.

A real problem on the horizon that is causing much concern to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the Chartered Institute of Taxation—I am a member of both—and, I am sure, the other accountancy institutes is the proposed roll-out of Making Tax Digital. If the underlying desire is to advance tax cash flows to quarterly, the Government should simply say so. People go into small business to run a business and earn a profit. They do so for aspiration and lifestyle reasons, not to spend time complying with additional administrative burdens. The Making Tax Digital programme should simply be scrapped until HMRC can prove itself capable of dealing with existing workloads to an acceptable standard. It should at least start with bigger businesses—those above the VAT threshold—that are more able to cope.

Adding together the last few years of real-time information, in which businesses have to provide monthly returns for payroll, and the software costs of auto-enrolment, and now Making Tax Digital, the Federation of Small Businesses estimates the compliance cost in software and professional support to be £3,600 per business per year. That is some way in excess of the well received employment allowance of £3,000 a year that every business can claim against its national insurance contributions.

Finance raising continues to cause difficulties. We have seen the welcome expansion of new forms of lending driven by the internet, such as peer-to-peer, but banks remain cautious, requiring guarantees and often over-zealous security coverage requirements. The reality is that family and friends are still often the primary source of seed financing. In February I obtained a written answer from the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), about the take-up of the seed enterprise investment scheme. I learned that the amounts raised nationwide were extremely and worryingly low: just £168 million for 2013-14. I will not go into the flaws in the seed EIS application process or HMRC's labyrinthine rules on getting such applications approved, but it is clear to me as a chartered accountant and chartered tax adviser that we need a lighter-touch regime to encourage more of the "friends and family" type of investment.

For many of our shops, which are often located in historic town centres, planning regulations can prove a barrier to sensible growth and plans for the future. We have the rather daft situation in which a conservation officer in one local authority will have an entirely different view from a conservation officer in the authority next door. That adds to uncertainty and costs.

Government Departments and local authorities have large procurement budgets, but bureaucratic rules still exist, particularly on contracts over a certain size and when EU procurement rules come into play. Those rules make it close to impossible for smaller retailers and businesses to even consider facing the cost and complexity of applying for lucrative bids.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned cigarettes. I have been working closely with the Tobacco Retailers Alliance and the National Federation of Retail Newsagents on the issue

of illicit tobacco. For many shops, tobacco sales drive footfall and lead to other sales, but the Tobacco Manufacturers Association suggests that because of the increasingly draconian rules on tobacco sales, plain packaging, hidden counters and the tobacco taxation escalator, 30% of UK smokers now buy from illicit sources. That is hardly surprising when a packet of cigarettes costs 50p in the Ukraine and still hovers around the £2.50 mark in much of eastern Europe. Local retailers are losing not only turnover from tobacco sales, despite the low margins, but other turnover through lost footfall.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I agree with the thrust of his argument and with his specific point on illicit tobacco sales. Is he aware that his debate is well timed because it coincides with the excellent “Freedom from Fear” campaign by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which is aimed at protecting shop workers from abuse and assault? Does he agree that small shopkeepers and their staff are all too often in the frontline of such attacks and that stronger deterrent sentences are needed to protect them?

Craig Mackinlay: Just last week in Ramsgate, I invited the Kent police and crime commissioner to a retail crime forum to address that very point. It was quite worrying how many small shopkeepers in the room had suffered attacks in the last year or burglaries of what is often very high-value stock. Consideration could be given to tax incentives to encourage small shopkeepers to beef up their security, not only for themselves but for their stock. The right hon. Gentleman’s point is very well made.

A Ramsgate newsagent who came to my crime forum last week estimated that his turnover is down £150,000 per year because of illicit tobacco sales. That is happening on every shop on every high street. It means less taxation on what is an entirely legally derived profit, and it means a vast cash windfall for illicit tobacco traders. HMRC estimates that the loss to the Exchequer is £1.8 billion per year; the TMA estimates that it is closer to £2.4 billion. We need a grown-up debate about the taxation of tobacco, because we have reached a tipping point that is promoting unregulated, potentially dangerous purchases of unknown tobacco products. That completely flies in the face of what are sensible anti-smoking public health measures.

I will finish a little off-key, on the issue of insolvency, on which I have listened to many smaller businesses, including retailers. Hon. Members may have to listen carefully, because the chain is quite complex. When a primary contractor in a supply chain fails, having not been paid by the head client, the insolvency practitioner who is appointed will seek to recover the contract value from the head client, but that usually comes with a negotiated settlement of contracted amounts. That leaves the smaller participants down the supply chain unpaid, and we often see a domino effect of failure and insolvency through that supply chain.

There is a sizeable business in Broadstairs called Blaze Signs. Members can guess what it makes: yes, signs. It is a substantial local employer with a substantial local workforce. It makes 20-foot high signs for Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury’s and McDonald’s—huge signs

that can be seen from a few hundred yards away. On the failure of the primary contractor in the chain, Blaze Signs has been left completely unpaid, despite its signs having been delivered and erected, because the insolvency practitioner has sought payment from Sainsbury’s, M&S or whichever company is at the top of the chain.

We need to give some consideration to a technical change to Insolvency Act 1986 rules. In the instance of unpaid bills at the top of a supply chain, where there are identifiable elements further down the supply chain supplied by participants who have been part of that final unpaid contract, the rules should be changed so that the payment bypasses the failed company in the chain and the smaller participants receive their money for goods properly supplied. That would almost be akin to putting a Romalpa-type clause on a statutory footing.

I am confident that the Government fully understand the challenges that smaller retailers and businesses face. I seek the Minister’s reassurance that the commitment to deregulation will continue and that the old mantra of “one in, two out” is realised. I will be pleased to hear from her how we can improve the business environment in this country still further.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) on securing this debate on small shops regulation. He has brought his detailed knowledge of and passion for retailers in his constituency to the attention of the House, and they are fortunate to have such a champion.

As someone with a business background, I am acutely aware of the impact of regulation, which not only imposes costs on businesses but often diverts resources from more productive activity. As we heard from my hon. Friend, small shops play a unique role in the fabric of British social and economic life; he cited several statistics from the “Local Shop Report” organised by the Association of Convenience Stores that really explain the benefit shops bring to our high streets. Small shops are the lifeblood of any community.

I agree with my hon. Friend that it is easier to regulate than to deregulate. I am finding that in my new role, and I might add that I am constantly vigilant against that instinct. We are recognised as a world leader in deregulation. Over the last Parliament we delivered savings to business worth more than £10 billion through what was then the one in, two out initiative. That made a real practical difference for small shopkeepers through, for example, reduced audit requirements and the simplification of health and safety requirements.

We are committed to delivering a further £10 billion of savings in this Parliament through deregulation. For the first time, that target will include changes in national regulators’ policies, as well as laws. For instance, we are working with the Financial Conduct Authority to review the way we combat money laundering. I hope that that will deliver more effective controls on criminals and simpler financial services for small businesses, including retailers. We are making good progress against our new target, and have made almost £900 million-worth of net savings through the measures already implemented since the last election.

[Margot James]

Deregulation is of course only one part of easing the burden on shopkeepers. We are trying to create one of the most internationally competitive tax systems, which is why we have complemented the national living wage with radical tax reforms to boost the take-home pay of the lowest-income workers. But, of course, we need to help employers to put all this into action, so we are cutting taxes and employer national insurance by increasing the employment allowance and reducing corporation tax. The increase in the employer allowance from £2,000 to £3,000 will benefit up to half a million employers and mean that a business, such as a small retailer, will be able to employ up to four people full time on the new national living wage without paying national insurance contributions.

As well as earning a proper wage now, it is vital that people save for their retirement. My hon. Friend mentioned the issues relating to auto-enrolment. So far, more than 6.7 million people have been automatically enrolled into a workplace pension by more than 250,000 employers. We understand that small employers may find complying with automatic enrolment challenging, which is why the Department for Work and Pensions and the Pensions Regulator are working to make automatic enrolment as straightforward as possible for them. For example, as part of that work, the Pensions Regulator has launched an interactive step by step guide on its website—I think my hon. Friend mentioned it.

Mr Andrew Smith: Will the Minister respond to the very sensible proposal made by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) about software that will help small shops to cope with auto-enrolment?

Margot James: I thought that was a good idea. I am obviously not a DWP Minister, but I shall write to the Minister responsible, mentioning the idea proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet. It seems like one of those simple steps that the Government could take to facilitate an improvement.

My hon. Friend spoke about insolvency. Of course, sometimes, no matter how hard people try, businesses unfortunately fail. That can be very difficult to live with, particularly when a small business fails as a result of the ripple effect from an insolvency further up the supply chain. The law already allows for retention clauses to be enforced in the event that a customer to whom goods have been supplied fails and those goods can be recovered. My hon. Friend suggested that any money subsequently recovered from the “head client” by an insolvency practitioner should be shared down the supply chain to particular suppliers. It is, though, a basic principle of insolvency law that unsecured creditors should be treated equally.

There is a narrow range of exceptions to that principle, but any extension to those exceptions could prejudice the interests of other creditors in an insolvency, who may also be small businesses. The regime has to balance the interests of many different stakeholders, including lenders, employees and suppliers. Returns to creditors can be improved by ensuring that the insolvency process is as efficient and cost-effective as possible. To that end,

I am pleased to say that a new set of insolvency rules for England and Wales will come into force next April, which will further reduce the costs of insolvency by removing some of the unnecessary regulations and driving the increased use of technology.

On the business environment and tax, I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to creating one of the most internationally competitive tax systems for small businesses. Earlier this year, Her Majesty’s Treasury made the Office of Tax Simplification permanent. The OTS will advise the Treasury on how to further simplify the tax system. This year has seen the biggest ever cut in business rates in England, worth £6.7 billion. Some 600,000 of the smallest businesses, many of which are retailers, will not have to pay business rates again. Although there have been fluctuations in the annual investment allowance, it is now at its highest ever permanent level. We have announced that we will cut the rate of corporation tax to 17% by the end of the Parliament.

My hon. Friend said that there was a great deal of disquiet among small retailers in his constituency about the programme to make tax digital. I have heard such disquiet in my meetings with the Federation of Small Businesses and discussed it with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. There are some signs of progress. There is no chance of the programme being rowed back or changed radically, but the Treasury is consulting on changing the threshold and removing unincorporated businesses entirely. It is also consulting on delaying its introduction for one year for businesses of a certain size, and there is even the possibility of some financial support for very small businesses. So the Treasury is listening. I think the consultation deadline is fast approaching, so I urge my hon. Friend to make haste in contributing his views on behalf of his local retailers.¹

As we have heard, the trade in illicit tobacco robs small shops of the income they deserve, in addition to causing a tax loss for Government. In 2015-16 we lost £2.4 billion-worth of revenue because of that illicit trade, so I thank my hon. Friend for his work to counter it. In March last year, the Government published a refreshed strategy called “Tackling illicit tobacco: From leaf to light”, which outlines how we will continue to target, catch and punish those involved in the illicit tobacco trade. By joining up all interested parties throughout the Government and leading the way in the international fight against illicit tobacco, more than 3.5 billion illicit cigarettes and more than 599 tonnes of hand-rolling tobacco have been seized in the past two years alone.

In conclusion, I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members present for their excellent contributions to the debate. Small shops remain a crucial part of our local and regional economies, creating jobs and injecting billions of pounds into our economy. I am passionate about supporting the sector—indeed, I am chairing a round-table of retailers this afternoon—and want to see it flourish. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet again for securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

1.[Official Report, 3 November 2016, Vol. 616, c. 1-2MC.]

Good Parliament Report

[MRS MADELEINE MOON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Good Parliament report.

“The Good Parliament” report was published in July and during my speech I will quote a couple of sections from it. The first is this:

“Parliamentary reform is too often the result of individual MPs expending significant time and political capital.”

For me, that is the key reason why this report is important.

The intention behind the report was to try to ensure that Parliament is a more representative place, so that it is more representative of society, has a better division between the genders, has a better representation across classes, so that it is not quite so middle class, male and of a certain age, and so that it has greater diversity.

Another line from the report is this:

“2018 is a timely reminder of the promise of equality in parliamentary participation and representation in the UK.”

The report comes in the run-up to 2018 and hopes to make changes in advance of both 2018 and the 2020 election. This is absolutely the perfect time for it to come out. I recognise the incredibly hard work that Professor Sarah Childs, who is in the Public Gallery today, put into it, and the good intentions that the House and Mr Speaker in particular had in commissioning it, which are hugely appreciated.

Before I talk about the report’s recommendations, I will talk a bit about who I am, why my circumstances matter and why the report is so relevant to me and people like me in Parliament. I am not from a wealthy background. Nobody in my family has a degree. I am absolutely not from that kind of traditional privileged background that people imagine politicians come from. I am not saying at all that I grew up on the breadline, but my family were certainly not affluent in any way.

I am also an MP from quite far away. My constituency is 500 miles away from here, so I am tackling geographical issues. I am not unique in that. My Scottish National party colleagues are similarly from far away places. We tackle geographical issues that London MPs, for example, cannot even imagine. It is really quite difficult to tackle them.

I am also a female MP. Women are still very much in the minority in the House of Commons and we still face—I do not want to say “discrimination”—barriers because of our gender.

I am also a relatively young MP. I was 29 when I was elected, which in House of Commons terms—we could include the House of Lords in that—is incredibly young. In House of Commons terms, 29 is still pretty young to be elected.

I am also a parent of young children. I have a three-year-old and a five-year-old. When I was elected, they were obviously even younger than that. It is unusual, particularly for female MPs, to be parents of pre-school children, because it is incredibly hard to do this job if you have them, particularly when tackling all the other issues that people like me face. I am so far from home. I also suddenly have to finance this role. Obviously we

get paid, but coming into this House without having a salary beforehand and having to pay back all of the money spent during election campaigns is hard to begin with. It is not easy. I feel that there are a lot of barriers in my way. I am from the SNP. I am no big fan of Westminster. I am not about this place being wonderful, but even if Scotland gets its independence, or when Scotland gets its independence, future generations of parliamentarians should not have to face the barriers that I have had to face in becoming an MP and in being an MP.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is very kind to give way so early on. I commend her for what she is saying and I agree with everything she has said so far. Does she agree that one way to address one of those barriers is to consider the possibility of MPs job sharing? The report does not consider it, but a future one might. One way to keep one foot solidly in our constituency, perhaps to provide the kind of family care that she is talking about, and represent people here is job sharing.

Kirsty Blackman: I will come to that. First, I am going to talk about some of the recommendations in the report and the reasons why they are so good. I will also talk about a few things that are not in the recommendations but that I feel would have benefits—job sharing is one of those.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I, too, commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for what she has said about the report. On the point she so strongly made about her being a young person in Parliament, a mother of young children and a woman living miles away from her constituency, does she agree that essentially what is important is that people such as herself can be in Parliament to make it more representative and fundamentally do the job that it is supposed to do? We therefore need her and others to get over those barriers so that Parliament can be the sort of institution that it needs to be for this country.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree and will say why Parliament being representative is so important. Part of it is so that we can inspire people, so that young people who look at Parliament are not as disengaged as some currently are. A lot of young people look at Parliament and think, “There’s nobody there who’s like me”, or, “There are not enough people there who are like me. I can never achieve that.” If young people do not see people like themselves in Parliament, why would they bother to become engaged? Why would they think, “I can become an MP”, if we are not living that and showing that, and if we are not destroying the barriers I have mentioned, so that they can become Members of this Parliament or of others?

The other reason why it is really important that this place is representative is the role that we have as Westminster parliamentarians in a world-leading Parliament. We have not done very well recently at being a world-leading Parliament. I am quite embarrassed to go into Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meetings or Inter-Parliamentary Union meetings to talk to groups of parliamentarians from other countries and tell them about how wonderfully democratic Westminster is, because it is not. There are too many issues with this place,

[Kirsty Blackman]

so that I find it really hard to say to people from other Parliaments, “You should follow our rules”, because our rules are not great.

If we were genuinely reforming this place and if we were genuinely a 21st century Parliament, it would be much easier for us to work with other Parliaments, help other Parliaments and trailblaze. If we were such a Parliament, that would be a better place for us to be.

I will go through some of the report’s recommendations and say why they are important. One of the first recommendations is about standards of behaviour. That recommendation is really important, not only because of the farce that is Prime Minister’s questions but because of some of the quieter things that people do not hear so much about. Some of my colleagues have had their outfits commented on by male MPs. That is not appropriate. People should not be making odd comments about outfits. That behaviour is not tackled enough in the House of Commons and there is not enough of an argument made when people face that kind of behaviour. Not enough people are standing up about it.

The next recommendation I will discuss is collecting statistics by gender and other characteristics. Basically, the intention behind that recommendation is that the Speaker should keep account of how many people are speaking, what percentage of women are speaking, what percentage of women are asking questions in debates and what percentage of people from working-class backgrounds are asking questions in debates. It is all well and good to get us elected to Parliament but if we are encountering barriers, or if our Whips Office does not let us talk often enough, for example, or if we are not managing to catch the Speaker’s eye, or if any of those types of things happen, they are issues. If we examine the statistics and try to work out what barriers are in place, we can work out how to overcome those barriers. Such statistics would be really useful information for us to have in the future as a House, so that we can consider tackling those issues.

The biggest section in the report is on procedural and timing changes, which would make the biggest difference. There are a huge number of recommendations. One of them is that the Government should announce recess dates at least one Session in advance, which is about making business in the House of Commons a bit more predictable. We had the ridiculous situation this year when the Whitsun recess in May was not announced until February or March. We did not know when the summer recess would be. People in the House of Lords could not tell their staff when their summer holiday would be.

In some ways, it is all well and good for MPs—we signed up to this—but for the staff, it is not fair and there is no good reason behind it. The only reason it happens is that the Government do not want to cede power. I am not blaming this Government any more than previous Governments. All Governments have been in control of the recess dates. It would be easy for them to announce the recess dates a bit further in advance than they currently do. Even if they said we will definitely be off for the whole of August and then tinkered with the other dates a bit later, that would be helpful. A move towards explaining the recess dates further in advance would be better for everyone.

I have already said my constituency is 500 miles away. I have to fly to get here. I cannot get the train. Some of my colleagues from Glasgow and Edinburgh occasionally get the train, but I am three hours past them. My constituency is really far away. The lack of business predictability means that my flights are more expensive. I am costing the taxpayer more money because I do not know when the Government will have votes far enough in advance to book anything. If I had more predictability—if the Government parted with that information a little further in advance—that would be cheaper for the taxpayer, which surely would be a good thing.

The thing about business predictability is that the Government do not have to go the whole way. They do not have to say, for example, “We will definitely be having Third Reading of the housing Bill on 15 November.” What they could say is, “That day will definitely be Government business, and that day will definitely be Back-Bench business.” That much they could tell us a good month in advance, and it would help with the cost and constituency engagements. If there is a vote on a Wednesday night, I cannot get home, and my constituents lose out on my presence. If I had a better understanding, because the Government told me further in advance, it would be better for my constituents and for taxpayers’ money.

One of the other recommendations is to abolish the party conference recess and sitting Fridays. We have been over the issues with private Members’ Bills in the past few weeks. There has been uproar about the way they work. I understand that some Members are particularly positive about the way private Members’ Bills work because they relish the opportunity to talk them out, but for me, being so far away from London, sitting Fridays mean I have to commit too much of my week to being here. I cannot just pop home of an evening to a constituency engagement. I already have problems representing my constituents as well as I would like, and committing to sitting Fridays makes things even more difficult. It is not just me. I am speaking from my point of view, but many colleagues are affected, whether they are in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. For anywhere without very easy access, sitting Fridays are hard.

There are a couple of other things in the report about procedure and timing changes. It suggests that when the restoration work goes ahead, a couple of things should be trialled. One is remote voting, so that Members on the Parliamentary Estate can vote remotely. I am from Aberdeen. The previous Member for Aberdeen South was Anne Begg, who uses a wheelchair, and she missed a vote because the lift did not come. How was it fair for her constituents that she could not physically be there because the lift was not working? She should not have been in that position, and the ridiculous voting system we have continues to make the situation worse. Remote voting on the Parliamentary Estate would be an interesting thing to trial. I am not sure exactly how it would work, but we should look at trialling it.

Another trial suggested in the report is a new format for PMQs. There is a lot of agreement in all parts of the House that PMQs is not the best way to showcase our Parliament. I do not know how we could do it better—less bad-tempered, less vicious and in a more collegiate manner—while still holding the Government to account, but I am pretty sure that the current system does not work very well.

The last thing on procedure and timing changes is dress codes. We have some bizarre rules about dress codes in “Erskine May”. Women are allowed to wear hats and men have to wear jackets and ties unless the Speaker tells them that they can take them off. In the midst of summer, the Speaker rarely tells Members that they are allowed to take their jackets off. That does not seem all that fair.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Speaker has never allowed that.

Kirsty Blackman: I did not want to say “never” because I was not sure whether there was a precedent. The report suggests that the dress codes should be changed to business dress or national dress. That is much clearer for people than the current oddities in “Erskine May”, which allows me to wear a hat, but not my hon. Friends who are male. If we could improve that, things would be better.

The next section of the report is about gender quotas, and it puts responsibility for that on a number of people. It is not just about political parties needing to have gender quotas. It talks about a number of different areas where there are issues with the under-representation of women. We do not have enough women giving evidence as Select Committee witnesses. We do not have enough women standing for Parliament for political parties. We have so few women among the lobby journalists. The report makes a call for that to change.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On gender quotas, does the hon. Lady agree that it might be a good idea to look at best practice across the United Kingdom? For example, in Northern Ireland, in a short timeframe and against a backdrop that is, for a variety of reasons, difficult in terms of female representation, our only MEP is female, our First Minister is female and almost 50% of all our Ministers and Statutory Committee Chairs are female. I am not saying that is unique, because Scotland and Wales have made similar advances, but does the hon. Lady agree that replicating best practice should be looked at before we move to quotas, which I and my party would not be in favour of?

Kirsty Blackman: There are ways that different parties have done it without quotas, but the party that seemed to be most successful in making the biggest change here in Westminster was the Labour party, which had women-only shortlists. I have an automatic dislike of women-only shortlists. I do not like the idea. I just have an issue with it, but it is one of the few things that has been proven to work really well. Despite that gut reaction, if I think about it with my head, I realise that there are positive benefits. Looking at best practice across the UK and the world is an interesting and sensible way to go. Political parties will approach the issue in their own way, and it would be sensible for them to be allowed the leeway to do that. As the hon. Gentleman suggested, in Scotland we have made great changes. We have a gender-balanced Cabinet in the Scottish Parliament, and that is a positive step forward.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this fantastic debate. The points she has made are so relevant. On the matter of gender—she will correct me if I am wrong—is it not still

the case that there are more men in Parliament today than there have ever been women since they were allowed to become MPs? As Rabbie Burns said:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!”

People look at this Parliament and do not see society reflected back. We need a multi-pronged attack. Making some of the changes that Sarah Childs suggests in her report will encourage women, but we have to look at the issue across the board.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. It is pretty dire that the number of women ever elected is less than the number of current male MPs. It does not make sense. Although we have made positive changes, it is not enough. We need to go further. I do not think that is entirely within the gift of political parties; everybody needs to take responsibility. That is one of the really good things about the report: it gives the whole House the responsibility for a lot of its recommendations. Some specific responsibility is given to two political parties, and they will interpret that in their own ways, but the whole House needs to take ownership.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I also thank Professor Childs for her work, and the Speaker for his long-standing commitment to these issues and on moving the debate forward.

The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the flexibility that political parties should have to take their own measures. I was not elected on an all-women shortlist, but I am a massive advocate for them and the change that they have brought about. I also believe that were they to be removed, we would see a roll backwards. It is very important to find ways to put stakes in the ground so that we do not see a rolling back on the progress that we have achieved. I also support the hon. Lady’s point that we need to see a shift in representation of MPs and elected politicians and around the culture of politics, which includes representation in the staff of the House as well as in the media.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. The report recommends looking at the gender balance of the House of Commons Commission, as well as in Select Committees and other Committees across the House, but this is not just about gender. We still do not have enough people from working-class backgrounds, from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, or from minority religions or non-Christian religions in the House of Commons. Political parties can achieve some change in all of those areas, but changing the culture of the House and the barriers to becoming an MP could support change.

The report makes suggestions for changes to the buildings. If the renovation work is going to go ahead, there is a real opportunity to make real changes. One suggestion is that we have more toilets, which seems eminently sensible. I do not think anybody would disagree with that and I am hoping that the Minister will stand up and say, “Yes, we’ll accept that one.” That would be great. There is a recommendation on artwork, which suggests that more women are depicted in the artwork hanging around the House of Commons, and that there is more work from women artists. That would be hugely positive.

Hannah Bardell: On the matter of artwork, I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. She will be aware of the work that I and other colleagues have done on this issue. Walking around the palace, it is full of mainly dead men of a different era, not even of today. The famous cupboard that Emily Wilding Davison hid in is hidden away from the public. There is no public representation of it. My hon. Friend makes a valid point about women being properly represented in all parts of Parliament.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. There are only two statues of females that I can remember seeing around here—one of Queen Victoria and one of Margaret Thatcher. If that is it, we are not doing a very good job.

Chris Bryant: There are more.

Kirsty Blackman: Even if there are, they are not in very prominent positions. It would be nice to have more female artwork.

Members probably expect me to talk about the report's recommendation to look into a crèche. The fact that I took my children to a Select Committee meeting was fairly publicly discussed. There is a real issue with the lack of flexible childcare here. I phoned the House of Commons nursery and asked them if they could take my children for the afternoon, and they said, "We can take your children for six weeks of afternoons." I said, "Well, they live in Aberdeen. What use is that?" There is a real problem with childcare provision.

There is such a contrast with the Scottish Parliament. Someone who is giving evidence to a Committee of the Scottish Parliament or who has come to see their MSP can leave their children in the Scottish Parliament crèche while they have that difficult conversation for an hour with the MSP, perhaps about problems they are experiencing with housing—conversations that they might not want to have in front of their children. Members of the public can use the crèche for free, and MSPs and passholders pay for its use. That is a really good system and one that we should consider adopting if we are going forward with renovations in the building as it is. I get that the nursery was a massive step forward and everybody was hugely supportive, or was convinced to be supportive, of the nursery taking over a bar, and I understand that a number of MPs still seem quite upset that the nursery took over a bar, but that is only a step on the way forward; it is not the flexible childcare that those of us from further away and those of us who choose not to base our children in London require.

My last point about the recommendations is about the promotion of the role of an MP. I have been really clear that I am not a fan of Westminster, but I think it is incumbent on me and people like me, who are not from that traditional male group of politicians, to say to young people, "You can do this. You can get involved in this place. You can get involved in politics. You can get involved in making a difference in your country." A number of my colleagues and I have tried to be really honest about what our job involves. It is not just about sitting in PMQs and people shouting at each other and then being on BBC News or wherever. It is not just about those things. It is about all of the casework that we do. It is about all of the everyday things such as about doing five minutes on a bike for the Poppy Appeal and getting comprehensively beaten—I will do

better next year. It is about all of those things that we do that are not mentioned in the media, but that are fabulous experiences for someone coming into this who has never experienced anything like it before.

The number of things that we are privileged enough to do is absolutely unbelievable, as is the number of amazing things that we get to do and the amount of change that we get to achieve for people in their everyday lives. If we are better able to promote that and to explain to people how being an MP actually works, people would be more likely to come into this role with a better attitude and intentions.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about understanding the reality of our lives as Members of Parliament. I have six years' experience since I set up the Fabian Women's Network mentoring scheme, which does a lot of political education and mentoring for those who might seek to come forward in political life. Does the hon. Lady think that there might be an opportunity for Members of Parliament to be engaged slightly more formally in ways to promote and help people understand the role of parliamentarians?

Kirsty Blackman: Yes, absolutely. One of the report's recommendations uses the phrase
"a diversity of people are, and can be, MPs"

and recommends having case studies on the House of Commons website about a range of different people and the backgrounds that we come from, so that young people in particular can understand what it is that we do. There is also a suggestion of a residential course, which would be a really good idea because it would give people hands-on experience.

I am going to the Patchwork Foundation awards tonight. The Patchwork Foundation tries to get under-represented groups more involved in politics. It does absolutely fabulous work—again, not in formal structures but more informally, through mentoring and similar things. It is quite difficult for me to get involved in some of those programmes from Aberdeen. I cannot take patchworkers out and about in my constituency, because they are not going to come 500 miles to do that, so there are some issues. It might be better if there were more formal structures.

There are some other points not mentioned in the report that are worth considering. I mentioned the financial barriers to becoming an MP. It is expensive to stand for election and it is difficult to make the change after being elected. As a newly elected MP, it was difficult for me to suddenly be able to finance the five extra dresses that I needed and to pay for things out of my own pocket before being set up properly with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. It is hard to come up against those barriers and to begin that life.

I took a £50,000 pay rise when I became an MP; I had never earned more than £26,000 a year and I had debts to pay off when I was first elected. It was very difficult in that initial period. There is not enough recognition of the circumstances that people find themselves in. I am not saying that MPs' salaries should be increased—I definitely do not think they should be—but the institutional barriers for people from less affluent backgrounds should be considered more carefully in the future.

I do not think geography is given enough consideration, even though there are quite a few of us from far away—perhaps we just have not shouted loudly enough about it. Five hundred miles is a very long way and I cannot just drop everything to come here for a vote. It is even worse for my colleagues from the highlands who have to get two aeroplanes or drive for four hours and then get an aeroplane down, when there are only two a day. There are something like five or six aeroplanes a day from Aberdeen, so it is not as bad for me as it is for some of my colleagues. Because of the way the business of the House works, there is a lack of understanding about and recognition of the geographical challenges for MPs from further away. The boundary review will compound that, because MPs from the furthest away constituencies will be representing a wider geographical area. In addition to doing a large amount of travelling, they will have to represent a constituency that takes six hours to drive across, or even longer in some cases, so the boundary changes will create some real issues.

Job sharing, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) mentioned, and maternity leave go hand in hand. The Green party has talked about job sharing for MPs, which is a really interesting concept. I do not think it would be possible for a single parent of young children to do this job. I cannot imagine a way in which they could do it, but a job share that enabled two MPs to be elected on half the salary and staff costs, with one office that they run together—the MPs would actually end up working for more than their allotted hours—would make the job more flexible and accessible for single parents and people from caring backgrounds. I do not see how somebody with caring responsibilities for, say, an elderly relative or a disabled family member could be an MP at the same time, but a job-sharing option would make that much more possible.

We do not have maternity leave. I was a local councillor when I had both my children. I had the first one, Harris, at the end of April, I was back in the office within four weeks and I took a promotion in the local authority in June. What was I supposed to do? There was not another option. My constituents would not have been represented if I had not been there. It is not fair for constituents to be disadvantaged because their MP happens to have a baby. If I had a baby right now—it is not going to happen today, obviously, and hopefully not any time soon—I would not have been able to fly for four weeks before having it, and I would not be able to fly for two weeks afterwards because I would have to have a caesarean section. Why would it be fair for my constituents not to have somebody to vote for them when it is not their fault that I had a baby? We need to think better and smarter about this. It could be easily overcome with a bit of sense. I do not think it is fair for constituents to have that issue. I think changes should be made to voting in particular when Members have children.

The attitudes, the misogyny and the abuse that some people from non-traditional backgrounds face are a real barrier. I have spoken to people who have said, “I could never be an MP because you get so much abuse.” I know that those things are an issue for people from all backgrounds—they are an issue for 45-year-old males from a privileged background—but I think they are more of an issue for those of us from less traditional backgrounds. Adopting the recommendations in “The Good Parliament” report would inspire the cultural change that would make

the difference. It would make the House of Commons a more positive place to work, with fewer barriers. It would make this a more representative Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Because of the length of the introductory speech, I am afraid I am going to have to introduce a time limit of five minutes, which may reduce depending on the length of interventions.

3.4 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). We may not agree on much, but she has made a strong start to her time in Parliament and should be proud of that. She is a very good role model for other people—women, young people and whoever else—who want to enter Parliament, and she is doing an excellent job in representing her constituency, for which I have a great affinity. I think Dyce is in her constituency.

Kirsty Blackman: It is further north.

Philip Davies: Is it a bit further north? I used to spend a lot of time in Dyce when I worked for Asda. I am sorry it is not in the hon. Lady's constituency, because it is a fine place.

When I first saw that this debate was taking place, my first question was, what is “The Good Parliament” report? After reading it, I rather wish I had not asked. It could be referred to as the “less accountable Parliament report” or the “dumbed-down Parliament report”, and it would certainly be better titled the “politically correct Parliament report”. There is not time to go into all the things that are wrong in the report, but I will pick out a few points in the limited time that I have.

The hon. Lady made the point that it is absolutely terrible that she cannot get up to her constituency on a Wednesday evening, and said that everything should be changed to allow her to do so. I checked, and in the 2015-16 Session of Parliament this House sat for 158 days out of 365. When people complain to me about Parliament, they say that none of us seems to be here when debates are taking place. I have never heard the complaint from the public that we are spending too much time here or that there are too many of us here during debates. I suggest to the hon. Lady that having 158 days to represent her constituency in Parliament is not too much to expect.

I am completely opposed to all-women shortlists and quotas. I could not care less if every single MP were a woman, if every position in Parliament were held by a woman or if everybody in the Cabinet were a woman. It is of no interest to me. As far as I am concerned, as long as they are there on merit, their gender is irrelevant. We should be gender-blind. I really think that the true sexists are the people who see everything in terms of gender. We should judge people not on the basis of their gender, but on the basis of their ability.

One thing I very much agree with the hon. Lady about is that we need more people from a working-class background in Parliament. One of the points I always

[Philip Davies]

made to the Conservative party when we were looking at things such as all-women shortlists—fortunately, we did not go down that route—was that replacing Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with Jemima from Kensington and Chelsea does not do an awful lot for diversity in the House of Commons. Replacing Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with Jim from Newcastle would do an awful lot more for diversity in the House of Commons than a tokenistic approach to diversity that sees things only in terms of simplistic diversity—gender or race.

Hannah Bardell: On the issue of gender quotas, we sometimes need to intervene to change things for the next generation. Would the hon. Gentleman concede that, as a short-term measure, in some cases gender quotas are useful?

Philip Davies: No, I certainly would not concede that point.

In the Conservative party, we had a female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, decades ago. She managed to get to the very top and stay there for an awful long time, and as far as I am concerned she was the best Prime Minister this country has ever had. I suspect that most people in this Chamber hate the fact that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. When a woman actually got to be Prime Minister, they all hated it. Today, we have another female Prime Minister on the Conservative Benches without all this tokenistic claptrap, and she is also doing a fantastic job. It is rather patronising to say that women need all these extra things to help them get to the top; they do not. We do not need to be patronising to women. They are more than capable of rising to the top.

I find the idea that people can represent only people who are the same as them completely alien. There will be many women in my constituency who think I do a great job representing them in Parliament, and many women who think I do a terrible job. There will be many men who think I do a good job and many men who think I do a terrible job. What most people are concerned about is their representative's views on issues: what their opinions are and the things they stand up for.

I can honestly say that, when I have been out canvassing during all my years in politics, people may have argued, agreed or disagreed with me about particular issues, but I have never yet had a person say to me that they would vote for me if I were a woman and that they would not vote for me because I am a man. Gender is irrelevant to the general public. They want their parliamentarians to stand up for the things that matter to them.

Being in Parliament is not a nine to five job. We pass laws that affect the country and we hold the Government to account. If we had nine to five days in Parliament, we would not be able to attend Select Committees if at the same time we wanted to be in the Chamber to attend debates or questions. There is lots to do as a Member of Parliament. It is very responsible work. The report is patronising and mostly full of claptrap. I want to make it clear that there is at least one dissenting voice. One day people might look back at this report and laugh, but for many of us at the moment it is not a laughing matter.

3.11 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for calling it. I welcome the work of Professor Childs and everyone else who participated in “The Good Parliament” report. I wish to touch on a few recommendations around the way the House operates and the impact that that has on democracy more widely. I want to stress that the report is not about us as MPs, but about democracy and giving people access to Parliament. It is about Parliament showing leadership and about demonstrating that, by deeds not words, we are as representative as we possibly can be.

It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friends that, as chair of the all-party group on infant feeding and inequalities, I want first to mention the issue of breastfeeding. It is a vital public health issue that, despite the efforts of many committed people, does not get the prominence that it should. In the UK, we have the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. This is not about the choices of individual mothers, but about society's attitudes. I would talk at length on the matter if I were not short of time, but I recommend people read Dr Amy Brown's book, “Breastfeeding Uncovered”, which highlights a lot of the issues.

There has been a lot of talk about breastfeeding in the response to “The Good Parliament” report, but it is a tiny aspect of the report. It is clear that even in the House there are various opinions on breastfeeding in Parliament. The hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) called it exhibitionism; certain journalists were surprised when I tweeted a picture of myself breastfeeding; and some people said that if women could not breastfeed while driving a tank, they should not be allowed to do it in Parliament. Those are ridiculous arguments. “The Good Parliament” report recognises that

“permitting entry to infants would have symbolic benefits—showcasing the Commons as a role-model parent-friendly institution.”

That is where we wish to be as a Parliament. I think we could all agree on that. In showing that leadership, it would also encourage businesses across the country to consider their own practices.

Yesterday, a friend who works at SNP headquarters in Edinburgh posted a photo of the breast pumps belonging to her and her colleague, both of whom have been supported by the SNP to express milk at work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North said, we both breastfed our babies in council meetings. Councillor Fay Sinclair is doing so in Fife. It is happening in Australia, Iceland and Scotland, and in the European Parliament. There is no reason why we in the mother of Parliaments should not embrace it, too.

I mentioned at the start that “The Good Parliament” report is not just about us, but about how Parliament does its business. The way we do our business excludes women from the life of this building, and that has a negative impact on our decision making. I attended an interesting event yesterday that was organised by Sense About Science. It was called “Evidence matters”, which of course it does, but which evidence and are we getting it from the right source? I am deeply concerned that the evidence we receive as a Parliament is not good enough because it excludes the views and experiences of women.

Dr Marc Geddes has produced interesting research on witnesses at Select Committees, from which it is clear that they are very much male, pale and stale. Out of the 3,228 witnesses who gave evidence to the 1,241 Select Committee sessions in Session 2013-14, only 792 were women. That is just shy of 25%. No Committee came close to calling an equal number of women and men to give evidence, and for some Committees—Defence, Energy and Climate Change, and Communities and Local Government—more than 80% of witnesses called were men. For the Treasury Committee, it was more than 90%.

I do not believe that there are only men with expertise in these areas, and we need to understand why this imbalance exists. Dr Geddes' research also highlighted that 67% of witnesses are coming from London and the south of England, even when Government witnesses are excluded. "The Good Parliament" report suggests we consider gender thresholds, but I believe Select Committees must also look at when they meet so that people can get to them. We should look at building into the parliamentary timetable a more considered way for when Committees meet. Committees need to recognise it is difficult for people to get here, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North mentioned. For Committees that meet in the morning, such as the Treasury Committee, it is really hard for people to get here to give evidence.

A 10 am meeting means an early flight or train or an overnight stay, rearranging the school run and making arrangements for childcare. Late-night meetings might end up the same way. We should consider building a system that takes into account the needs of people, rather than the needs of London-based Committees. I would encourage Select Committees to get out and travel outside London. The best meeting of the Communities and Local Government Committee was when we took public evidence on devolution in Manchester and actually heard from people in Manchester. It was useful to be able to hold to account other witnesses who came late in the day because we had heard evidence first hand.

I want to briefly mention the crèche issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North mentioned. Joeli Brearley from Pregnant Then Screwed came to listen to a debate in this room and had to sit at the back juggling a wee one and popping in and out because there was no crèche provision for her.

Kirsty Blackman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alison Thewliss: Of course.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Justin Madders.

3.16 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on her superb introduction to this debate. She set out the huge range of issues that we have to consider and will, I hope, act upon. I very much welcome the recommendations in the report. I hope that they are given the opportunity to be implemented faster than we have seen female representation grow in this place.

Having been elected only last year, I still look at some of the goings-on here with a mixture of wonder, bemusement and sadness. My job before I was elected

enabled me to peer into many other workplaces and their cultures. I am sorry to say that, if the culture we have here were replicated in an ordinary workplace, the company could expect to be involved in many employment tribunals every year. It would also find it difficult to recruit good people and would have an even harder job retaining good staff.

Although it is a huge privilege to work here, we should not be afraid to challenge archaic practices and cultures where we find them. At how many workplaces does someone's finish time vary and change at incredibly short notice? How is that in any way family friendly? In which workplaces is it acceptable for colleagues to stop speaking to you because they disapprove of something you have or have not done? Would we expect to start a new job without any feedback or appraisal of progress, but still be promoted or demoted on a set of opaque criteria we are not privy to? In which jobs would it be considered normal to engage in arguments on Twitter with work colleagues? And I am talking about people from the same party; they sometimes come with insults and abuse that would breach any dignity at work policy.

I am chair of the all-party group on social mobility. We are currently conducting an inquiry into access to the professions, which includes law, finance, the arts, media, medicine, the civil service and politics. In terms of Parliament, as we have heard, the stark fact remains that there have been fewer female MPs elected than there are male MPs currently sitting in the House of Commons, and less than 30% of MPs at the moment are female. Although the report looks mainly at gender issues, we cannot isolate that from other factors that influence representation here. According to the Sutton Trust, 32% of MPs were privately educated compared with 7% of the general population. Of those, the research shows, almost one in 10 went to Eton. Nearly 10% of all MPs attended the same school: a school that of course only boys can attend.

The recommendations on sitting days are welcome. Why, for heaven's sake, do we have a half-term recess next week that starts on a Wednesday? No schools are off then and I am not aware of any school breaks that start on a Wednesday. I certainly welcome the recommendations on producing a statement on maternity, paternity, adoption and caring leave. We would not expect our constituents to forgo those hard-won rights, so I do not think we should, either.

Recommendation 43 places the onus on political parties to increase the diversity of parliamentary candidates. My party has been at the forefront of this, and with the creation of the Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme, I am confident we will continue to be so. The reality is that it is up to the political parties to seriously look at the way they select candidates if we really want to change things.

My party has made great strides towards gender equality. I have a great amount of respect and admiration for my Labour colleagues, but it is still very much the case that someone has to have connections with the centre, the kind of informal networks that we see in all professions, if they want to succeed in politics. We have to recognise that, to be selected as a candidate for a major political party in a winnable seat, someone must first of all win an election that in all likelihood will be just as challenging as the real one, but without the party's resources, or the finance. They may not have the

[Justin Madders]

time to get the nomination, particularly if they are in a full-time job outside politics, or have caring responsibilities, or both. The reality is that, if they are working at the local Tesco, and have three kids under 11, they will struggle to find the time to run a successful election campaign. Some unions are getting better at recognising those challenges, and we need to go further and support them.

There is a huge London focus in most professions, but arguably it is most acute in politics. The Speaker's parliamentary scheme is helping to open up opportunity, but a number of people do not apply to it at all because the cost of living in London is so high. Those who are on the scheme can struggle because the cost of living is so high, even on the London living wage. That is why people with supportive and well-resourced families have an advantage. We must therefore stress the importance of open and funded internships and placements, which do not rely on self-finance. We hope to present the result of the all-party group's inquiry next month. It is pretty clear that it will show patterns that restrict opportunity, repeated throughout the various professions—with politics no exception. There are pockets of good practice in all professions, but they are just that—pockets. In Parliament we have a unique role and an opportunity to lead by example, to show that in this country, whatever a person's background, they will have the same opportunities as everyone else.

3.21 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I am delighted to take part in the debate and to support the recommendations in Professor Childs' report calling on Parliament and the parties to do more to improve the diversity of Parliament and the political system.

When I entered the House of Commons as a new MP last year, one of my first impressions of Westminster was that a large majority of MPs—outwith the SNP, obviously—were white, middle-aged, men. They all looked like slightly older versions of me. I am 36—not quite middle aged. Despite some minor progress on the issue of increased diversity, it is clear—and now confirmed in "The Good Parliament" report—that the UK Parliament remains

"disproportionately white, male and elite."

Some progress has been made on increasing the level of female representation in Parliament, but it has been slow, and little has been done to try to remove the barriers that prevent so many talented women from pursuing a career in politics. Twenty-nine per cent. of current MPs are female, and that percentage has increased by only 10% in 10 years. Based on that, we shall have to wait another 20 years to have a Parliament with equal representation.

In attempting to address the issue, we should not limit ourselves to Professor Childs' report, excellent though it is. We should learn from the experiences of other countries to increase diversity. On a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association trip to Canada during the conference recess, I was fortunate enough to have great companions, including the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and to meet with the Federal

Parliament's standing committee on the status of women, Quebec's circle of women parliamentarians, the women's group for policy and democracy, and Equal Voice. They told me that, despite the 2015 election, which represented the most diverse group of parliamentarians that Canada has ever had, Canada still lags behind the UK; only 26% of MPs are women. The experience of that election tells us that it is not just about the number or percentage of women candidates standing; it is about the winnability of the seats. For each party, the Liberals, Conservatives, the New Democratic party and Bloc Québécois, the number of females elected as a percentage of their group was less than the percentage of female candidates on the ballot.

Each group that we spoke to is determined to do something about that. They were all heartened to hear of Scotland's experience, but in particular I want to mention a new national initiative being launched by Equal Voice. Daughters of the Vote will recognise a significant event in Canadian history: the 100th anniversary of the first voting rights granted to a select number of Canadian women in 1916. Equal Voice is inviting young women aged between 18 and 23 to participate in a national initiative in which 338 women—one from each constituency—will be selected to take their seat in Parliament. The women will meet and hear from outstanding women leaders from every sector. Daughters of the Vote is an initiative to identify and to encourage young women who can lead the country to a fairer and brighter future. That is something that we could and should do here.

Back on this side of the pond, it is clear from "The Good Parliament" report that, if we are serious about tackling the barriers that prevent women, disabled people, people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex, and others from pursuing a career in politics, we must have leadership on the issue. We must commit to making a concerted effort to removing barriers, and win over colleagues who adopt the "If you're good enough, you will be elected" mindset. I welcome statements by the Speaker that he intends to lead on the recommendations from Professor Childs' report, and I hope that he is supported in his efforts by all our party leaders.

I welcome what the report says about a gender-neutral approach to family life. I have a young family, and I have difficulty in balancing the promises that I made to the electorate and to my family. Anything that Parliament can do, no matter how small, to achieve that balance, is to be welcomed. Pursuing inclusivity is not about ticking boxes or being politically correct. The issue is not just about making the political system fairer, more inclusive and accessible. It is also about creating one that is more effective, which draws on the talents, skills and experience of all citizens. I support "The Good Parliament" report and the Speaker's efforts to act on it. I may be white, male and in my mid-30s, but I am also an ally who will support any attempt to create a Parliament that is truly representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective in all its functions.

3.25 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Mrs Moon, I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship—chairwomanship, I should say. It is the first time I have ever done that, and you know how much I love you.

When I saw that the report is called “The Good Parliament” I thought it was a reference to the 1376 Parliament, which was when we first had a Speaker at all, and when we impeached nearly all the Government’s Ministers and imposed a new set of Ministers of our own—maybe we will do that later today. The history of our Parliament has not been very good in relation to women. Sometimes we boast about “the mother of Parliaments”—a terrible phrase, but I will not bore people with how inaccurately it is regularly used. More important, for a long time women were not even allowed to attend the debates of the House of Commons other than by sitting in the room above the Chamber that had been built in the kind of false ceiling above the ventilator. When they were finally allowed in the Gallery, they had to have a grille so that they could not be seen, in case that somehow disturbed the male MPs.

When I arrived at theological college, when I was training to be a priest at Cuddesdon, it was the first year there was more than one woman training there. I know that that was difficult, both for many of the men—including the gay men, bizarrely—but also for many of the women, because for the first time women could not be treated as honorary chaps. I think we are only just beginning to get to the point in parliamentary terms where we no longer treat women as honorary chaps in the way we do business. That is one of the things that must change.

I warmly commend the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for bringing forward the debate. We probably will have to have a debate in the main Chamber at some point and I hope that the Government will enable that to happen, because I think that—withstanding the views of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who is a splendid chap but just wrong about everything—we should air the issues.

There are some things that it may be difficult to change. There might be unintended consequences of changes to where and how we vote that make things even more difficult for people post-maternity and paternity; but there are things we can do. On the question of all-women shortlists, I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that before the 2001 general election in Wales, 10 Labour MPs retired, and the Labour party, which prides itself on being a party of equality, selected 10 candidates every one of whom was a man, because we did not have all-women shortlists then. I benefited from that, in one sense, as did the people of Rhondda, no doubt—[*Interruption.*] Or maybe not. The point is that surely every party needs to find its own mechanism to try to make Parliament more representative, both in this House and, I would argue, in an elected House of Lords.

Philip Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Bryant: I am not going to, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, because we do not have long.

There is a real difficulty for parents. It is shocking how few mums—mothers of young, or actually of adult, children—we have in Parliament. There must be reasons for that, and we need to explore them. As the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) has just pointed out, it is very difficult for dads of young children as well. They must decide where their kids will be educated, and it may well end up being in London, because that is the only way they will be able to see them for most of the week. That then poses

questions for them in their constituency, if that is some way away. I do not think that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is anywhere near helpful enough about that. I can feel hon. Members agreeing with me—I may even have the hon. Member for Shipley with me on that.

I simply think that IPSA’s role is confused: on the one hand, it is a regulator; and on the other hand, it is meant to be a support mechanism, and those two roles conflict. In this area, it is making things increasingly difficult for people with families to think of becoming Members of Parliament, in particular if they are from ordinary working-class backgrounds. I think that that means IPSA is failing, and we need to address it.

There are more pictures and statues of women around Parliament than one might think, but they are not part of the standard tour, which is all about white dead men. It would not be a bad idea—I would be happy to organise this—to create a tour of women in Parliament, which could easily be done around the building.

Another point was made about restoration and renewal. We have got to get that right—the disability access in the building is shocking. Take eyesight, for example, and being able to see in debates: this Chamber is quite good, but other rooms are shockingly bad. We need to transform that.

Finally, we can see the sexism in politics in how Hillary Clinton is treated. Let us hope she wins.

3.30 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing the debate, and I welcome the report, which is an important addition to an ongoing debate about the representation of women in politics.

Many of us female parliamentarians—including all the women on the SNP Benches in this Chamber today—are new, serving our constituents in Parliament after being elected for the first time in 2015. A number of shocking experiences, some of which were reflected in the report—comments about how we speak, dress and so on—and all of which were entirely unwelcome, made the difficult situation of entering Parliament as a new MP even more difficult to deal with. The report highlights a number of issues. The question for us is: are we prepared to accept that this is the way it is? That is what we were told when we entered Parliament: this is the way of Westminster. Well, we are not prepared to accept that. We have an opportunity to change and we have to seize that opportunity with both hands.

Women have been fighting for a long time. Mention has been made of women who have achieved great things in Parliament, and yes, they have, but let us never forget that every opportunity that has come to women in every walk of life has come not by accident, but after having had to fight for every single opportunity. We have to continue that fight, and the fight is clearly continuing today in this debate.

Why is it important that Parliament should reflect society? Because we are making decisions about all the people in society every single day of our working lives, whether the members of society are men, women,

[*Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh*]

LGBTI—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex—black, Asian, from a minority ethnic community, or disabled. That is important, and no one knows better about how to make decisions than those people themselves. That is why we have to work hard to increase their representation.

We do so in the knowledge of what we are encouraging people to come into, which is not good enough. We know that we need to make a difference. With the help of colleagues on the SNP Benches, in the Scottish Parliament and in the wider SNP, I am pleased with what we have done to encourage women to come into politics. We have a women's academy in the SNP; we have worked to give training or opportunities to practise debating skills, or have just encouraged women to come forward. For almost every woman who has come forward in any political party, someone has asked her whether she has ever considered standing for election. It is never something we put ourselves forward for; it is always something that is suggested to us.

As we hold debates in this Chamber or the main House of Commons Chamber, we should remember that people are looking in at us—at how we conduct ourselves, how our colleagues of the opposite sex reflect what Parliament is like, and how they demonstrate respect for us or otherwise, as is sometimes the case. That should always be at the forefront of what we do.

In the short time I have remaining, I will address the issue of quotas, which raises its head so often. If we had a level playing field, we would have a Parliament that represented society. It is a matter of fact that we do not have a level playing field—or is anyone here today brave enough to stand up to intervene on me and say that women are not as good as men in any of the jobs we do throughout Parliament? That is of course not the case—

Gavin Newlands: Will my hon. Friend give way?
[*Laughter.*]

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Absolutely, I will give way.

Gavin Newlands: I appreciate what my hon. Friend is saying—I am not intervening to make that point. The SNP introduced our national quota system at the spring 2013 conference. At the start of that conference, I was completely against a quota system, not unlike the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), but a debate on the day changed my mind. I am now a big advocate of quotas.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention—[*Interruption.*] Other comments have been made from a sedentary position, but I am happy to accept interventions on that point or any other. It is worthy of note, however, that many men in this Parliament and beyond very much support the work being done on equal representation. That is something that should be commended, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work.

I mentioned the elections and our representation in Parliament. The SNP has gone from having one female Member of Parliament to having 20. At the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections we increased women's representation in the SNP group at Holyrood from the 25% of 2011 to 43% by adopting positive mechanisms to ensure that women are properly reflected in Parliament, which is the right thing to do.

It is also worthy of note that it is a matter of political will. In any political party, candidates go through a vetting process, and men and women all go through the same process, and at the end of the day it is up to the political party to decide whether it wants representation to be equal, because people have already passed the test—the bar of being effective and capable. I accept no argument that selection is on merit, because if it were we would see more women in Parliament than we have today. Indeed—I am sure many will agree—we women also set ourselves a very high bar to begin with, before we even enter any race or competition, so quality is guaranteed and is never an issue.

We have a lot of work to do, and the fight continues. We all know that nothing will come to us because people gift it to us. Before us, however, is a set of recommendations and, to replicate some of the positive change discussed and certainly seen in my political party—we have also heard from the Labour party over a number of years—we must commit ourselves to implementing them, and now.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Before we move to the Front-Benchers, given the time constraints I suggest that the Scottish National party has five minutes, the Labour party seven minutes and the Minister 10 minutes. With some generosity on everyone's part, I hope that that leaves us with a minute or two for the formal wind-up from Kirsty Blackman.

3.37 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): With you in the Chair today, Mrs Moon, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) stated, the report, which we are grateful to Professor Sarah Childs for and to Mr Speaker for commissioning, outlines some clearly much-needed change in this place.

I stress at this point that my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen North and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and I were each elected as councillors—young, female councillors, and some of the youngest female councillors in Scotland. There is no shortage of talent in our local authorities, and the job does not end here in this Parliament, because we must continue it in local authorities too.

I was probably the most unlikely candidate ever to find myself in this esteemed institution. I had no desire to be here for a great many years, and in fact it will come as no surprise to Members that I actively campaigned against this institution. None the less, we are here and we are part of the UK for now, so it is worth stating that as a young LGBT woman who was a young carer, getting into an institution such as a university even to get into the door of this place was one of the biggest challenges that I faced. I faced those challenges, so I know that young men and women up and down this country face the same challenges every day. For so many people even to get into this place is inconceivable and unimaginable.

I stress that I am proud to be a member of the Select Committee, the first ever Women and Equalities Committee. It is long overdue for this Parliament to have a discussion about equalities—not only for women, but for every single protected characteristic under the Equalities Act 2010.

I want to take this opportunity to summarise the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North, because there is no better way to make them. Sadly, this place is still full of middle-class white men, 10% of whom are Etonites. That is apparently a good place to go to school. However, there are many children up and down this country who did not have the benefit of such privilege and such an esteemed education and will never enter this place. This is their Parliament, and they deserve to have their voices heard.

It is worth also saying that this place's job is to be representative. It is hard to believe that when we witness middle-aged white men waste time by filibustering their way through debates in the Chamber. I distinctly remember that happening during a debate on marriage. That sends a message to young people at home that this place is out of touch and has no grip on reality. *[Interruption.]* The summary of the report sets out standards of behaviour; the Government Members who are chuntering from a sedentary position could learn some decorum. Clearly, whether we deal with standards of behaviour or gather data, we should ensure that new parliamentarians get more than one minute to sum up in a debate after the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has waxed lyrical in his ever-entertaining way about how much he adores a former Prime Minister. Trust me—we know that.

The report has some practical implications. Gathering data to ensure that this place is representative is a start. We must consider how we measure the success of the work that we do. The proposed procedural requirements and changes would be helpful. Remote voting would make a great difference to those who have just had a child and simply cannot make the journey—and why should they? We should modernise the dress code. It's 2016. Hello—no one wears top hats anymore. There is no cost to enhancing the crèche facility and allowing people to access this institution. This is their Parliament and they should be able to access it. It is not for the privileged few, and it is not only for Etonites.

I am conscious that I am running out of time, so let me say honourably that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central has been an absolute champion on issues such as breastfeeding, the tampon tax and the rape clause. To me, she is an award-winning MP. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) is also a role model and champion for gender equality. He is the father of two daughters, and I would welcome the opportunity to have a Daughters of the Vote style initiative here in Westminster; such women rightly deserve to take a seat in our Chamber. I look forward to the Minister's comments and would love to see the report take legs, because Professor Sarah Childs's work deserves to be heard and acknowledged.

3.42 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing this debate. During my first appearance at business questions as shadow Leader of the House, I asked the Leader of the House to consider having a debate on this subject, and he said that he would take it away and look at it.

I know Professor Sarah Childs. We went to the first Commonwealth Heads of Government women's forum meeting in Malta late last year. I do not know how

many women Prime Ministers there have been in the Commonwealth, but it is surprising that that was the first such meeting.

The report is excellent. It synthesises some of the main issues we are all talking about. Cleverly, it has three dimensions and 43 recommendations. It is impossible to do it justice in such a short time, so I hope that we will have more time to debate it. We need to separate out the issues. What struck me from reading it was that there is something for society to do—we need to change society—but the political parties and the House also have roles to play. The report provides a snapshot of where we are. I would not be standing here if many grassroots members of my party had not cajoled it to ensure that I got here. It took me 20 years to get here. I came in on an all-women shortlist, and I challenge the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) to say that I am not good enough.

In the longer term, we have to change behaviour in society, from schools to the workplace and civil society, through education and legislation. When I first came here in 2010, there had been a huge change in the number of Members, and we had an induction day. I suggest that at such induction days, needs assessments should be done of all the MPs—male and female—with families, and then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, IPSA should be asked to ensure that there is enough childcare provision for those Members.

I agree that women should be allowed to breastfeed anywhere, but I am not sure that I would have liked to do it in the Chamber. Children need routine. As a lawyer, I am not sure that I would ever have done it if I went to court. There is a time and a place for it, although it is for an individual to choose. I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), but women should be given time and space. I would actually prefer for them to have their maternity leave in that year.

I am whizzing through the report. Recommendation 3 proposes voting at the door of the Division Lobbies. That could cause confusion, because it is important for the Whips to be able to count votes. We have a family room—that is an easy win—and children could go there, but we need to get either the House or IPSA to pay for proper childcare by someone who can look after children, and we need a service for such emergencies.

On recommendation 25, we have a fantastic Secretary of State for Education, but, as usual, the woman has to do two jobs—she is also the Minister for Women. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, whose job it is to try to prevent discrimination in society, faces huge cuts. Will the Minister look at reversing those cuts if possible? The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) is right that we need a level playing field. Women make up 51% of the population, and we therefore need to be represented.

Recommendation 12 goes to parties' commitments. It is about paternity, maternity, parental, adoption and caring leave, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) rightly said. Given that we are going to have a great repeal Bill, can the Minister say whether all those rights that were won in Europe and that our party played a part in securing will be secured?

Recommendation 29 is about language. I understand that we are in a situation where the Clerks will decide what can and cannot be said in the Chamber. I am not

[Valerie Vaz]

sure whether “Erskine May” would say that one Member trashing another under parliamentary privilege was good tempered or just someone being thrown to the lions.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) and I had the pleasure of going to Canada—it was indeed a pleasure. The Canadian Parliament is going through its own restoration and renewal process and a new Chamber is being built. More importantly, we saw the powerful image of the Canadian Prime Minister surrounded by a diverse group of Members of Parliament—a Parliament in which women have key roles. Women and men of ethnic minorities and even First Nations all have important roles in the Canadian Parliament, and the Prime Minister is sending the message that Canada is a welcoming, tolerant and inclusive society.

The report needs to be looked at carefully, not dismissed or put on the shelf. If the Minister looks at page 2, he will see that a lot of different groups will have to respond to the recommendations. Will he comment on whether one main body, perhaps in the Cabinet Office, could track those recommendations, perhaps using a Gantt chart? It is important that we do not lose sight of them, since they are all very good.

Finally, we should consult Members. Things are sometimes done in committees for which Members feel that they do not have responsibility, but when my right hon. Friend the former Member for Lewisham, Deptford looked at changing the hours of the House, we had a consultation. Members were involved and different motions were tabled. The Youth Parliament will sit next week, which will give us an opportunity to show our young people that they, too, can become Members. Once again, I thank Professor Sarah Childs and hope she understands that we appreciate the hard work that has gone into the report.

3.49 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I very much congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on securing this important debate. If I may say so, I would like to see more Members like her. She can be proud to be here and we are proud to have her. I thank Professor Sarah Childs for her report. This is a recent report and a significant work. The work she continues to do on the subject of gender and politics is important.

I have listened to the contributions of hon. Members with great interest and I assure them that the Government take this subject seriously. The debate comes at an important time for Parliament as an institution as it considers the recommendations made in “The Good Parliament” report.

In the report, which was published a few months ago in July 2016, Professor Childs outlines a blueprint for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons. It contains 43 recommendations to a variety of stakeholders, including the Government but not just the Government. Also included are the Speaker of the House, the House of Commons Commission and a number of Select Committees in the House among others. The report also recommends the establishment of a Commons reference group on representation and inclusion.

Mention has been made of the Women and Equalities Committee, an important Committee of the House, which is undertaking an inquiry into women in the House of Commons after 2020. It is examining both the impact of the proposed boundary changes and the recommendations made in Professor Childs’ report. The Government have submitted written evidence to the inquiry and very much look forward to reading the Committee’s report.

All sides should acknowledge that progress is being made. This is the most gender-diverse Parliament in British history and we should celebrate our many talented parliamentary colleagues. We have our second female Prime Minister, and women now make up an unprecedented third of the House and a third of our Cabinet. Therefore, the House as an institution has made great strides since 2010. The House of Commons nursery opened on 1 September 2010 to support Members and other passholders with childcare responsibilities. The nursery now provides a post-6 pm service, and of course the children of Members have unrestricted access to the Estate when they are accompanied by a parent.

The House of Commons monitors and reports on the diversity of its staff. The Commons has goals to increase the diversity of its staff and monitors the position carefully and actively. Outreach has greatly improved and grown, including the annual Parliament week, and civil marriages, for example, can now be conducted on the Estate. Improvements have been made and changes have taken place, but there is still a long way to go to reach a representative and inclusive House. That is not just about finding diverse talent. This should be a place where all people want to work. The Government are carefully considering the recommendations contained in Professor Childs’ report and look forward to working with the Commons reference group on representation and inclusion, which is considering the recommendations.

A lot of progress could be made if the main parties worked together to build a more consistent voluntary approach to growing diverse talent. I am glad that only a week or two ago the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from all the main parties about this important issue. That hearing received media attention, which reflects the good work that the Committee is doing. Indeed, “The Good Parliament” report specifically called on the Leader of the House of Commons to support the permanent establishment of that Select Committee. It is clear that the Committee has a key role in driving forward this agenda, so I am pleased to say that the Government are indeed able to offer that support.

Professor Childs also recommended setting the recess dates for each parliamentary session at least one session in advance. Members and staff of the House, together with their families, want to know that information as far in advance as possible. That is perfectly understandable, so we make every effort, as previous Governments no doubt did, to announce recess dates as soon as is reasonably practicable. However, the setting of recess dates is complex and depends on many varying factors, not least the progress of legislation through this House and the other House. It is difficult to settle a whole session in advance. The consideration of Lords amendments, for example, could never be predicted before a Bill has even begun its passage through both Houses.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but this is nonsense. It is perfectly easy to work out when the recess dates will be next year—I can give the Minister a draft later this

evening if he wants. At this stage last year I predicted exactly what the recess dates would be this year, and that was what the Minister ended up announcing. Frankly, I do not know why he cannot get on with doing it for next year now.

Michael Ellis: Of course, if it were as easy as that, no doubt the Labour Government would have done it between 1997 and 2010. With regards to the recommendation relating to the conference recess, it is important to note that any decision would have to be made some years in advance because things are booked years in advance—large-scale plans are made for conferences by all the parties—and it would require cross-party agreement. As always, such issues are subject to discussions between parties, which should continue to be the case. Only if agreement were reached on that change would it be possible to consider that proposal and the one to abolish sitting Fridays.

On that subject, Members will know that the Procedure Committee has looked in detail at that. Abolishing sitting Fridays, as referred to in Professor Childs' report, has not formed part of the package of recommendations in the Committee's latest report on private Members' Bills. Should the Committee be minded to resume the line of inquiry, the Government would consider the proposals in detail and respond in the appropriate manner.

With regards to political parties providing data relating to parliamentary candidates, also referred to in Professor Childs' report, there are no plans to introduce legislation at present. Once again, we believe we can make progress if the parties build a more consistent voluntary approach to growing diverse talent. I am glad that the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from all the parties about that.

One other specific proposal I want to talk about is the aim to increase the voice of disabled people in this place, which is also under consideration. The three-year pilot of the access to elected office fund, which aims to support people with disabilities to stand for election as local councillors or Members of Parliament, is being reviewed. The views of disabled candidates, all political parties and disability charities have been sought as part of this inclusive process. An announcement about the future of the fund will be made in due course.

To conclude, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate and who continue to contribute to this area of work. We thank Professor Childs for her work and, for that matter, Mr Speaker for his leadership.

3.57 pm

Kirsty Blackman: I very much appreciate the Front Benchers giving me a little bit of time at the end. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. I will not name them all because of time constraints, but I thank them for coming along and, in the main, supporting the recommendations in "The Good Parliament" report, or at least the direction of travel in the report.

I want to mention briefly the Procedure Committee, because a number of its members said they were sad that they could not come today because a Committee meeting clashed with the debate. I am sure they would have been keen to see some of the changes to procedures that have been suggested. I am looking forward to the Commons reference group on representation and inclusion, which I understand is due to meet for the first time this month. That is a great thing, and I am really pleased that it is getting off the ground.

I am keen that all the recommendations in the report are considered. As individuals, we might dislike certain recommendations, but the House as a whole and those people who are tasked with taking them on need to consider all of them seriously, and look at evidence for and against adopting each of them.

More widely than that, all of the under-represented groups need to have more of a voice in this place, whether it is people who support gender equality, on which the report mainly focuses, or people who support disabled candidates such as Jamie Szymkowiak in the SNP. The SNP is the gayest parliamentary group, and changes such as that are being made in positive, more inclusive political parties. I have an internship scheme specifically aimed at people from poorer backgrounds who would struggle to come to parliamentary offices in the main. Any such changes are to be welcomed. We need to work together to make them.

On what the Minister talked about, I do not think we can say, "Look at the wonderful things we have done." We should have been doing all of that before. We cannot in any way rest on our laurels until we have genuine 50:50 representation and remove those barriers to under-represented groups coming into this place. We cannot rest. We need to keep working until we make this place better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Good Parliament report.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

Housing in Kent

[SIR ALAN MEALE *in the Chair*]

4.15 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing in Kent.

I recognise that more new homes need to be built in the United Kingdom, and I acknowledge that the Government are taking steps to encourage the building of those homes. However, I feel that Kent is being asked to take more than its fair share of the new house building, particularly since we have already seen in recent years unprecedented housing growth that has led to great pressure on our local infrastructure and services.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. He will be aware of the housing and infrastructure problems in Dartford that cause terrible congestion at the Dartford crossing. Does he agree that more housing in the area simply adds to the number of people, the number of vehicles and the congestion? It is therefore vital we have the infrastructure to go with those new housing plans.

Gordon Henderson: I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend, because he is perfectly right. The pressure we have been facing will only increase unless action is taken to stem the tide of development.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gordon Henderson: I am delighted to give way to my neighbouring MP.

Mrs Grant: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an essential debate. A nonsensical 18,560 new homes are planned for the Maidstone area, notwithstanding the already serious and chronic traffic congestion around the town. Does he agree that local authorities must be much bolder and more robust in using the legitimate constraints provided for in the national planning policy framework to set more sensible and sustainable housing need figures in their draft local plans?

Gordon Henderson: As the MP for the neighbouring constituency, I share those exact concerns, but our local authorities are put in an invidious position by the Government, and I will raise that concern. In order to meet Government targets, local councils in Kent are planning for 155,000 homes to be built by 2031.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gordon Henderson: I am happy to give way to my other neighbouring MP.

Rehman Chishti: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for all the brilliant work he has done on this issue. He talks about pressure on local authorities. One of the biggest pressures is where developers that have been given permission to build do not build,

and instead sit on the land waiting for another day when things are good for them. That pushes pressure on to others and the local authority. That is completely wrong. Does he agree that the Government need to ensure there are severe penalties for developers that sit on the land where they have been given permission to build? That is completely wrong and undermines the whole objective of creating more housing in the area.

Gordon Henderson: I am more than happy to agree, and I will raise that issue later in my speech.

I mentioned that Kent is having to plan for 155,000 homes by 2031. However, in the same period, the number of jobs likely to be created in Kent has been estimated to be only 121,000. In essence, Kent local authorities are being expected to plan for 34,000 homes for people who work outside the county. In contrast, Cornwall—which I know is on the other side of the country but is still part of the United Kingdom—is only being expected to plan for 47,500 homes to be built in the county. That is less than one third of the target being imposed on Kent. Continued housing growth in Kent at the current level is simply unsustainable. It will lead to the loss of more and more green fields and inflict immeasurable harm on our beautiful county, which, after all, is the garden of England. Those additional homes will lead to thousands of extra cars on our roads, thousands more children in our schools and thousands more people using our health system, all of which are already stretched to the limit.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. In Medway alone, we are facing an arbitrary demand for an extra 30,000 houses. Does he agree that the high housing targets we are seeing across Kent are undeliverable and will do nothing to benefit or improve the lives of the people who already live in our communities, unless there is acceptance of the burden being placed on Kent, backed up with proper investment in infrastructure and services? He has outlined some of the pressures.

Gordon Henderson: I do agree. I was born and raised in Medway and am a proud man of Kent. I believe we have taken more than our fair share. Unfortunately, the problem is not new for Kent. Our local authorities have consistently had high housing targets imposed on them. The need for such high targets comes from migration, both internal and external. Kent County Council's figures show that 84% of population growth in Kent is due to migration, with the Government consistently imposing high housing targets to keep up with the movement of people.

More migrants, mean more houses, mean more migrants, mean more housing. It is a vicious circle that has resulted in agricultural land being covered in concrete and many natural habitats being lost. The situation is not helped by a planning system that encourages developers to build on green land despite brownfield sites being available, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) said.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In Thanet, we are supposed to be taking grade one agricultural land—the finest agricultural land in the country, bar none, with wonderful alluvial soil—for houses when we have brownfield sites available.

Another threat is at Manston airport, which some people want to smother in houses simply to take overspill from London, which has nothing to do with Kent and nothing to do with Thanet.

Gordon Henderson: I am delighted my hon. Friend has raised that issue. Another example is Isle of Sheppey in my constituency. In Queenborough and Rushenden, the Homes and Community Agency owns a large brownfield site, which has good access to road, rail and local amenities, but has remained undeveloped for years. Two miles away, in Minster on Sea, thousands of homes have been built on green fields as part of the Thistle Hill development. The main roads on Sheppey are now some of the most congested in Kent.

In Sittingbourne, too, there are plenty of brownfield sites on which to build, yet Swale Borough Council is being forced to allocate additional green land in its local plan for housing, although it is not needed at present. When that land is included in the local plan, developers are effectively given the green light to build on it straightaway, instead of developing the brownfield sites that already have planning permission. That is nonsense and affects many small communities, such as the village of Borden, where a planned development of 665 houses will change that rural community out of all recognition.

This is not the first time that has happened in my constituency. The village of Iwade, at the time of the 2001 census, consisted of just over 400 dwellings with a population of 1,142. In just 15 years, Iwade has grown and now consists of 1,690 dwellings with a population of 3,087. It is no longer a village; it is a small town. It is not the only area of rapid growth in the past decade. Eden village, Kemsley, Milton Regis, Minster on Sea and The Meads have also seen major housing developments. My constituents in Sittingbourne and Sheppey have seen their area change beyond recognition in the past 25 years. All those developments have reduced our green open spaces, destroyed good agricultural land and affected the lives of whole communities.

My constituency has made more than enough sacrifices to help to solve the housing crisis, and enough is enough. We do not want the character of our area to change any more. My constituency is not unique in Kent. As my hon. Friends have said, many areas are facing similar pressure for housing development. We are calling on the Government to help us to protect what is left of our green fields, open spaces, traditions and communities.

Gareth Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that to facilitate more houses in Kent we need another Thames crossing? It must be built in a way that gives motorists choice to ensure that we have resilience in Kent. The only way to achieve that is to build another lower Thames crossing east of Gravesend, which is option C.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Order. This debate is a short one—only 30 minutes. The mover of the debate has so far been very understanding in giving way and I have been kind in allowing that, but perhaps we could allow him to make his speech and, if there is time left before the Minister speaks, I will be willing to allow other contributions. Perhaps hon. Members could be more understanding.

Gordon Henderson: Thank you, Sir Alan. I am more than happy to take that into account. I will be summing up fairly shortly.

I agree that we need a lower Thames crossing, but we need it for existing residents and communities, not to encourage more housing. The Government should spread responsibility for providing new housing land to other areas of the country. As more people move to Kent, particularly from London, the county is finding it increasingly difficult to cope with a rapidly growing population. Other parts of the country are not taking their fair share of the housing needed to help to overcome a national problem.

Government statistics for house building in the June quarter of 2016 show that there has been an unequal amount of house building between north and south. In the south-east, 3,180 dwellings were started, compared with just 960 in Liverpool city and 1,090 in Greater Manchester. How is that proportionate? We have a national housing crisis, yet certain areas are taking the brunt of the new building.

I understand there are different needs in different areas, but these statistics show the south-east is taking responsibility for five times more new homes than if it were divided up equally between regions. That is unfair and Kent is a real victim of that unfairness. It is time for the Government to act and to reduce the number of homes for which they expect local authorities in Kent to plan. Ministers can do that by making it clear to local authorities that no further green fields have to be allocated for housing until all the current brownfield sites in their area have been developed.

4.28 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I am in a slightly difficult position because some of my colleagues, whose support I value highly, have spoken passionately about their concerns. I entirely understand those concerns and some legitimate points were made, but I must set out some points of difference and I hope they will bear with me while I do so. I will come to their legitimate points, with which I am in complete agreement.

The first thing to say at the outset is that the Government do not set housing targets for local authorities. We have a local plan-led system in this country. The Government require local councils to carry out a robust assessment of housing need in their area and then, subject to whatever land constraints they face, to meet that housing need. That is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said something my constituents often say to me that it is worth exploring. There is a feeling that more and more homes just lead to more and more people living in the area. Actually, there is pretty compelling evidence that if we do not build the additional homes that an area needs, the people still come, but rather than living in their own homes, they just live in more overcrowded conditions. We have only to look at what is happening now in some parts of our capital city, where people live in sheds at the bottom of gardens and in other completely unacceptable conditions. If people want to live in an area but we do not provide enough housing to allow them to live in decent conditions, they still come.

Gordon Henderson: I will take my hon. Friend the Minister up on one thing. He said that the Government do not set targets for local authorities. My authority,

[Gordon Henderson]

Swale Borough Council, put in a target for housing that was then rejected by the Government and it is now having to increase that target. It is wrong to say that they do not set targets.

Gavin Barwell: Just to be clear on that point, what will have happened is that Swale Council's plan will have been examined by an independent inspector, appointed by the Planning Inspectorate. The inspector's job is to test that the assessment of housing need in that area is realistic. If it was rejected, that would be because compelling evidence was presented that the assessment was not realistic.

I have taken the time to look at the data for each of the local authorities—I apologise if I miss anyone out—that hon. Members in the Chamber represent. I will start with my hon. Friend. His council is in the best position. The annual household growth projections, which are not Government figures but independent Office for National Statistics figures, show projected housing growth in Swale of 540 households a year, and Swale Council delivered 540 net additions to the housing stock in 2014-15. In Dartford, the projections show 603 extra households a year. The council is currently delivering 570. In Maidstone, the projections show nearly 900 extra households a year, but the council is currently delivering only 580. In Thanet, the projections show 600 extra households a year, but the council is delivering only 380. In Medway, the projections show nearly 1,350 extra households a year, but the council is delivering 480.

I say to my colleagues that if, as a country, we do not build the number of homes necessary to accommodate our population growth, we will continue to see what we have seen for the last 30 or 40 years, which is housing in this country becoming increasingly unaffordable for people to buy or to rent, with all the consequences that that has for inequality, both geographically and between generations. I will leave colleagues with just one statistic—it is a national rather than a Kent statistic. Of people who are my age, 45, 50% owned their own home when they were 30 years old. For people who are 20 years younger, who are 25 today, the projection is that in five years' time just one quarter of them will own their own home. That is the consequence of years and years of failing to provide enough housing.

My hon. Friend made two other points that I want to tackle, and then I will come to all the areas where I am in the happy position of being in complete agreement with all my colleagues. One of the issues was migration. He referred to the figures for population growth in Kent as a result of both internal migration from within the UK to Kent and external migration into the UK. It is important to draw a distinction between population growth and household growth, because they are different. Migrants tend to be younger, so there is less of an impact on household growth than population growth. At national level, about half our population growth is due to net migration, whereas only just over one third of household growth is due to net migration. The household projection figures that I cited for each local authority already assume a reduction in net migration from the current levels.

In addition, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a huge imbalance in the level of house building in different parts of the country. That is a reflection of a

market economy and of where people wish to live. Some of our colleagues—they are not in the Chamber at the moment because this debate is about Kent—live in areas where houses can be acquired for very low prices because people do not want to live in those areas and do not want to buy those properties. Therefore, if the Government were to adopt a policy of trying to set targets for every area and saying that each part of the country should assume a uniform level of housing, the reality is that we would see very sharp house price inflation in areas where demand was larger than supply. We would also see homes that people do not want to buy on the open market in areas where the demand does not exist.

I hope colleagues accept those points in the spirit in which I have made them, because the job that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given me is to ensure that as a country we start building the number of homes that we need to build. I now come to the points that my hon. Friends made with which I have complete sympathy and which we will seek to address in the White Paper that we will publish later this year.

My hon. Friend made this point very powerfully, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford reinforced it in his intervention. One of the main things that my constituents say to me—in Croydon, we have all the same pressures to which all my colleagues have referred—is that in recent years, the infrastructure has not been put in to support the additional housing. The consequence of that is that people say, “I understand why more housing is needed in this area, but it is making it harder for me to get my children into the local school. It is making it harder for me to get an appointment at my local GP practice. It means that my train, when I go to work in the morning, is more overcrowded.” Hon. Members are therefore absolutely right to press the case for investment in infrastructure that ensures that local communities—not just the people who are lucky enough to get the new houses, but the local communities in which that housing is placed—benefit from the new housing. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has been a doughty champion of the need for an additional, third crossing of the Thames, and my brother is a constituent of his, so he can rest assured that I hear about the misery that is inflicted on him whenever there is a problem with the existing crossing.

Rehman Chishti: I pay tribute to the excellent work that my hon. Friend the Minister is doing. I completely agree with him about infrastructure, but linked to that is the issue of developers who sit on land or landbank. What are the Government doing about that? They can do something about it by ensuring that there is a severe penalty. That would ensure that those who get planning permission develop in good time. If they do not do that, they should lose the planning consent and be penalised in order to make the system much fairer.

Gavin Barwell: I had noted my hon. Friend's very good point even before that intervention—I had noted it from his previous one—and I was just coming to it.

My diagnosis is that we have basically three problems—three reasons that lead to us not building enough homes as a country. The first is that, in some places, we are not releasing enough land. Those tend to be in the parts of the country where demand is at its most acute.

The second reason is that there is a growing gap between the planning permissions that we are granting and the homes that are actually being built. Hon. Members may be interested to know that in the year to the end of June, the planning system in England granted a record number of planning permissions—277,000 homes were consented in those 12 months—but people cannot live in a planning permission. We must do a better job of turning planning permissions into actual starts.

There is a range of reasons why that does not happen. My hon. Friend puts his finger on one problem—developers landbanking and taking too long to build out—but there are others. Often, the utility companies are too slow to put in infrastructure. Councils sometimes rely too much on pre-commencement planning conditions that delay schemes starting. There is a range of factors. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I cannot set out today what will be in the White Paper, but I can give him a categorical assurance that the White Paper will include measures to try to deal with the problem that he talks about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) spoke powerfully on the third issue that I want to address. I had the privilege last week of visiting his constituency and seeing some of the area for myself. He spoke about the importance that people attach to green fields. My constituency has a significant amount of green belt land, so I know perfectly well the importance that my constituents attach to that, but in other parts of the country, where there is no green belt, people feel equally passionate about green spaces. Therefore it is absolutely the priority of this Government to try to ensure that development is concentrated on brownfield land. We have already made a number of interventions to try to make that more likely. I do not have time to go through them all, but will reference a few.

Perhaps my hon. Friend and I can talk in more detail separately, but one thing that I would point out to him and his council is brownfield registers, which were legislated for in the Housing and Planning Act 2016. A number of local authorities are already trialling them, but the idea is that local authorities draw up a register of brownfield land. They could possibly link that with the planning permission in principle reform in the Act, so that developers can see where there are sites that are suitable for housing development and have permission in principle. In that way, they will have clear planning certainty that those sites can be progressed. The Government have a clear manifesto target to get 90% of brownfield sites developed by the end of this Parliament. I reassure him that the Secretary of State and I are passionately committed to trying to ensure that, to the maximum extent possible, we focus development on brownfield sites.

One problem with some of those sites is contamination from previous uses, so we have tried to put in place funding programmes that can help with remediation. A good example is the new starter home land fund. My hon. Friend referred to a site in his constituency that has been sitting vacant, and he is frustrated that it has not been brought into use while developers pick on greenfield sites elsewhere. I say to him strongly to look at whether that fund could help to bring that land back into use.

I also refer my hon. Friend to our neighbourhood planning system. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) is, coincidentally, now in the Chamber. He played a pre-eminent role in pressing forward that

policy. It presents a huge opportunity to local communities to control where the development goes within their communities. One of the problems we have right across the country is that too many councils do not have up-to-date plans in place. The result is that the presumption in favour of development applies and we get speculative applications where, essentially, developers are picking the sites they want to see developed rather than local communities saying, “If we need 800 homes in this area, we will decide where the right sites are for them to go.” The combination of ensuring that local councils have local plans in place, and ensuring that individual communities below that have neighbourhood plans that set out in more detail exactly where the right sites for housing are within that neighbourhood, gives people control over the planning system.

One thing I want to achieve is minimising the number of cases that end up on my desk because a council has turned down a speculative application. A colleague or another Member of the House will be furious and will ask the Secretary of State to call the application in. Not only is that incredibly divisive, but it wastes a huge amount of time and money. What we want in England is a plan-led planning system in which communities decide where the appropriate places are to build the housing that we need.

I will make only two final points—I am conscious of the time. Density is one of the other things that we want to look at in the White Paper, which might reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. It is particularly relevant in London. How can London accommodate more of its own growth? If we want to protect our precious greenbelt, we need to look at whether we could have more intense development on the sites that we have already developed. In my constituency, when faced with the choice between building on our precious greenbelt and metropolitan open land or having a number of very tall buildings in the centre of Croydon, people much preferred the latter. There is huge potential in major centres and around public transport hubs to have denser development. That does not have to mean unattractive tower blocks. Actually, the most densely developed borough in London is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where there is some incredible architecture. We can get high-quality, dense development that provides more homes on a given plot of land.

I hope my hon. Friends are reassured by my response. It is my job to make the moral case for building the homes that our country needs, so that we have a country that works for everyone and so that young people who work hard and do the right thing have the opportunity to get on the housing ladder. I am also very cognisant of the concerns that have been expressed in the debate by hon. Members who are passionate about protecting the character of their local areas. I firmly believe that, with the right policies, it is possible to strike the right balance between those two very important objectives.

4.44 pm

Gordon Henderson: First, the notion that the Planning Inspectorate is not accountable to Government is quite bizarre, because the Secretary of State can call in any plans that he wants. To say that it is independent is disingenuous. The projected targets that are being placed by the inspectorate on local authorities are taking into account the notional migration into the areas that need those houses. The houses that are being built are not

[Gordon Henderson]

actually solving the problem of homelessness in our boroughs. We still have homelessness. We still have people that need homes and are not getting them because, as the estates are being built up, they are sucking in more people. I will leave the Minister with that thought.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Media and Young People's Mental Health

4.45 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of social media on the mental health of young people.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I called this debate because I have become increasingly concerned about the mental health problems afflicting our young people and about the role of social media in adding to the strain that they are under. I should perhaps declare an interest: as the father of two young children, I look with an increased sense of foreboding to the day when they acquire their first smartphone.

From the reaction I have received to this debate within Parliament and beyond, I sense that there are many parents and carers up and down the country who are concerned about this issue. The problem is that parents today can feel particularly helpless. Unlike in the past, when parents could draw from their own experience to help navigate their children through the minefield of adolescence, the extraordinary pace of change means that many parents simply cannot do that now. They are not digital natives, so it is hard for them to prepare their children for the digital deluge to come.

Let me start with the background. It is not an exaggeration to say that it sometimes feels as though this generation of young people is one of the most unhappy since the second world war. No MP can fail to be aware of the pressures on young people's mental health. As the MP for Cheltenham, I see it in the brave young people from local schools who come to my surgery to talk about in-patient care and waiting times for talking therapies. I see it in the growing workload for staff at the excellent Brownhills eating disorder clinic at St Paul's Medical Centre. I see it in the statistics provided by Teens in Crisis, which provides counselling services across Gloucestershire for young people: in 2013, it was receiving 20 to 30 self-referrals per calendar month; in 2016, the figure was around 70.

This debate is not principally about how we, as a society, pick up the pieces. It is not about NHS resources, or about what more we need to do to bring parity of esteem. Both of those issues are very important and were extensively debated last week in an excellent debate arising out of the publication of the Youth Select Committee report on young people's mental health. Instead, this debate is about what we can do to address problems upstream, before they have caused damage. My view is clear: we need to be as focused on preventing these problems as we are on curing them, and that means focusing on causes.

Today, my focus is on what an increasing number of studies suggest is playing a very significant part in this precipitate decline in young people's mental health: social media. Social media are, of course, utterly pervasive among young people. They are totally immersed in a virtual world. That world can be very positive but it can also be harmful, to both the way they perceive the world around them and the way they perceive themselves. Increasingly, young people seem to be finding it hard to distinguish between the real and virtual worlds.

Let me make it clear that this is an emerging topic in academic research. Association and correlation are not the same as causal link, but it is becoming tolerably plain that social media can have a damaging impact. Turning to some of the studies, the Office for National Statistics' 2015 publication, "Measuring National Well-being: Insights into children's mental health and well-being", found that there is a "clear association" between longer time spent on social media and mental health problems. While 12% of children who spend no time on social networking websites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27% for those who are glued to the sites for three or more hours a day. That is particularly worrying for girls, because research shows that girls are far more likely to spend excessive amounts of time on social sites than boys. One in 10 girls was found to be in the top category for time spent on the websites, compared to just one in 20 boys.

How can social media have this negative impact? Embryonic research suggests that there are three principal routes: first, online bullying; secondly, the phenomenon of what I call "compare and despair"; and thirdly, sleep deprivation.

Taking bullying first, a study in 2014 by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that bullying or trolling was by far the single largest category of upsetting experience encountered online. MentalHelp.net found that 95% of teenagers who use social media have witnessed cyber-bullying and 33% have been victims themselves. Bullying is as old as the hills—there is nothing particularly new about it, unpleasant as it may be—but the power of social media to amplify its impact is so transformational and can be so damaging. Social media provide new and inventive ways to be cruel, such as body shaming and hurtful posts, excluding children from online games, setting up hate sites, creating fake accounts and hijacking online identities, and they have the power to scale up that bullying by using the technology to spread its impact widely through a school community or even beyond.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this incredibly useful and important debate. Does he agree that in the past children who were bullied at school would be able to escape that by going home, but now with social media, bullying is constant and they can be exposed to it every hour of their lives?

Alex Chalk: I am sure the hon. Gentleman must have had a copy of my speech; the next paragraph says precisely that.

Whereas in the past, children could physically escape their tormentors, nowadays social media make that impossible. The way I put it is that platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram bring bullies into the bedroom, so children's homes are no longer the sanctuaries that they once were.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem is the anonymity that some of these platforms provide? As our colleague, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson), just pointed out, children cannot escape from this kind of bullying, but nor can they necessarily identify the

perpetrator. Does my hon. Friend believe, as I do, that the platforms need to do a lot more by way of regulation to try to minimise that?

Alex Chalk: I absolutely agree and will be developing those points in due course, because it seems to me that social media providers have to do more. It is no good simply to give us these vague blandishments, saying, "Oh well, you can click to get some advice." They have to become far more robust about it. The anonymity also creates an element of menace about the whole thing and simply adds to the level of bullying.

The second route is the phenomenon of "compare and despair". What do I mean by that? I am referring to the fact that young people observe imagery online that can inspire profound feelings of inadequacy. In many cases, they are not yet mature enough to realise that everyone has apparently become their own PR agent: people are increasingly projecting an online image of their lives that is beautiful and perfect in every way, and even though that may be misleading in reality, it may not feel that way to a 12, 13 or 14-year-old.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on delivering a very eloquent speech. He is coming to a point I want to raise about teenagers in particular who have eating disorders. I have found that to be quite a prevalent problem, often involving people who feel under pressure. That pressure can come from social media because people are looking at the success of others and feel they have to aspire to it. As my hon. Friend said, they look at other people who seem to have a perfect body and so on, and that seems to be a growing problem in teenage mental health.

Alex Chalk: That is absolutely right. At the end of my hon. Friend's intervention, he hit on a particularly important point in mentioning the growing problem. Let us be clear: negative body image has long been with us. When I was growing up, the finger was pointed at hard-copy magazine publishers and the size zero models that were in those magazines, but once again social media have the power to magnify the impact.

Interestingly, a study compared the impact on women of Facebook images against those on a fashion website. It found that the former led to a greater desire among them to change aspects of their appearance. One can speculate about the reasons for that: is it because people think, "Well, I recognise that in a fashion magazine things may be airbrushed and stylised, but I do not expect that on a Facebook post," so it is somehow more damaging? I offer that as a possibility but there may be plenty of others.

As well as body image concerns, there are issues about popularity and feeling inadequate. Anecdotally, it is clear that teenagers make a habit of comparing their own posts' popularity with those of other people. We increasingly get the sense that young people fear that their existence compares unfavourably with others. Much—probably too much—gets read into the absence of "likes" or "views".

Finally, there is the effect that social media have on sleep patterns. That might sound rather prosaic, but it is important. A study presented by the British Psychological Society in September last year in Manchester found

[Alex Chalk]

that the need to be constantly available and responding 24/7 on social media accounts is linked to poor sleep quality. Research from the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference that was tweeted to me this morning suggests that almost half—45%—of students admit that they check their mobile device after going to bed, and that a staggering 23% check it more than 10 times a night. The concern is not just that they turn up to school exhausted but that sleep deprivation is well known to be a trigger for depression.

I know that the Government are very mindful of that issue and that a lot of excellent work is being done to support parents and schools to help children to use social media safely. The Department for Education funded MindEd to set up a new site, MindEd for Families, which was launched earlier this year and which I have looked at. It provides free online advice on a range of mental health issues affecting children and young people; it includes, of course, a section on social media. This morning I read the Department's advice sheet entitled "Advice for parents and carers on cyberbullying". It is really helpful and very good. I also pay tribute to the fact that the Government are continuing to provide funding to the YoungMinds parents helpline, which is a national service providing free and confidential online and telephone support, information and advice.

That is all hugely welcome—there is great deal more as well, and I look forward to hearing about that from the Minister—but the fact remains that young people's mental health does not appear to be moving in the right direction. Against that context, I will make two points. First, if we are going to maximise the effectiveness of our response, I believe we need a more thorough and scientific investigation of the causes, because although strong emerging evidence shows a correlation between social media use and declining mental health, the time has come to bottom it out with something more robust.

Back in February 2014, the House of Commons Health Committee launched an inquiry into child and adolescent mental health services. A subject it took evidence on was the impact of bullying and of digital culture. It recommended that

"in our view sufficient concern has been raised to warrant a more detailed consideration of the impact of the internet on children's and young people's mental health...and we recommend that the Department of Health/NHS England taskforce should take this forward".

That was eminently sensible and I invite the Government to do so, if they have not already. Again, it may be that we will get more information, but I was a bit concerned that that view may not be finding favour, because in answer to a question from Lord Blencathra, the Government said:

"The Department does not itself conduct research, but funds research through the National Institute for Health Research...and the Department's Policy Research Programme", which they said

"have not funded specific research into the possible mental and psychological impact on children of using Twitter and Facebook and have no plans to commission research on this topic."

Of course, I entirely recognise that public funding is tight and we cannot fund every single project, but it seems to me that the sheer weight of the evidence is now sufficiently strong that it calls for that robust study to take place.

My next point echoes one that was made earlier: social media platforms need to face up to their responsibilities. We rightly hold headteachers accountable for bullying and abuse that takes place on their premises. Social media platforms also need to take their fair share of responsibility for what takes place on their own digital premises. Creating safety guides is not enough. Suspending people from Facebook or even expelling them is perfectly sensible in theory, but does it happen in practice?

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), in an excellent debate last week, said about social media companies:

"They are huge companies employing many thousands of people, yet the numbers in their scrutiny and enforcement departments are woefully low."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 481.]

I am not here to beat up the social media companies. I think they do some important work and what happens is a fact of life, but I think they need to step up and face up to their responsibilities, because they have to recognise that they can be a force for good but that they can also be a force for something far less welcome.

In conclusion, social media are the phenomenon of our times. They have the ability to take all the ordinary experiences of growing up—the triumphs and disasters—and magnify them beyond anything we could ever have imagined a generation ago. They can create heroes in seconds, but they can crush people too. Their capacity to intensify bullying, enhance body anxiety and exaggerate exclusion is becoming increasingly clear. If we want a society that truly tackles those problems upstream, builds resilience in our young people and prevents as well as cures, the time has come to ramp up our response.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): This is only a 60-minute debate and seven Members of Parliament have written in to take part, if they can. As is laid down by the Chairman of Ways and Means, I have to provide the Front Benchers a total of 20 minutes of speaking time, which only leaves a short period for all the hon. Members who have indicated that they want to speak. Therefore, I will impose a time limit of four minutes per Member. If hon. Members go over that limit, I may drop the limit further.

5.1 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) on securing this important debate.

Perfection: the state or quality of being perfect; a state completely free of faults or defects. Perfection is popular. People are attracted to it. People are attracted to you. In 2016 perfection is everything, or rather, to young people it is. Among young people, there is a pressure to be perfect, to act in a perfect way, to look perfect, to have a perfect body, to get a perfect number of Instagram likes, and to be in a perfect friendship group. If young people do not meet those high standards, the self-loathing begins and the feeling of worthlessness sets in, sometimes with fatal consequences.

While preparing for this debate, I have spoken to lots of young people. One explained how he felt about social media, saying:

"Young people are made to feel like they live an unfulfilled life, because theirs doesn't live up to the seemingly perfect lives they see on social media".

And that is just the way it is. With technology and social media sites making it so easy to edit and amend—or rather, correct—photographs, it is easier than ever before to manipulate the truth, allowing us to present ourselves in our own filtered sense of reality, showing only what we want to show. That can result in people critically comparing their lives with the lives of others, and using others' posts as a measure of success or failure in their own life. That cannot be right. We must teach young people to aspire not to unattainable perfection, but to personal satisfaction, and to love themselves for who they are.

For young people today, the pressure to succeed is all around them, so much so that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reports a 200% increase in recent years in the number of young people seeking counselling over exam stress alone. For others, the coping method is more worrying: the Mental Health Foundation estimates that between one in 12 and one in 15 people self-harm, with some research suggesting that the UK has the highest rate of self-harm in Europe. We may be shocked by those figures, but many young people who self-harm do not harm themselves in a way that requires medical attention, so those numbers only show part of the picture. Social media do not always help with that. One person told me about a problem relating to the website Tumblr, saying:

"Young people are able to type any mental illness into the search bar and there are ineffective controls to dissuade people from seeing...harmful content. When I self-harmed, I would find Tumblr was my place to go to see material by other users that would encourage me to hurt myself."

That illustrates that social media can not only cause mental illness in young people, but perpetuate the problem.

Social media are vital tools for young people today and we must not seek to interfere with the good they do. Another young person I spoke to explained that they suffer from chronic depression and acknowledged that occasionally social media worsen their mental health, but when they are feeling low and cannot leave the house, social media mean that they are not alone; contacting friends is instantaneous, wherever they are. It is important not to forget the benefits of social media, which can do a lot of good.

There are many lessons for us to take from the debate. Young people must know that they are valued for who they are, no matter what their Facebook timeline, Twitter feed, Snapchat story or Instagram followers say. Young people are perfect for being who they are.

5.5 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Alan. I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for bringing the debate forward, and I will try to be brief.

I want to take part in the debate to tell the story of one of my constituents, Declan Duncan, an incredibly brave young man from Castlemilk in my constituency. His life was made a complete misery by the use of social media, and he wrote to me to tell me about some of the experiences he has been through. I have met him on a number of occasions and was moved to tears when he told his story in public at Castlemilk Youth Complex, which gave him enormous support. I pay tribute to the people there, particularly to the youth worker, Christopher Lang, who really helped Declan.

Declan was bullied throughout primary school and high school, starting off from the fact that, since birth, he has had a tracheostomy because of a collapsed windpipe. When he was in high school, he came out as gay at a very young age—something that I certainly would not have had the bravery to do when I was in high school. The bullies used social media, in addition to face-to-face bullying, which we would understand to be traditional bullying.

People made up fake profiles in Declan's name using his photographs and said that he was doing all sorts of vulgar things that were completely false and untrue. They also set up petitions and shared them on Facebook, Twitter and all the rest of it, encouraging people to—to quote from one post—"run him out" of Castlemilk. There was even a concerted effort to get people to turn up to school one day with things such as tomatoes and eggs, and to run him out of school. All of that was organised on Facebook. Declan sent me some screengrabs of some of the stuff from the time, and people even complained that their posts had been deleted. His life was made a complete misery.

The Castlemilk Youth Complex told me about a phenomenon that is happening at the minute: there seems to be a website that is being used by people to create what is made to look like a genuine news article. People can type in anyone's name, use any photograph they wish and claim that they have done anything, and it is then spread all around Facebook and Twitter. The youth complex has cases of particularly vulnerable individuals being targeted by these rancid people in the most vulgar fashion.

Alex Chalk: A lot of people hearing this horrific story, which the hon. Gentleman is articulating powerfully, will want to know what the social media platforms did to clamp down on those who were posting and perpetrating such vile abuse.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: That is a fine point, on which I will aim to end. Social media platforms need to do more but, in addition, teachers need to be better empowered. Although I respect that that specific matter is for our Government in Scotland, I think that the social media platforms need to engage better with educators to combat bullying in their schools.

Declan has since left high school. He is now studying social care at college and doing very well. The last time I met him, he was a happy young man at the gay pride event in Glasgow. Castlemilk Youth Complex will go on to support other young people who are being targeted in such a way. I hope that all of us here, other Members of Parliament, local councillors and teachers will work better with and get on to the social media companies, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham suggested, to ensure that all those other people like young Declan out there in our constituencies get better support, which they so badly need.

5.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) on securing it and on setting the scene so well, and I congratulate the other Members who have spoken or who will speak.

[Jim Shannon]

This is a pertinent issue. Social media can be a wonderful tool for arranging get-togethers to catch up with old friends and for enjoying updates on the lives of people who live far away. I have seen social media wonderfully used to promote family events, to ask people to pray for a specific need or to provide help through churches and church groups. Social media can do good things.

I saw the part that social media played in spreading information on the dangers of legal highs. I met a young man who organised a peaceful protest outside somewhere that sold legal highs, as they were then known. The protest was well organised, respectful and well attended due to the proper use of social media, and it highlighted the dangers to those using such drugs. Social media brought good from a terrible situation, so they can do good.

I have enjoyed photographs, witty remarks and jokes that have been shared by others, and I can see the benefits of social media when they are used appropriately. However, as the hon. Gentleman said, this debate is sadly not about the good that social media can bring; it is about the bad that social media do to some people's lives when they are misused. They can become a mistake that will always be there for all to see. They can be a weapon for people to be bullied or mocked in perpetuity. They can be a tool for people to be socially excluded, and they can be the harshest judge and critic that a person will ever have.

How can we protect our children from that? The obvious answer is that we should not allow our children to use social media, which is unrealistic. There is an age limit on most social media sites, but that is not enough. We must step in. We have all seen figures showing that children who spend more than three hours each school day on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are more than twice as likely to suffer poor mental health. Whereas 12% of children who spend no time on social networking websites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27% for those who spend three hours or more a day on such websites, so there are health issues. That is not the Minister's direct responsibility—I am pleased to see her in her place—but we need answers.

How can parents protect their children and how can the Government help that protection? The limitations in place are not working. Enough is Enough, an organisation for internet safety, conducted a survey that found that 95% of teenagers who use social media have witnessed cyber-bullying and 33% have been victims themselves. Too many children are seeing and being part of something that we seek to protect them from.

A study exploring the relationship between teenagers, social media and drug use found that 70% of teenagers aged 12 to 17 use social media and that those who interact with social media on a daily basis are five times more likely to use tobacco, three times more likely to use alcohol and twice as likely to use marijuana. The figures clearly show that there are health and addiction problems related to too much use of social media. In addition, 40% admitted that they had been exposed to pictures of people under the influence via social media, which suggests a correlation between the two factors.

Although all that might not be substantive enough for a court of law, it is jarring enough that the House must consider how we can better regulate things to protect young

people. Can we legislate for protection? Can we allocate funding to train schools in dealing with problems caused by social media? Can we ensure that no one can set up profiles until they get older? All those things need to be worked through with healthcare professionals and those who know about social media. The Government, and the Minister in her response, must decide to take action to protect our children. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham said, we are all here to protect children. Action must be taken now.

5.13 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this debate, which is a reflection of how fundamentally our society has changed. Technology is a huge part of that. Young people today are growing up in a world that is markedly different from any experience we had of growing up, with the possible exception of my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson).

As we have heard today, social media are a double-edged sword. Social media can be an important social outlet and an extraordinary source of information and education, and they enable people to connect with each other over vast distances. The benefits that social media offer to both young and old are plainly obvious but they can also be a dangerous, insidious tool. Social media are a stick with which too many of our young people can be beaten. They can be a yoke of oppression around their necks as they are pressured to conform, to be governed and even to be alienated by the false reality that is too often projected to and targeted at our young people.

It is alarming that research has associated online social networking with severe psychiatric disorders, including depressive symptoms, anxiety and low self-esteem, as well as poor sleeping patterns—sleeping patterns are so important to physical and mental wellbeing. The conclusion has been reached that young people's immersion in social media should be considered a serious public health concern.

We all know that people fill their Facebook pages with pictures of their apparently perfect lives, which pressures others to portray and edit their lives in the same way for Facebook. It is thought that that is why young women are now three times more likely than young men to exhibit common mental health symptoms. That statistic has risen alongside the growth of social media, so we need to pay attention to it.

Barnardo's has carried out important work on the effects of social media on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. It has concluded that access to online pornography and other harmful online content can distort not only young people's body image but their view of healthy relationships. It can even lead to harmful sexual behaviour, often due to distorted ideas of consent and what a healthy relationship actually looks like.

Of course, as we have heard, social media can also be an insidious tool for those who use them as a vehicle for bullying. Social media can be extremely intimidating for victims, who can find them very difficult to escape because of their sheer prevalence in young people's lives.

I am delighted that the Scottish Government's "Respect Me" campaign recognises the importance of this issue and the essentialness of addressing it and taking it extremely seriously. Young people inhabit a different

world from us as they develop, grow and find themselves, which makes them vulnerable and poses all sorts of challenges. It is our job to do all we can to protect them, and I am interested to hear how the Minister will proceed.

5.16 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. The development of social media and the role they play in each of our lives is significant, yet there is limited focus on their impact, so I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this debate. Social media are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but there is no doubt that they can have a negative impact on the mental health of young people. I take this opportunity to draw attention to a few adverse effects of social media and how they can affect the mental health of children, teenagers and young people.

One of the most notable consequences of social media use is that it can create an unhealthy need for constant approval. When a young person uploads a new photo of themselves, the number of likes can act as a barometer of their perceived popularity that they can instantly compare with their peers. In the past, being at the receiving end of a compliment or even a smile may have been enough for a teenager to feel good, but now they will often need dozens of likes on their profile picture or dozens of retweets to feel the same sense of acceptance. It can be incredibly important for a young person to feel as if they fit in, but with social media creating such an obvious scale of approval it can be painfully difficult for a teenager to think they are popular.

Aside from that, social media can be damaging because they can create unrealistic expectations. Young people naturally compare their appearance with that of their peers, but when the photos they see of their friends have had filters and effects applied, they are comparing themselves to unrealistic standards. When people use social media to post about their lives and how they spend their weekends and holidays, teenagers will compare their lives, too. Inevitably some will see themselves as having less interesting or less exciting lives than their peers, which can be damaging to their self-esteem. Of course it is not only friends and family with whom young people compare themselves. Social media give opportunities to follow celebrities, which gives way to even more distant and unrealistic standards to which to aspire.

We should be cautious not to overplay the dangers of social media. It is important to recognise that all technological developments of this scale can have positives. History should serve as a reminder that we often get ahead of ourselves when a new technology plays a role in our lives. Social media are having an adverse effect on the mental health of young people, but they are not inherently bad. Indeed, in moderation, social media can help young people to have a more positive adolescence. If platforms such as Facebook are used to organise face-to-face interactions, rather than replace them, young people can create relationships with far more ease than previous generations.

Social media can also be a great alternative education tool and a way for young people to express themselves, but we should be cautious of them and recognise the negative effect they often have on the mental health of

young people. It is vital that social media companies do more not only to manage the content of their pages and sites but to take responsibility for their impact on young people and their mental health.

It is great to see attention and parliamentary time given to debate mental health issues again, and I am particularly pleased that we are debating the roots they can have in social media. I hope we can all learn from this discussion and that concerns raised today will be taken on board by the Minister and eventually translated into Government policy.

Stuart Blair Donaldson *rose—*

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Stuart Blair Donaldson, let me just tell you why you are being called last: because you intervened earlier and took some time. Do not think that your being new to the House goes against you in any way. You now have your four minutes.

5.20 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alan. As has been mentioned today, I speak as the youngest male MP and as someone who has grown up with social media—a digital native. I also speak as a vice-chair of the all-party group on body image and as someone with my own hashtag on Instagram—*#instaMP*, if anyone is interested.

I thank everyone who got in touch with me to share their stories and experiences of mental health and social media, particularly Vicky Kerr, who shared her dissertation on the subject. Social media can be a great tool in many ways, but platforms such as Instagram often portray a rose-tinted picture of a person's life and can promote the idea of self-worth based on how many "likes" a picture gets.

The fact that young people can readily access at any time of the day pictures of famous people sharing their seemingly perfect lives can make them question their own self-worth. Additionally, the predominance of photos of those beautiful people present young people, mainly young girls, with a skewed vision of how they should look. The people they look at often look that way because of their job—they can dedicate time to it and will often have nutritionists, personal trainers and I dare say the odd bit of Photoshop. Most young people do not have access to such facilities, and famous people often do not acknowledge that they use them.

Constant exposure to those images and basing a positive self-image on likes can lead to significant deterioration in a young person's mental health. In extreme cases, that can lead to the development of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia. That might be an over-simplification of a complex and serious illness, but the idealised body images so often portrayed in both conventional and social media have an effect on people at risk of suffering from it.

Unfortunately, social media often hinder rather than help people who suffer from significant mental health issues. Young people can often get caught up in eating disorder promotion on social media. Hashtags such as *#thinspiration* and *#skipdinnerwakeupthinner* allow people to connect and share tips on how to lose weight, purge and starve themselves. That makes the problems more

[Stuart Blair Donaldson]

severe and can have severe and tragic consequences. I have witnessed the devastating effects that losing a daughter to an eating disorder can have on a family, which is why I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and raise awareness—I wish I had more time to speak.

As a society, we could do a lot more to promote healthy body image and to talk about and be more open about our mental health, whatever age we are. I will leave Members with a quotation:

“The quickest way to get a bikini body is to put a bikini on”.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Mr Donaldson, everybody gets worried and wants more time. Don't worry about it.

Dr Cameron rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Dr Cameron, you have five minutes.

5.24 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Thank you once again, Sir Alan, for your excellent chairmanship today. I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for bringing this crucial debate to Westminster Hall and for providing such a comprehensive review of the field. He highlighted the extraordinary pressures on the mental health of our young people today and the importance of prevention, research and specific interventions.

I begin by declaring an interest: I have worked in mental health as a psychologist and continue to maintain my skills and engagement in line with my professional registration requirements. In the short time I have today, I will cover the positives and negatives of social media, sum up the thoughtful contributions from Members and make recommendations to the Minister.

We have heard that there are many aspects to the new world of social media. Indeed, as a candidate I had never before tweeted but was told that it was crucial to the campaign and that I needed to develop a social media profile. Social media are coming to everyone of all ages, including me. I have noticed that they make people question themselves: “Is this relevant? Am I witty?”—not usually, in my case—“How do I phrase this? Will I make a mistake and be criticised?” They can help us to link with many people but are also a pressure. I was interested to learn about Instagram today from my youthful hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson)—something else that I hope I never have to learn to use.

We know from psychological research that, for introverted teenagers, linking with peers can be easier through social media than in person. Social media can have an affirmative effect, as we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and can help to build self-esteem and friendship networks. However, some problems emanate when young people's social lives begin to completely link with social media and online activity, rather than with active involvement with others for some part of the day and building friendship networks of people with whom they can spend quality time and engage. One key question about social media must be how much is too much and how much is healthy.

In a 2012 survey, 53% of social media users in the UK said that social media had changed their behaviour. Of those, 51% said that the change was negative because of a decline in confidence. Young people are particularly vulnerable to peer pressure and negative comparison. They may feel inadequate because they do not seem to have as many friends as their peers, as we heard from the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), or because they feel that they are not physically perfect. Research indicates that this trend may affect girls more than boys, but none the less it can affect all our children and young people.

Millennials apparently take around 25,700 selfies in their lifetime. A recent NHS report has shown a large increase in the number of young women suffering from mental health problems as a result of selfie culture—we heard that point put forcefully by the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). We also heard about dangerous websites that can encourage young people to self-harm or to reduce their weight to critical proportions. Earlier this year, Instagram introduced anonymous reporting tools and a support network designed to tackle issues from self-harm to eating disorders. Some of the answers may be online, but most definitely not all of them are.

Hon. Members have spoken eloquently about the fear of missing out. There is increasing pressure on young people to be part of the group and to be included in online activity constantly, so they become agitated, anxious and find it difficult to switch off and resume everyday activities. It almost becomes an obsession.

Cyber-bullying was raised by the hon. Member for Cheltenham and by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who spoke eloquently about his constituent. It is unacceptable and can lead to suicidal behaviour, particularly in vulnerable populations.

On the sensitive issue of sexting, it appears, worryingly, to be much more common. Sexting affects a considerable proportion of young people, who may feel pressure to sext their naked body parts to third parties. Those photographs can then find their way online, to mentally scar those young people and leave them literally exposed to the world in perpetuity.

It is clear that society has moved online, and our responses need to take account of that. I ask that the Government look at standardised online materials for children and adolescents to help them to prevent harm caused by social media use and to take precautions for themselves. I also ask that police service resourcing be supported to take action against sites that specifically focus on young people and aim to undermine their mental wellbeing. As always, we must target the online predators who may target young people. Safeguards for online sites must be introduced. Children and young people need education on safe online usage, as do their parents. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham eloquently said, we need to develop research and treatment to help people who have had their mental health damaged online. There is a lot to take forward, but we must do so with care, together.

5.30 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham

(Alex Chalk) on securing this important debate. I draw attention to the contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). There is not enough time for me to mention everybody who spoke because, as usual at the end of these short debates, we are tight for time, but I particularly thank the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson). He spoke of a painful experience, which is always so difficult to do.

Young people are growing up in an age in which online culture and social media are so central to everyday life. That is particularly true of social networking sites, to which more than 85% of children now belong. We have heard some interesting statistics relating to that throughout the debate. Commenting on social media and mental health, the Children's Commissioner said:

"Excessive use of social media has been linked to poor mental health...When combined with bullying it can have a terrible effect."

Consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Sebastian Kraemer gave evidence to the Health Committee as part of the inquiry into young people's mental health mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham. On the impact that digital culture can have, he said:

"It makes intimidation more alarming and more chronic. You can be teased in the playground and it has gone with the wind, but if you have got your photograph on Facebook then it stays there forever...The medium is not the cause, but it certainly facilitates different ways of harming each other, of abusing each other, and that is what young children do."

Parents are seeing the link. In a survey of more than 1,000 parents with children under 18, four fifths blamed social media for making their children more vulnerable to mental health problems. It seems that the excessive use of social media can be linked to depression and can play a role in heightening underlying anxieties and lowering self-esteem—we have heard about some interesting cases.

These days, there is much concern about body image and appearance, which is another potential cause of anxiety and low self-esteem. It is clear that social media can intensify such feelings. A small study in the United States found that teenagers were affected by the "like" culture, with photos with more likes being more attractive to them. This like culture was found to affect self-esteem, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore both said.

The damaging impact of social media has been seen as one of the causes leading to the increase in the number of children and young people self-harming in the past 10 years. ChildLine has seen a 35% increase in the number of contacts from young people with anxiety. That increase has been linked to the rise of social media, which has increased the pressure to attain a so-called perfect life. With increasing numbers of young people self-harming or being diagnosed with depression or anxiety, will the Minister tell us what action is being taken to understand the possible links between social media and depression, anxiety and other mental health issues? I agree with the hon. Member for Cheltenham that we need a robust strategy and some research that proves the links.

We have heard much about cyber-bullying, which is a growing problem, with more than one in 10 young people admitting they have been affected by it. We heard about Declan; I am very glad to hear that he has moved past

the bullying phase that was so affecting him. Bullying UK found that 43% of young people aged between 11 and 16 had been bullied via social networks. Bullying has been found to be a factor associated with children's mental health issues. One study reported by the Office for National Statistics found that children who had been bullied at 13 were more than twice as likely to have depression at age 18.

Stress and anxiety have also been linked to cyber-bullying. Will the Minister outline what action the Government are taking to tackle cyber-bullying and what measures will be put in place to help young people who are affected? Following the debate on young people's mental health in the main Chamber last week, my concern is that help is not getting through to children before mental health problems escalate. Indeed, in 2015 the Children's Commissioner found that one in four young people experiencing serious emotional or psychological problems were being turned away from specialist mental health treatment.

Early intervention can help. Lorraine Khan of the Centre for Mental Health said:

"There is good evidence for a range of interventions to boost children's mental health, and the sooner effective help is offered the more likely it is to work."

However, Government cuts to local authority budgets have meant the loss of services for children and young people. Cuts have been made to the numbers of social work staff and educational psychologists, and to mental health services in schools, leading to a reduction in care and support for young people. In the face of such cuts to early intervention and prevention services, will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to develop better early intervention?

From pressures about body image to cyber-bullying and the pressures caused by social networking sites, it is clear that we need to do more research on the impact that social media are having on young people's mental health. Although Ministers have pledged extra funding for mental health services, we know it is not reaching the front-line services that children and young people need. Schools and colleges must be supported to help their students to cope with the challenges of online culture that we have heard about in this debate. The internet and social media are clearly here to stay, so it is vital that the Government ensure that young people receive the help, support and guidance that they need in this digital age.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Before you begin, Minister, may I ask you to be so kind as to consider leaving up to a minute at the end of your speech for Mr Chalk to sum up?

5.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I shall do my utmost, Sir Alan. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) on securing this very important debate. Contributions have at times been distressing, but they have been hugely important. He is right to raise awareness about the impact of social media on young people's mental health. I thank all constituents and colleagues who have bravely allowed their stories to be shared today; it does have an impact and it is important.

[Nicola Blackwood]

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, in recognising the harms that are occurring on social media, we must not reject the positive role that social media can play. Instead, we have to put social media in their place and know that, like any tool, their impact is dependent on how they are used. How we use social media depends on our intentions, for good or ill, and on our skills.

For the disfranchised and those without a voice, social media have provided a powerful medium for advocacy and outreach, and at times messages that would not otherwise have been heard have found a global reach. Even for the most vulnerable groups, the evidence shows that by no means all influences on social media are negative, and that only a minority of people will use social media to exploit and harm others.

The Samaritans undertook a consultation as part of its Digital Futures project, which looked at how people use online sources in relation to suicidal and self-harm content. The study found that, as well as negative experiences, those who took part in the research also highlighted using the sites to build peer networks. Three quarters of those who took part said that they looked for support online.

If we can harness the power of online platforms, we can use them to deliver the effective prevention interventions that many Members have called for, to raise mental health awareness, and to provide advice and support. Indeed, many of the support organisations that help our young people and adults who experience emotional challenges and issues of poor mental health have a presence on social media. As the Minister with responsibility for public health and innovation, that is something I must encourage.

As constituency MPs and Members of this House, we can all cite examples of social media platforms being used to inflict harm, whether through grooming or cyber-bullying, or of the anxiety and low self-esteem caused through hyper-use, which some Members have described. The Government reject the laissez-faire attitude that says this is all just an inevitable by-product of our connected world and shrugs its shoulders. No child should be groomed, bullied or harassed online, or simply left without the skills they need to critically and sensibly engage with social media.

That is why we are working in partnership with industry, the community and schools to address the challenges. New technology and social media continue to be misused to exploit and target the vulnerable. We have been clear that we expect social media companies to respond quickly to incidents of abusive behaviour on their networks. We have robust legislation in place to deal with internet trolls, cyberstalking and harassment, and perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. We are absolutely clear that these are crimes, and will be treated as such.

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre has available various resources, which can be accessed via its website. The “Thinkuknow” programme has web resources to educate and empower young people at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. I hope that some of them may access that if they are watching the debate. We know that the worst cases of bullying, including cyber-bullying, can lead to serious depression and even thoughts of suicide. A recent study by the national inquiry into homicide and suicide found that bullying—the

sense of there being “no escape” was articulated by many colleagues—was a factor in the suicide of children and young people. I particularly thank Declan, the constituent of the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), for allowing his story to be told and may I say how sorry I am that he had to go through that experience. We know that we must do better.

That is why all schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy and measures to tackle bullying in all forms among their pupils. Schools are free to develop their strategies, but they are clearly held to account by Ofsted. That is also why the Government Equalities Office announced £4.4 million of extra money to tackle bullying, and why over the next two years four anti-bullying organisations will go in to support schools to tackle bullying and to improve the support that is available. In particular, the GEO has invested £500,000 in the UK Safer Internet Centre to provide advice to schools and professionals on how to keep children safe, and a further £75,000 in CEOP to support a national roll-out of Parent Info, which is delivered through schools, to stop parents feeling helpless because they are not digital natives. It is a free service and helps parents to show their children how to use the internet and mobile devices appropriately.

We are also working with the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, which brings together 200 organisations to form the digital resilience working group to take forward work to equip children and young people to identify and respond to risks online, including cyber-bullying and negative influences.

We know, as colleagues have said, that young people, as well as their parents and carers, continue to feel the impact of unrealistic representations of body image, which have a pervasive impact on social media. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham may be aware that the Government launched a body confidence campaign in 2010, which publishes a regular progress report on how we are addressing negative body images to tackle the very “compare and despair” trap that he so rightly highlighted. I agree with him about the importance of prevention and resilience building. A great deal of work is under way to try to target the sources of online abuse and harmful content upstream, at source.

Central to tackling the challenges posed by online bullying, exploitation and self-image will be supporting young people, as well as those who care for them, to build resilience. This year, Public Health England’s £337,000 Rise Above campaign is intended to do just that, building the resilience of young people by providing online information and tackling issues that include body image and online stress.

Alongside supporting young people in developing resilience, we know that parents and schools have a role to play in preventing mental ill-health, and we will continue to work with the Department for Education to improve mental wellbeing in schools, and to support children and teachers in addressing mental health issues through educational resources and by providing single points of contacts for mental health in schools.

My hon. Friend rightly highlighted the good work of the DFE in developing the MindEd web-based tools for children and parents. We are looking for ways in which those tools can be developed further to support local areas and to improve online contact.

Underpinning all of that is the need to tackle the stigma around mental health in all areas of society. That is why we have increased funding for Time to Change, which is our national anti-stigma campaign, to ensure that young people are confident in coming forward to get the help that they need. Underpinning all of that is our programme to reform and improve mental health support for young people. That is why we have increased investment in mental health to £11.7 billion, and local clinical commissioning groups are required to increase spending on mental health each year. That is part of a holistic strategy to improve key areas of mental health services, such as perinatal mental health, services to tackle eating disorders and better crisis care resolution in the community, as laid out in “Future in mind” and “The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”, so that we can give young people with mental health problems the care and support that they deserve.

My hon. Friend was right when he said that we need to have the proper research in place, because this is an emerging area. That is why the Mental Health Taskforce asked the Department of Health, working with relevant partners, to publish a report by February 2017 to set out a 10-year strategy for mental health research. The final 10-year strategy planned for publication will identify the needs of mental health research. It will include a specific focus on the mental health of children and young people.

We know that there is much more to do and my hon. Friend is aware that the Lords Select Committee inquiry into children’s access to and use of the internet is currently under way. We are watching that closely and will look at its recommendations about online safety and the role that the Government, regulators and media companies can play to protect our children online because we know that more needs to be done.

We recognise the challenge of social media for young people up and down this country. We are determined to do our part to equip them with the tools they need to meet that challenge, not only in terms of their mental health but to protect them online, to make them more resilient and alert to the risks, and to make them confident digital natives who can critically and sensibly harness the power of digital tech for good.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): I call Alex Chalk to sum up—briefly.

5.44 pm

Alex Chalk: This has been an excellent debate but a debate in name only, because there is a profound consensus about the potential for social media—as well as being a force for good, it can cause harm.

I was very pleased to hear from the Minister that some embryonic research may develop into something more robust. Such research is welcome. That is important because we need that platform to press the social media platforms to do more.

I reiterate the point that, in schools, we expect headteachers to take control, in Parliament, we expect the Speaker to take control and, if people are not behaving properly on social media, the platforms should be robust in dealing with them.

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.10(14)).

Petition

Wednesday 2 November 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of South Norfolk,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State

Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mr Richard Bacon.*]

[P001973]

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Wednesday 2 November 2016

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Wednesday 2 November 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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