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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 8 November 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hunterston B Power Station

1. **Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): If he will discuss with the operators of the Hunterston B power station the reported fractures in the keyways of that power station. [907113]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): The safety of operating nuclear reactors in the UK is regulated by the independent Office for Nuclear Regulation, which is satisfied that Hunterston B is safe to operate. The issues referred to by the hon. Gentleman are addressed transparently in the ONR's most recent annual report to Parliament. The ONR will continue to oversee these issues closely and will permit a nuclear plant to operate only if it is satisfied that it is safe.

Rob Marris: My thanks to the Minister for that. Nuclear safety is important. The blueprint for Hinkley Point C is the Flamanville European pressurised reactor in Normandy, yet in 2015 it was discovered that Flamanville's steel reactor vessel was faulty and at risk of splitting. The French company Areva is to be a major supplier to Hinkley Point C, yet in May the independent French nuclear safety authority discovered that more than 400 of Areva's reactor components were dodgy and Areva admitted that it may have falsified hundreds and hundreds of its safety assessments. What assurances can the Minister give the House that Hinkley Point C, if built, will be safe?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. As he may know, the issue of the anomalies and inconsistencies associated with the Areva components has been the subject of an independent review by the ONR. The ONR has made it perfectly clear that learning from the EPR under construction in Flamanville must be taken into account in the manufacture of components to be used at Hinkley Point C.

Innovation

3. **Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote innovation (a) in the regions and (b) nationally. [907115]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): Innovation is at the heart of our industrial strategy. Investment in science, funding through Innovate UK, and research and development tax credits all contribute to our goal of making sure the UK remains one of the most innovative countries in the world.

Andrew Bingham: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. The latest figures from the Patent Office show that my constituency has more patents awarded than any other district in the east midlands, more than Manchester, more than Cheshire East, and is in the top 8% in the country. May I ask that the measures we take, some of which he outlined, do not stop at urban boundaries and extend into rural areas, fully using the talents of people and businesses there, including the incredible level of talent that has been demonstrated in High Peak?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate, through my hon. Friend, the innovators in his constituency on an outstanding achievement. Let me reassure him that the Government are determined to make sure, both through the industrial strategy and tools such as the innovations audits, that we are better informed and better equipped to support innovation across the country.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The steel industry is very much an industry of the future, and innovation is part of creating that future. What are the Government doing to support research and development in the steel industry, and a metals and materials catapult?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. We had an excellent debate last week about the future for steel, and I hope I made clear to him the determination of Ministers to support the sector in moving from a story of survival to one of growth. Innovation will clearly be a very important part of that, building on the quality of British steel. As in that debate, I assure him that in the capabilities review that we are funding and accelerating, that issue will be addressed.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I know that the Minister has previously flown over The Wrekin in a Squirrel—that is a helicopter—and has complimented Shropshire. May I invite him back to the Marches local enterprise partnership, which covers Shropshire and Herefordshire? What part will LEPs play in making sure that we engage and trade with Europe?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for reminding me about a helicopter trip that had slipped my memory. I am sure relevant Ministers would be happy to make the visit at his invitation. He raises a fundamental point, and on the development of the industrial strategy, the Secretary of State could not have been clearer about the importance placed on LEPs and of Ministers engaging with them to understand fully the priorities and needs in each area of the country.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Secretary of State said on "The Andrew Marr Show" that innovation in attracting foreign investment was in part about skills and training. Will there be a level playing field across the regions and the nations of the United Kingdom? Is his Department having talks with the devolved Administrations?

Mr Hurd: I assure the hon. Gentleman that in developing the industrial strategy, the development of skills and upgrading our skills base across the country must be fundamental to success, and we will of course maintain a high level of engagement with devolved Administrations.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): In North Cornwall, we have a company called Water Powered Technologies that builds hydroelectric pumps, which enable businesses to generate electricity through renewable means and, of course, support the local economy in Bude. Does my hon. Friend agree that the hydroelectric sector should be encouraged more and that we should go further and develop these technologies to help consumers?

Mr Hurd: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that huge potential remains for the UK to generate energy from our natural resources and our water assets. The real test in the future will be how competitive those technologies are against comparable technologies. I am sure that my hon. Friend does not need any lessons from us on the need to be very cost-conscious at this moment in time.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Brexit Britain faces a choice: an industrial strategy that invests in innovation to deliver smart, sustainable and shared growth; or the slashing of wages, rights and corporate responsibilities in a race to the bottom. Sunday's report from Sheffield Hallam University, "Jobs, Welfare and Austerity", put the price of the last Tory Government's disastrous de-industrialisation strategy at £20 billion a year today. Will the Minister stop prevaricating and set out how he will invest in skills, research capacity and infrastructure to stimulate innovation in our great industrial regions?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady has a distinguished record and knowledge of innovation, but I do not recognise the picture she paints. She totally ignores the job creation under the previous Government and that manufacturing productivity has grown three times faster over the past 10 years than the rest of the UK economy. She is right—I have already stated the importance of this—about placing innovation at the heart of our industrial strategy, because it is key to productivity.

Infrastructure Investment

4. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the level of infrastructure investment outside the south-east. [907116]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (**Jesse Norman**): The Government are committed to providing significant infrastructure investment across the UK. Through the first two rounds of growth deals, the Government have allocated close to £5 billion to local enterprise partnerships outside London and the south-east to invest in their priorities for growth. With matched funding from the private sector, that is helping to deliver billions of pounds of investment in infrastructure throughout England. City and devolution deals have also committed more than £8 billion to areas outside London and the south-east through long-term investment funds; £1 billion will be in the midlands engine and £3 billion across the northern powerhouse.

Ian C. Lucas: Global businesses such as Kellogg's, Airbus, JCB and Toyota have sited themselves in north-east Wales and have prospered, making the area one of the most successful industrial areas in the UK. We would love to see the hon. Gentleman there. Will he bring with him the investment that these businesses deserve for their confidence in north-east Wales as an area?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question and mourn the collegiality of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport now that I have crossed on to the Front Bench. I share his admiration for the work of those companies; I had the great pleasure of visiting Airbus only a week or so ago. I would be delighted to visit his area in due course. The Government support those strategic industries in many different areas.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): In view of the announcement made by the Department for Transport this morning that parts of the west coast main line might not be electrified until 2024, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is essential that each infrastructure project dovetails with another? The third runway at Heathrow might well be built before the west coast main line is fully electrified.

Jesse Norman: I absolutely take my hon. Friend's point, but these issues need to be considered in the round and there are provisions in the current structure for local funding to allow areas to share visions and investment potential.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The Government know how important the energy sector is to the north-east and in the past have made commitments about insisting on local content in projects such as offshore wind. What are they doing to assess, monitor and, if necessary, impose penalties when promises of local content are not met?

Jesse Norman: The Government have a rigorous assessment process for local content. Most recently, the Hinkley Point C station was subject to provisions for more than 60% local content. If the hon. Lady knows of any instances in which the Government are not following up on this, she is welcome to write to the Department.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (**Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**) about the west coast main line, may I ask about parts of the Great Western railway that have similarly been deferred this morning, which is not great news for our region? As the Secretary of State develops an industrial strategy for the south-west, will he agree to meet MPs from that region and perhaps support us in changing the mind of the Department for Transport?

Jesse Norman: I cannot speak for the Secretary of State, but the hon. Gentleman will know that several of the LEPs are my responsibility. I meet them regularly, and will continue to champion their interests.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Minister outline what discussions about infrastructure investment have taken place with devolved regions and with the Chancellor in advance of the autumn statement?

Jesse Norman: I have had the opportunity to meet both Invest Northern Ireland and the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland, and those conversations continue. I cannot speak for colleagues, but they also have a responsibility for the devolved Administrations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In last night's Adjournment debate led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) failed to tell the House that he would honour the Government's pledge to electrify the midland main line north of Kettering. There is cross-party support for this scheme, which has the best ratio of investment to benefits in the whole country. This is the third question we have had this morning about rail electrification. Will the Minister liaise urgently with the Department for Transport to get these schemes back on track?

Jesse Norman: Of course the Government recognise the concern that has been raised. This is a matter for the Department for Transport, but I have no doubt that it will be attending closely to today's proceedings.

Counterfeit and Substandard Electrical Goods

5. **Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking before the Christmas retail period to prevent counterfeit and substandard electrical goods from being sold. [907117]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The Government take consumer protection seriously, and robust legislation requires consumer products to be safe. My Department funds trading standards to prevent high-risk products from entering the UK. This month's national consumer week, starting on 28 November, will focus consumer awareness on faulty electrical goods, in time for the peak Christmas retail period.

Carolyn Harris: I thank the Minister for that answer. She will be aware that, as chair of the all-party group on home electrical safety, I have a keen interest in faulty, substandard and counterfeit goods. Last year's hoverboards debacle highlights to us the dangers of internet sales. Will the Minister consider talking to her colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about introducing measures in the Digital Economy Bill to help prevent such incidents?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and congratulate her on the work of the home electrical safety all-party group. Manufacturers are required by law to take corrective action when they discover a fault, whether the fault emerges in products sold online or in the high street. In addition to local trading standards, we fund National Trading Standards, which prevents many substandard products from coming into the UK. I will liaise with colleagues in DCMS about the issue that she raises this morning and report back to her in due course.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is right, as ever, especially on this point. This is not just about safety. There is a disincentive for firms to undertake research and development and develop products if they are then

going to be counterfeited. Is not the moral of the story that people should not buy cheap products from back-street traders but go to renowned department stores—perhaps those which are never knowingly undersold?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for that advertisement for the John Lewis Partnership. I assure the House that there are many other retailers that consumers can trust, and I think I will leave my answer at that.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We would not want to give the impression that poor-quality goods are bought from small businesses. We know that small businesses do an excellent job, and the Minister is right to make that point. She is right about the impact on consumers, but does she recognise that where there is a failure to follow standards it is often British manufacturers that are undercut by cheap imports from overseas? What does she intend to do as we head forward to ensure that coming out of the EU does not mean that standards slip and British manufacturers are unfairly treated?

Margot James: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that all standards derived from the EU that are considered by the UK Government to be necessary, as the vast majority will be, will continue to be enforced. I can reassure him also that National Trading Standards plays a vital role in cross-boundary enforcement, and the intelligence-led approach prevents many of those products from coming into the country in the first place.

Manufacturing: Leaving the EU

6. **Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP):** What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK's decision to leave the EU on the manufacturing sector. [907118]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The UK is the ninth largest manufacturing nation in the world. My colleagues and I will continue to engage with UK manufacturing and other sectors to understand their priorities in shaping a successful Brexit and an industrial strategy that is effective in supporting competitiveness.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Nissan's special deal is, of course, good news for workers there and for that sector, but does the Minister agree that my constituents in the manufacturing sector deserve a similar deal? Will he therefore provide this House with a full list of assurances given to the company and all the details provided to those investigating the potential state aid implications of that deal, so that we can assess the implications of that work for our overall manufacturing sector?

Mr Hurd: We ran through this last week in the statements that the Secretary of State made. The senior Nissan Europe executive Colin Lawther was very clear that the company had received no special deal, and the Secretary of State spelled out clearly the basis of the assurances given—three were about the automotive sector and one was about Brexit and our determination to make sure that in those negotiations we do not undermine the competitiveness of key industries.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that since the referendum, manufacturing has already had a Brexit dividend as a result of the fall in the value of the pound, which makes our exports much cheaper and imports more expensive, so people who produce stuff in this country have a price advantage already?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The CBI surveys and others are encouraging, but we are determined not to be complacent. Clearly, Brexit raises a number of questions and there are a number of concerns out there in sectors across the economy. It is the responsibility of this Department to engage fully with the sectors to understand their priorities for the negotiations.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Ministers should come to the beating heart of manufacturing in this country in Huddersfield. Throughout the country manufacturers are in turmoil post-Brexit. There is no Government policy and no preparation. We are going to lose markets all over Europe and replace them with nothing.

Mr Hurd: That is a very defeatist statement from someone whom I associate with sunny optimism. It is a priority for the Secretary of State that Ministers get out there and engage with areas and with LEPs to understand their priorities fully. The hon. Gentleman is too defeatist about the competitiveness of British manufacturing.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): As Britain leaves the European Union, the high-value manufacturing catapult centres will play a key role in protecting innovation in the manufacturing sector. Will the Minister continue to support these centres, so that we protect our competitiveness in the future?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the catapult centres. We are extremely proud of them and we gave a manifesto commitment to continue to support them. They play a fundamental role in our vision of an innovation-led economy.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): UK goods and foods can compete on quality and cost with any in the world, but freight charging can remove the cost-quality advantage. Will Ministers carry out an assessment of freight charging in other countries for the export of manufactured goods and what advantage that would give to Northern Ireland and other regions?

Mr Hurd: The Department is and will continue to be rigorous in engaging with sectors across the economy to understand the issues of competitiveness and to understand where playing fields can be levelled, so that that can inform the negotiating strategy and the industrial strategy.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): An end to uncertainty for Nissan workers is deeply welcome, but there are millions of workers who want to know if they, too, have a future, and there are thousands of employers who are holding back from investment decisions, as the Engineering Employers Federation's survey has demonstrated, until they, too, know the future. Will the Government act to end uncertainty, spelling out precisely

how they will defend British manufacturing interests, otherwise it will be workers and their companies who will pay the price in Brexit Britain?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. Of course, as a west midlands MP, he sits at the heart of a region that is being very dynamic and organised in expressing its determination to compete aggressively. Let me reassure him. I recognise the uncertainty—Brexit does create tremendous uncertainty and we need to recognise that—but it is the responsibility of the Government, and my Department in particular, to liaise closely with sectors across the economy and the regions to understand their priorities and inform the negotiating strategy.

Innovation and Research: Science

7. **Nicky Morgan** (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage innovation and research in science; and if he will make a statement. [907120]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government are committed to making the UK the best place for science research and innovation. To achieve that, as my right hon. Friend knows, we are investing £30 billion over the course of this Parliament. We are also strengthening our research and innovation system by creating a new body, UK Research and Innovation.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for that reply. In March the former Life Sciences Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), visited the Charnwood campus in Loughborough, the former AstraZeneca site, and invited it to become the country's first life sciences opportunity zone, a hub for innovation and research in science. That bid is now on the Secretary of State's desk, and I ask him to look on it favourably.

Mr Hurd: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that the Government remain extremely interested in life sciences opportunity zones and that we were extremely impressed by the leadership that Charnwood campus has shown in preparing its bid, which has great potential. I am assured that my colleague, the Minister for Universities and Science, is well aware of the bid and expects to make an announcement shortly.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): So advanced is UK innovation and scientific knowledge that, prior to the referendum, this country made £3.5 billion more in grants for science and innovation than it put into EU funds. That is now all up in the air, and there is despair in some areas of UK science about the disentanglement that Brexit will cause and the threats to integrated innovation and science budgets. What can the Minister say to reassure us? What is the plan?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady makes an extremely important point about the funding for science research and innovation in this country. I think that she recognises that the science research budget has been protected in real terms, which is an extremely important commitment. We understand fully the concerns of the science community, which have been expressed to us clearly. Again, it is our responsibility to engage with those concerns and represent

them. I can assure her that it is clear to us that science research and innovation is at the heart of our industrial strategy.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): The Cheshire science corridor, which includes Alderley Park, the AstraZeneca site in Macclesfield and Daresbury, is strongly supported by the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government support that key initiative and that life sciences will be a vital part of the northern powerhouse?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the leadership he has shown in championing that agenda. He will know from his conversations with the former Life Sciences Minister and the current Secretary of State, who is committed to the agenda, that that remains very important to the Government.

Carbon Monoxide Alarms

8. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What plans he has to make compliance with the BS EN 50291 safety standard mandatory for all carbon monoxide alarms that are placed on the market in the UK. [907122]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Carbon monoxide poisoning is a very serious issue. Detectors must be safe, but currently compliance with the standard is not mandatory. I will consider any evidence the hon. Gentleman has and discuss it with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, who are responsible for the construction products regulations.

John Mc Nally: I thank the Minister for that answer. I know that the Department takes a keen interest in this issue, which is a matter of concern to the whole nation. She will be aware that in November last year the BBC reported on the dangers of substandard carbon monoxide detectors being purchased online, and *Which?* magazine has recently highlighted the problem as well. Given the potential for loss of life, what extra measures can she take here and now to stop the purchase of substandard detectors in the UK?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I will definitely discuss the matters he raises further with the Department for Communities and Local Government. I am aware of the *Which?* inspection involving various tests, which found some equipment to be defective. However, last year the Government brought forward the smoke and carbon monoxide alarm regulations, covering private landlords; at least private tenants now have the absolute protection of carbon monoxide alarms being in every room used as living accommodation where solid fuel is used.

Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon Project

9. **Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): What his Department's policy is on the future of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon project. [907123]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): We will consider the findings of the independent review of tidal lagoons, due to report by the end of this year, before

deciding how to proceed on the proposed Swansea bay tidal lagoon project. We hope that the review will contribute to and help develop the evidence base for that technology. That will ensure, with luck, that all future decisions made regarding tidal lagoon energy are in the best interests of the UK and represent value for money to the consumer.

Mr Williams: I thank the Minister for that response. He knows, I am sure, how important the project is to Swansea bay and Wales, and its potential for very good news for the renewable sector across the UK. Despite the somewhat gloomy timetable—the end of the year, the Minister says—does he anticipate that the Hendry review will give the Government the assurances that they need to deliver their manifesto promise and proceed with a pioneering project that is critical to the south Wales economy and the future of the UK energy mix? In short, can we get on with it?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that helpful clarification at the end. It is widely understood that there is support for the project among many colleagues. The Government have received an early draft, but we await receipt of the final report, which is due by the end of the year. We will give it the careful consideration that such an important issue deserves.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): We have a tremendous opportunity in front of us if we are ambitious to create the world's first tidal energy industry here in the United Kingdom. Does my hon. Friend agree that key to making this work is recognising that the Swansea project is essentially a pathfinder and that the future lagoons, which will all be larger, will bring down the costs very significantly?

Jesse Norman: Yes, that has been widely suggested. It is fair to say that the issues being addressed by the review are complex and relate to a new and untried technology—potentially, a place-specific technology. The Government will need to look closely at the review's specific conclusions and how far they can be generalised as part of a wider strategy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The future of the British steel industry depends on the approval of vital cutting-edge projects such as the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Will the Secretary of State please now call time on the two years of prevarication, commit to a timely and positive decision, and ensure that that decision is included in the autumn statement on 23 November?

Jesse Norman: Of course, in the context of the steel industry, it is important to recognise the commitment that the Government have made to Hinkley Point C—a major industrial commitment of their own. I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point, but we are not going to be railroaded into going beyond the timetable that has already been described. An orderly process is in place, a highly respected former Minister is running the thing, and we will be looking at the issue with the care and consideration that it deserves.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is reliable, it is green, it would form an important part of our energy mix—and it would boost the south-west economy to boot: will the Minister support it?

Jesse Norman: I am tempted by my hon. Friend's enticing fly, but I am not going to take it because the process must be given the proper consideration that it deserves. One of the key questions that the Hendry review and its consideration will need to address is whether the project offers proper value for money. I notice that that was not included in my hon. Friend's list of enticing benefits.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Swansea bay tidal lagoon would power 155,000 Welsh homes for 120 years, sustain 2,232 construction and manufacturing jobs and safeguard our steel industry. Will the Government now give Swansea bay tidal lagoon the green light and trigger the new dawn of an industry worth £15 billion to Wales and the UK?

Jesse Norman: I am loving the rhapsodic language that the hon. Lady uses; to it I counterpose the boring bureaucracy of due process and proper consideration.

Business Growth Strategy

10. **Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What steps his Department has taken to develop a long-term strategy for business growth since the UK's decision to leave the EU. [907124]

11. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps his Department has taken to develop a long-term strategy for business growth since the UK's decision to leave the EU. [907125]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): We are creating a business environment that supports growth and investment by cutting corporation tax, by investing in infrastructure, by expanding our world-beating science, research and innovation activities, by increasing the number of apprenticeships, and by devolving power all across Britain. Our industrial strategy will build on these strengths, and we will work with industry, local leaders, investors, workers and consumers to build the conditions for future success.

Carol Monaghan: In Scotland, skills shortages in key areas have proved challenging when businesses are seeking to grow. The post-study work visa remains an important lever for promoting innovation and growth. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is now time to extend the post-study work visa pilot to include Scottish higher education institutes?

Greg Clark: It is important that we attract the world's brightest and best students to our fantastic universities, and all of us in the Government have a commitment to that. We have visa arrangements in place so that people can work in graduate jobs after that, and it is important that they should be able to do so.

Stuart C. McDonald: Up to 100,000 jobs across the UK will be at risk if Brexit causes London to lose euro-denominated clearing business. The loss of that clearing business will also mean the loss of much of the financial markets' infrastructure. What urgent action are the Government taking to stave off these dangers?

Greg Clark: I am glad to hear that question from the hon. Gentleman, because it is true that the success of the financial services is not just about the City of London, but extends across the whole United Kingdom and, of course, Scotland. That is why it is important, in our negotiations, that we achieve the best possible deal to allow financial institutions, wherever they are in this country, to continue to trade freely across the EU.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can I put in a plug for free markets and laissez-faire as the best long-term strategy?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend does not need to make a plug for that. It is free markets and the knowledge that this is a competitive place to do business that accounts for our world-beating status in the G7 at the moment.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Government regularly, and in my view rightly, promote the aviation and automotive sectors as future areas of growth in the UK economy. The world-class oil and gas industry, and particularly the exceptional supply chain, which, while centred in Aberdeen, stretches the length and breadth of the UK, is another area ripe for international development and diversification. When developing his industrial strategy, will the Secretary of State make sure that oil and gas is right at the heart of it?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I have visited Aberdeen already, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and I had a very fruitful conversation with not only the oil and gas industry there, but the Aberdeen chamber of commerce. It is important that this area of great strength for the UK is built on and that we extend those strengths, so that the industry can be competitive in the future.

Callum McCaig: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I look forward to progress on that issue. However, whether it is oil and gas, food and drink, or the financial services sector, the attraction and retention of talent, much of which comes from elsewhere in the European Union, is absolutely central to that future. Businesses, I am sure, are saying the same things to me as they are to him. Will he ensure that we protect the status of EU nationals in discussions about leaving the EU?

Greg Clark: Yes. The Prime Minister and my colleagues have been very clear about that. Of course we want people from the European Union who are here to continue to stay, but it is important that this is part of the discussions that we have to make sure that the rights of UK residents overseas are also recognised.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): My right hon. Friend is quite right to address the importance of the oil and gas industry to Scotland, and it is also important to East Anglia. In the North sea, there are significant tax issues, which are making it harder to transfer some assets to new investors due to their near-term exposure to decommissioning. Will he liaise with his colleagues in the Treasury to come forward with proposals in the autumn statement to remove this constraint to much-needed investment?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend will recognise that, over recent years, there has been considerable progress and agreement between the sector and the Treasury to ensure that we have the best possible tax regime for the UK continental shelf. That will continue, and we will make sure that the regime remains competitive.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Our economy is desperately in need of more long-term strategic thinking, decision making and far less reliance on free markets and the laissez-faire approach that was mentioned earlier; I am grateful for the Secretary of State's response to his colleague's comments. Yet for many businesses the long term is currently a "maybe" rather than a certainty, as the uncertainty arising from Brexit places investment and survival in grave doubt. Will the Secretary of State give all companies the Nissan treatment and say how he will support all our businesses and industries through Brexit?

Greg Clark: I am disappointed with that question. Perhaps it was rewritten by Seumas Milne when the hon. Gentleman was not looking—that might account for it. He knows very well that I will be vigorous and active right across the economy in promoting Britain as a good and competitive place to do business. That is our responsibility in government, and no one will discharge it with more vigour than me.

Small Businesses

12. **Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to increase opportunities for the development of small businesses. [907126]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): We are committed to creating the best environment for small businesses to start and grow. The British Business Bank has provided £3.2 billion of finance to over 51,000 small businesses. The doubling of the small business rate relief will mean that 600,000 small and medium-sized enterprises will pay no rates at all.

Mark Pawsey: The Minister will be pleased to hear from Rugby's local chamber of commerce that our businesses are doing well—so well, in fact, that there is a shortage of industrial accommodation, especially smaller units, and that is holding back start-ups and small businesses wanting to grow. Can any steps be taken to encourage property developers to provide more accommodation for this important sector?

Margot James: My hon. Friend works tirelessly for businesses in Rugby, and it is great to hear about their growth. I urge him to get in touch with the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP. When I visited it in September, I was advised that the Coventry and Warwickshire growth hub is providing support to local businesses that are expanding and looking to move premises.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): According to the Federation of Small Businesses, of those small businesses that export, 82% export to other EU member states. What plan does the Minister have to support small businesses through Brexit?

Margot James: According to the World Bank, the UK is now ranked first in the G7 and seventh out of 190 countries for ease of doing business, and that includes trade and exports, whether to the EU or outside the EU. We achieved that status while belonging to the EU, and I have no doubt that the Government are doing all they can to ensure that we will retain that status as we transition to a new relationship with the EU.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): On Small Business Saturday, I will launch my third annual small business competition in Penwortham. May I invite the Minister to join me on that day? What is the Department doing to promote Small Business Saturday?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for her plans to get involved in Small Business Saturday on the first Saturday of December. My Department will support Small Business Saturday with events across the country to which hon. Members are invited. In particular, they should contact their LEPs to see what is going on locally and join the hon. Lady, and all of us, in visiting a small business on the first Saturday in December.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): In the United States, 23% of federal Government direct spending is with small businesses; in this country, the like-for-like direct comparison is just under 11%. Is it not time that we learned from President Obama's success in government? If we did, we would improve quality and value for money for the taxpayer, support growth for small firms and help rebalance the economy. That is what I call a plan.

Margot James: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to invest more in support for SMEs, and that is precisely what we intend to do in my Department.

Business Growth: North of England

14. **Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support the growth of businesses in the north of England. [907128]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our investments in the northern powerhouse continue to support the growth of businesses in the north and are helping to build an economy that works for all.

Kevin Hollinrake: Work on Yorkshire's largest economic project—a potash mine on the North York Moors—and the drilling of the UK's first shale gas well since 2011 are both planned to commence early in 2017, but much of the associated traffic will travel down a single lane of the A64. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and representatives from the Department for Transport and the Treasury to see how we can make sure we have the necessary infrastructure upgrades to support those key economic developments?

Greg Clark: It would be a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend. One of the reasons why we have created the local enterprise partnerships and the growth deals is to

make sure that the investment in infrastructure can go alongside economic development, and that is a big step forward.

19. [907136] **Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Businesses in the north-west of England have expressed to me their concern about Ofgem's announcement that local generators will no longer receive embedded benefits, which reflect their local generation and transmission. There has been no consultation on these proposals. Will the Secretary of State undertake to consult local businesses before any changes are introduced?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows that when it comes to energy, it is very important that we have regard to the costs that are incurred by consumers, whether they are private residential consumers or businesses. That is why these decisions have to be taken to contain the costs that would be on bills.

Clean and Reliable Energy

15. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the increased use of clean and reliable energy sources. [907131]

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government are committed to upgrading our energy infrastructure to make sure it is reliable, affordable and increasingly clean. The phasing out of coal and our commitment to new nuclear and new renewables through the next round of contract for difference auctions are key milestones in the energy transition that is under way.

Edward Argar: Tidal power represents one of the cleanest and most reliable types of green renewable energy. I am sorry to bring the Minister back to this topic, but may I again press him, due process notwithstanding, to make his decision on the future of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project as swiftly as possible?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his persistence in pressing this point. I have nothing to add to the bureaucratic prose that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), has placed so elegantly on the record. We will look at the matter seriously.

Mr Speaker: The Chair of the Select Committee, no less: Mr Iain Wright.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): The UK has slipped to 14th place in Ernst and Young's renewable energy country attractiveness index. It is our lowest ever placing, behind the likes of Chile and Morocco. EY states that various Government actions, as well as Brexit, "have dealt a blow to the country's already floundering renewable energy sector and its attractiveness in the eyes of investors."

I know that the Minister, who is committed to this issue, will be concerned about that. What steps are the Government actively taking and what steps will be taken soon to secure energy confidence and investment to ensure that this promising and vital sector can flourish?

Mr Hurd: It is good to see the hon. Gentleman back safe and sound from his visit to Sports Direct.

I refute the point that the hon. Gentleman makes; it is worth recognising that the average annual investment in renewables has more than doubled in the past five years, with an average of £9 billion invested each year in UK-based renewables. We have made extraordinary strides in building renewable capacity in this country under this Government, and we expect to announce further steps shortly.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Another source of clean renewable energy is geothermal and Cornwall is the best place in the country for its development. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the Government's support for the development of geothermal in Cornwall, and—even better—will he come and visit?

Mr Hurd: I know my hon. Friend to be a great champion of his area and of innovation there. Cornwall has interesting assets in relation to geothermal. I have written to him, but I can place on record here that the answer is yes.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): On clean energy, we are close to the first anniversary of the announcement by the Secretary of State's predecessor that all unabated coal generation would close by 2025 and that a consultation on that closure would be launched in spring 2016. As we can see, it is not spring any more, and no consultation appears to be in sight. Is that because the Department is reconsidering his predecessor's commitment, or because the Department has not got around to writing the consultation yet?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman will not have to wait much longer for the answer to that question. The Government are committed to the transition from coal to clean energy. In fact, he will know that this year is the first in which we will generate more electricity from renewable energy than we do from coal.

Topical Questions

T1. [907138] **Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): In the first 100 days since the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was created, we have made substantial progress across all our responsibilities. We have confirmed Hinkley Point C, the first new nuclear power station for a generation. We have seen British engineering praised following Nissan's decision to produce the Qashqai and the X-Trail at its Sunderland plant. We have ratified the Paris agreement on climate change to keep the global temperature rise to below 2° C. With the national minimum wage increasing and the number of UK businesses at a record high, this Department is investing in our long-term industrial growth in an economy that works for everyone.

Stuart Andrew: This week, a delegation from the University of Leeds is focusing on encouraging research partnerships with businesses and academics in India, as part of the Prime Minister's visit. Will my right hon.

Friend join me in commending Leeds University and businesses in the city for helping to build a reputation for the city as an excellent centre for learning and innovation?

Greg Clark: I will indeed join my hon. Friend in congratulating the University of Leeds. In fact, I initiated this week's tech summit in India during a visit to India two years ago, so I am delighted that it is taking place. I took a party of vice-chancellors with me on that occasion. He is absolutely right that Leeds plays a formidable part in the scientific excellence of the north.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that no walls or media devices have been harmed in the formulation of this question—nor have they ever been.

In the light of the enthusiasm for workers' rights expressed in yesterday's debate by the Secretary of State, will he join me in offering his support to delivery riders? These workers are seeking union recognition as part of their fight against bogus self-employment and to secure employment rights, such as sick pay and holiday pay. Will he commit his Government to helping in whatever way they can?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman might have noticed that we have commissioned a review of these new employment practices, which Labour did not do when it was in government. There is perhaps a problem for him in that the review is being led by Matthew Taylor. I do not know whether the former head of the policy unit under Tony Blair counts as a person he trusts with the review; nevertheless, he is engaged with the review and will report to the Government and to the House.

T2. [907139] **Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** Returning to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project, does the Minister agree that a decision to proceed, making use of expertise in power generation provided by GE Energy in Rugby, would provide an opportunity for the UK to become a leader in this sector?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): I will not add to what we have already said about the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, but I want to celebrate—the industrial strategy will celebrate—the work of world-leading companies such as GE Energy in my hon. Friend's constituency and their capacity to benefit from opportunities arising from low-carbon technologies.

T3. [907140] **Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** I have always got on very well with the Secretary of State, but may I ask him not to be complacent? I have just been to a meeting of the leaders of Russell Group universities, who are saying that the sector is in meltdown post-Brexit in terms of staff, students, and research and innovation. What is the plan? I am known for asking, "What's the plan, Stan?" What is his plan to put this right?

Greg Clark: Our universities and scientific institutions continue to be the best in the world. We are opening the Francis Crick Institute this very week, which is an emblem of our leadership in this sector. As the hon. Gentleman will see as we discuss our industrial strategy

in the weeks and months ahead, I am determined that reinforcing the position of scientific excellence and innovation will be central to our economy and to how we project the strategy forward.

T6. [907143] **Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con):** A key factor in the success of any industrial strategy is the ability of business and industry to access the communications and technical infrastructure they need to succeed. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure such access?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are to maintain and build on our position of excellence, we cannot be complacent about supporting infrastructure, including digital infrastructure. In my view, it needs an upgrade.

T5. [907142] **Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab):** The digital economy makes a big contribution in the UK, including in east London, with 43% of its exports going to other EU states. How do the Government plan to protect those exports after we have left the EU?

Jesse Norman: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that our digital infrastructure is critical to this country and its long-term economic and industrial strategy. I draw his attention to the report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which I used to chair, on BT's under-investment in Openreach. If he thinks that there are specific questions to address, we should revisit them after he has seen the industrial strategy.

T7. [907144] **Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** As the UK is now only 60% self-sufficient in food production, what are the Government's strategies to encourage the next generation to enter farming and help them to invest in future food production, and therefore help to safeguard our food security?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a vital part of the economy. It is very important that more young people are brought into farming and given the chance to do this extraordinarily interesting and valuable pursuit. This country is highly food secure. The Government support new and young farmers through the increased basic payment scheme payments and are committed to increasing the number of apprenticeships in food and farming. I cannot resist adding that I hope that people will have a chance, in due course, to study agri-tech at the New Model in Technology and Engineering institute in Herefordshire.

T8. [907145] **Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab):** Ministers spoke earlier about securing the best possible trade deal for the UK in the context of Brexit, but what evidence does the Secretary of State have that a new UK-EU trade agreement can be completed within two years? Do the Government accept that if such an agreement is not possible, an interim transitional arrangement will be required?

Greg Clark: We first have to make sure, through consultation with business, industry and other groups across the country, that we get our negotiating mandate informed and right. Then we need to begin the negotiations, and then we can make those judgments.

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will publish discussion papers on the industrial strategy as soon as possible and that they will reflect contributions made by Members who took part in the recent debate in the House?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I thank my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, including members of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which is doing an inquiry into this. If an industrial strategy is to endure in the long term, it needs to be rooted in as great a consensus as can be achieved around it, and of course that will include contributions from Members of this House, and organisations and individuals outside it. I will engage them in those discussions over the months ahead.

T9. [907146] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Thousands of Marks & Spencer staff will be worried this morning by the announcement of the threat of closure facing 60 branches that have not been identified. In the light of the disgraceful treatment of BHS staff, what more can the Minister do to encourage Marks & Spencer to consult and engage fully with staff trade unions at the earliest opportunity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Marks & Spencer has a good record of consulting its staff. It has a regional, a local and a national body, and it consults them widely on all its plans for any changes in terms and conditions. I would add that it is rather unfair on Marks & Spencer to put it in the same bracket as BHS.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Many people in Suffolk welcome plans for a Sizewell C power station, but would the Minister not agree that it is vital that with those plans come the requisite improvements in rail and road infrastructure? Importantly, that includes looking at the pinch points on the road around the four villages of Stratford St Andrew, Farnham, Little Glemham and Marlesford.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the changes that we have made, through the growth deals and local enterprise partnerships, has been to bring major investment in line with major infrastructure improvements.

T10. [907147] **Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Government delays mean that almost two years have passed since the last contract for difference auction in support of offshore wind. That situation is undermining investor confidence. Will the Minister confirm that the next offshore wind auction will take place no later than January next year?

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): I repeat the reassurance that I gave earlier to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), whom I should have welcomed to his brief. The Government remain committed to renewable energy and will be coming forward shortly with an announcement to prove that.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The planning process for building combined cycle gas turbines on sites where coal-fired power stations have historically been situated is complex and takes too long. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss the issue and how his Department and the Department for Communities and Local Government can work together to address this matter?

Jesse Norman: Yes, I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Our wonderful resurgent ceramics industry, which produces high-tech cutting-edge ceramics for the future generations, is carefully watching the Government's Brexit plans. What discussions is the right hon. Gentleman and his Department having with the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU about trade barriers, protectionist dumping by the Chinese and the wider needs of the ceramic industry?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that ceramics is a major source of competitive advantage for this country. Whenever I am in Stoke-on-Trent and the potteries, I am always impressed by the innovation that is going on there. Of course, the ceramics industry will be very well represented around the table as the Cabinet Committee considers Brexit.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): There are so many advantages to Brexit that I do not know where to begin, but one of them is that we will be able to provide state aid, which we are forbidden from doing at the moment. Has my right hon. Friend considered that particular area of support?

Greg Clark: I want our economy to be as competitive in the future as it is now, without the need for state aid to keep it so. It is on the basis of our strengths in innovation, the talent of our workforce and the industries in which we are competitive that I want us to compete with the best in the world.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): During the Select Committee visit to the Shirebrook facility of Sports Direct yesterday, the positive seeds of change that we witnessed on the frontline regarding workers' rights in the facility were contradicted by control-freakery and the surveillance of the MPs on that trip, which completely ruined all the positive things that have been happening there. We saw the surveillance of a private meeting of MPs. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is no place for this kind of behaviour in the senior parts of big business in this country, which should be outward looking and engaging with the community, not surveilling it?

Greg Clark: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I find what has been reported this morning to be extraordinary, especially for a company that has made declarations that it wants to improve its reputation and image. I merely point out that I do not think that this practice is representative. The practices in that company that the Select Committee has uncovered should not be taken as representative of the very high standards of behaviour that almost every company in Britain adheres to.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has highlighted, Ofgem's review of embedded benefits and grid changes is in danger of having unintended consequences. One of these is the roll-out of energy storage. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look into this particular problem?

Jesse Norman: Yes.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State look urgently at today's announcement by the Royal Bank of Scotland on its funding of repayments to small businesses? Will he produce a report on the Government's response and place it in the Library, so that we can see the Government's view of this approach by RBS?

Greg Clark: I have not seen the report. I will have to consider it and I will then, of course, write to the right hon. Gentleman with my reaction to it.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I commend to the Secretary of State and his team the final report of the Energy and Climate Change Committee, and particularly our recommendations on energy storage and demand-side management. I encourage my right hon. Friend to enact some of those recommendations, so that we can upgrade our energy system.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend provides me with an opportunity to thank all members of that Select Committee for their forensic work during its time in this House. It made very valuable contributions to public policy, and I know that its successor Committee will continue the high standard that it set. I will indeed pay close attention to the recommendations of the final report.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The restoration and renewal of this building will be a multi-billion pound infrastructure project, but all the evidence suggests that at the moment this country does not have the skills to be able to deliver it. I urge the Secretary of State to set up a specific industrial strategy to get more colleges up and down the country engaged in training people for major infrastructure and construction businesses, so that we can make sure that every single one of our constituents has an opportunity to work here?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As we acquire what I hope will be growing order books for UK companies and businesses, we will be able to fulfil them by having a workforce that is trained and skilled to the right level. The hon. Gentleman illustrates that very well.

Speaker's Statement

12.34 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question, I should like to make a brief statement.

As the House will know, one of my priorities as Speaker is to support the development of emerging and developing democracies around the world. I believe that we all have a duty, as parliamentarians, to support and to champion those who are fighting for democracy in what are often difficult and challenging situations. Accordingly, I am pleased to inform the House that I am today launching a new initiative, the Speaker's Democracy Award. The intention is to allow the House to recognise and celebrate individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the development of democratic societies and institutions across the world. I will be writing to all Members later today with more information about the award, and to invite colleagues to suggest the names of individuals who should be considered for it.

I should like to thank, very warmly, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) for agreeing to serve with me on the Committee that will make the award, as well as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who initially suggested the idea to me. I hope that colleagues will nominate candidates, and thereby support this initiative to recognise those who are doing so much for the cause of democracy.

UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community

12.35 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the planned United Nations vote on the validity of a UN independent expert for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her question, and warmly welcome her reappointment to the Front Bench.

As the House may know, the issue before us concerns the United Nations Human Rights Council and its recent very welcome decision to create the post of independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity, or, in House parlance, what we could call LGBT. The person chosen for that role was Mr Viti Muntarbhorn, from Thailand. The United Kingdom was successfully re-elected to the Human Rights Council only last month, but we are now having to campaign in New York, where a group of African delegations have challenged the mandate of the independent expert and are trying to reverse the decision and the appointment. I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me an opportunity to explain the steps we are taking, which I am certain will enjoy the support of the whole House. We are obviously strongly opposed to this attempt to reverse the mandate and to block the final approval of the process—something that should be seen as straightforward and procedural.

Opponents of this important mandate misunderstand its nature, which is proportionate and was properly established by the Human Rights Council. Since Friday night, when we discovered that this was happening, the UK's entire diplomatic network has been making that point in every capital across the globe. Only this morning, for instance, my noble Friend Baroness Anelay, who is visiting Sri Lanka, secured the agreement of her hosts in Colombo to join us by supporting an amendment tabled by a group of Latin American countries, which were the main proponents of the appointment in the first place.

The Government, and all in the House, believe that the chance to live with dignity, free from violence or discrimination, should never be undermined by a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. All people are born with equal rights, and should enjoy the protection of the United Nations. Acts of violence against LGBT people take place in all regions of the world, including our own. We condemn such violence and discrimination, and we strongly support the new independent expert in his work. We will resist any and all attempts to block his appointment and his mandate.

Sarah Champion: I thank the Minister for his upfront declaration of the Government's intent on this matter. It is however frustrating that it took an urgent question to find out the Government's position.

As the Minister said, in June of this year the UN Human Rights Council adopted an historic resolution mandating the appointment of an independent expert

on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It effectively created the first ever UN LGBT human rights watchdog. The motion put before the UN General Assembly by the African nations today could reverse that decision, aiming to defer consideration of, and action on, this Human Rights Council resolution. The motion seeks to suspend, and potentially get rid of, the UN independent expert on LGBT violence and discrimination.

This motion has a realistic chance of passing, securing votes from the African Group and many of the nations within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. It is crucial that this matter should be raised in the Chamber because it is concrete evidence of the systematic attempt to frustrate the protection and advancement of LGBT human rights internationally.

In many countries persecution based on who people love or are sexually attracted to, or on their gender identity, is extreme. Often, this discrimination and violence is state-sanctioned. According to a UN human rights report last year, at least 76 countries retain laws that criminalise and harass people on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. This includes fines, torture, hard labour, forced “conversion” therapy, lifelong prison sentences, and the death penalty.

The UK is a tolerant country, yet according to Galop, a UK-based anti-violence LGBT charity, we have seen a 147% increase in hate crimes against LGBT people in July, August and September of this year, with one in four gay young people having experienced homophobic bullying. I know the Minister is as appalled as I am at these statistics and agrees with me that it is crucial symbolically, politically and practically that the actions of the UK put a stop to this persecution once and for all and that we are strong in our condemnation of this motion. So I ask the Government to take this opportunity to show zero tolerance to violence and discrimination against LGBT people in all its forms and offer a firm commitment to working with our international allies to eradicate violence, hatred and intolerance towards people based on their gender or sexuality.

I specifically ask the Secretary of State to clarify a couple of points. Has the UK’s position been made clear to other member states ahead of the potential vote, specifically the African nations? What work are the Government undertaking to promote LGBT rights abroad both through the UN and in regular interactions with individual nation states? Finally, does the Minister intend to make his view on the Africa Group motion public and will he make a statement following the General Assembly meeting today, to update the House on this matter?

Sir Alan Duncan *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like to think that the House of Commons is public. I think I understand that the hon. Lady would like further elaboration, but I hope we are public here, and I must say that the Minister has not knowingly been understated over the years or inclined to express himself quietly in the background—unlike me.

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think I dissent from a word the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has said; we are as one, and obviously I have a deep personal interest in this issue. I commend her on raising this matter for the very point Mr Speaker has just made:

we are making this public through the House and this is a very useful opportunity for the House to do so. May I also say that the hon. Lady is well-named for the purpose she has adopted today?

This issue has not been publicly aired in great detail already because it has sprung up rather suddenly; it is an emerging issue that requires fast-moving diplomatic effort. It is unusual for something to be decided in the Human Rights Council and then go to the General Assembly with that assembly used as a forum to try to block something. This does not normally happen, and indeed it should not happen in this way.

The hon. Lady asked whether the UK’s view is clear. I think it now is, and the view of a united House of Commons will redouble the view of the Government. We make our view on LGBT issues very clear in all our diplomatic representations overseas. For example, advancing the interests and rights of LGBT people is very much a part of many of our Department for International Development programmes. She asked whether we will make public what happens. I think that this will be followed, although whether it justifies a statement will depend on Mr Speaker. Our views will be very clear, however, and I can assure the House that we will be fighting in every capital in the world to ensure that this decision goes the right way.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): A depressing number of the countries that are likely to vote for this resolution are members of the Commonwealth. Can my right hon. Friend update the house on the work that is going on to persuade countries other than Sri Lanka not to vote for the resolution? What further work is the Foreign Office doing to take the Commonwealth countries on the same journey that the rest of the world is on in relation to rights for LGBT people?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is a long and continuing journey of persuasion for many Commonwealth countries, and it is always very disappointing that some of them do rather lag behind on this issue. I can assure my hon. Friend that every single post in our diplomatic network has been issued with clear instructions to make representations to get their country to vote in the right way in the General Assembly, where we expect the decision to take place either today or on Thursday.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): First, may I commend the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this urgent question? I should also like to commend the Minister for his response. It appears that we have finally found some common ground. The Scottish National party was delighted when the United Nations Human Rights Council delivered its historic vote in June mandating the appointment of an independent expert for the LGBT community. This reaffirmed one of the UN’s key principles that everyone is equal in dignity and in rights. Anyone who truly believes in equality knows that no single equality is more virtuous or more worthy than any other, and I am sure everyone across the Chamber will agree that we must stand up for them all.

We are deeply concerned that this progress has suffered a major setback with the group of African states planning to force a vote today in the General Assembly to revoke the appointment of the independent expert for the

[*Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh*]

LGBT community. Distressingly, the vote might pass, so the UK Government and the Foreign Secretary must do everything possible and use every possible channel to prevent this loathsome resolution from being approved. The Foreign Secretary's diplomacy skills are needed now more than ever. The Minister has mentioned Sri Lanka, and perhaps the Prime Minister has secured India's support during her trip to India. What other international counterparts have the UK Government spoken to ahead of the vote today? What efforts are they making to ensure support for a vote against the resolution? It is clear that the Minister understands that the UK's action on this matter is critical. Will he assure us that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will leave absolutely no stone unturned in ensuring equality for all?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am pleased and delighted to agree wholly with the hon. Lady. I can assure her that no stone will remain unturned. We are looking at a complete starburst of diplomatic effort to try to corral votes for this purpose in the General Assembly. Indeed, we are starting from an alliance of considerable diplomatic effort. We are proud to be a member of the new equal rights coalition, which is made up of more than 30 states, and we also contribute funds to support LGBT rights projects globally.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I was honoured to be present on behalf of the all-party group on global LGBT rights, which I chair, at September's high-level United Nations meeting. At that meeting, the Secretary-General applauded the appointment of the independent expert, saying that it was an "historic step". Is it not the case that so many of the groups that face discrimination across the world regard the stance of the United Nations on this matter as an immense encouragement in the promotion and valuing of human rights, and that the continuing appointment of the independent expert to translate international principles of humanitarian law into practical action and ensure that they are enforced will be immensely important?

Sir Alan Duncan: I wholly agree with my right hon. Friend, whose question gives me the opportunity to say that the chosen person, Mr Vitit Muntarbhorn, is a well-respected human rights campaigner of the highest quality and character. There are absolutely no grounds whatsoever for questioning the choice of him for this purpose.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that LGBT rights are human rights and that, as such, they are indivisible from any of the other human rights that we are so proud that the UN tries to enforce? Will he accept from me the very best wishes of the LGBT community in the battle he now leads within the UN? If this human rights advocate is voted against and taken away from the UN, that will be a huge setback in the fight to make change in the 76 countries that criminalise LGBT people and use the law to oppress them.

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree with the hon. Lady and am grateful for her good wishes. I hope that the vision of Members from across the Chamber agreeing on this issue will send out a strong message to any

country or person who thinks that they should vote the other way or have an opinion that goes against what we would like to see.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is it not the case that the UN expert is being appointed to protect individuals in many countries from violence based on their sexual orientation? He is not being appointed to promote or to take a particular view on sexual orientation in those countries. It will be a dark day for the United Nations if it turns its face away from somebody who is trying to protect those who should have the same rights that we enjoy in this country.

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The appointment is about protecting principles as he has described. How anyone can wish to challenge that is quite beyond me.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): When I was a Foreign Office Minister, I was told by one leader of a Commonwealth country that I would not be welcome to visit, so we have come quite a long way. I thank the Minister for what he is doing. Is it not time to make our generous aid conditional on respect for all humans' rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I obviously speak for the Foreign Office, not the Department for International Development, but I am a former DFID Minister. The issue of conditionality always raises the moral question of stopping money, but that would then harm the impoverished people we are trying to help. It is not as straightforward as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, but I take on board the importance of campaigning strongly and using any budget and expenditure to maximise our influence over this issue.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister and am glad to hear about the Government's stance. As someone who has been beaten unconscious some years ago because of his sexuality, I know how isolated one can feel after being attacked. Does the Minister agree that this appointment is incredibly important for people across the world who are being persecuted because of their sexuality?

Sir Alan Duncan: Unfortunately, people get persecuted or beaten up for their sexuality in all too many places. That is exactly what we, through our efforts abroad, and the United Nations want to stop. The appointment of this champion—if I may use that word again—is essential. We must ensure that no one is able to block it.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's strong statement and the powerful all-party support for what he has said today. I want to ask about a particular Commonwealth country: South Africa. After apartheid, South Africa adopted a constitution that included provisions against discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. What representations are the Government making to South Africa to encourage it to break with other African countries and vote for the amendment from the Latin American and Caribbean countries?

Sir Alan Duncan: My personal regional responsibilities do not include South Africa, so I am not familiar with the exact detail to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I have no doubt that he is absolutely accurate. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ensure that the responsible Minister writes to the hon. Gentleman.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Apart from certain African countries, how far beyond Africa into the middle east and Asia is this problem evident?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is broader than Africa. Of course, one does not always know everything in advance about how a country will vote. The process needs to be one that secures an assurance that countries will vote the right way. However, the issue obviously does go further and that is why every single diplomatic post where we have an ambassador and representation has been absolutely, clearly and unequivocally instructed to try to persuade their host country to vote the right way in the General Assembly.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister take this opportunity to celebrate the universality of rights relating to sexual orientation and gender identity? Will he press for them to be linked to existing human rights instruments?

Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman always cleverly hides a technicality in his question, but I certainly endorse universality. Such rights are inalienable and do not depend on where someone lives. Human rights are for everybody, regardless of age, location or anything else.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The sad truth is that gay men in particular are still being persecuted in Russia and beaten up by the police. Gay men in Iran are still being executed for their sexuality. Gay men in so many other countries around the world can be arrested or imprisoned simply for holding hands. I therefore entirely endorse everything that the Minister has said today. However, is it not a particular irony for British people that 90% of those who live in Commonwealth nations live in countries where homosexuality is illegal because we, the British, wrote those colonial laws? Is it not time that we took that as an important part of campaign for a better world?

Sir Alan Duncan: Many of those Commonwealth laws are totally out of date, highly inappropriate and should be changed. The Commonwealth system, our diplomatic efforts abroad and, indeed, this House, with all the contacts that individual Members of Parliament have across the world, should all be used to the full for that objective.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Over 400 million people live in countries where being gay is punishable by death, so I strongly welcome what the Minister

has said at the Dispatch Box today. I commend the Government's efforts to defeat the resolution. I want the Minister to consider two issues carefully. First, further to the points of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), what leadership role can the UK Government play within the Commonwealth to try to see further progress for LGBT people living in Commonwealth countries who are victims of rules written up by the British?

Secondly, will the Minister look at the advice that the Foreign Office gives to the Home Office on people seeking asylum in this country? A constituent of mine, Joan Tumwine Ayebare, a lesbian asylum seeker from Uganda, is currently at risk of deportation back to that country. She has been splashed across the front pages of the Ugandan press, and her life and safety would undoubtedly be at risk if she returned, so will he consider the advice and ask his colleagues in the Home Office to review that case in particular?

Sir Alan Duncan: No such representations have been made to the Home Office in the past, but I am sure that they will be. The hon. Gentleman's question also illustrates another human right: the right to life. It is therefore an essential part of our policy to oppose the death penalty in every single country where we make representations—particularly those in which we have interests and programmes on which we are spending money. The influence of the United Kingdom in the Commonwealth can go only so far in that its members are independent, self-governing countries. It is good that they are part of this broader organisation—the Commonwealth—but we have to use our influence as best we can and do not have complete power over them. Those days have long since gone. They are voluntary members of the Commonwealth, but I assure the House that we always use our best influence wherever we can and will continue to do so.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I concur with the remarks made by several Members about the Commonwealth. Will the Minister say a little more about Russia? In recent days, tweets have been put out by the Russian Foreign Ministry and repeated by Russia's embassy in this country that are disparaging and derogatory towards gay people—part of a pattern of behaviour by Putin. How confident is the Minister that other countries in Europe are not being influenced by the Putin propaganda that is on our Freeview channels every day and put out through the internet and social media?

Sir Alan Duncan: When a country's official apparatus adopts such attitudes and uses social media, it takes behaviour to utterly unacceptable new heights. We of course condemn any kind of attacks on gay people, but when they are perpetrated by a country and deliberately, it is even more deplorable than the many other ways in which we see such opinions expressed.

Points of Order

1 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Justice Secretary contacted you to say that she intends to make a statement to this House before recess on the crisis of violence and disorder in our understaffed prisons, in light of the disturbance at Bedford prison, and the murder at, and escapes from, Pentonville prison?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is: no, I have received no such indication. It is only fair to remind the House, and to point out to others who might not have been aware of the fact in the first place, that there was a statement by the Secretary of State last week—last Thursday, if my memory serves me correctly. It is true enough that there have been further incidences of violence since then, but there has not been a request to make a statement today. Doubtless these matters will be returned to, as appropriate, in due course.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, may I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in my capacity as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group? On 20 October, in business questions, I asked for a debate in Government time on reforms to the civil service compensation scheme. On 21 October, I wrote to the Paymaster General on behalf of the PCS parliamentary group seeking a meeting to discuss that issue. May I also remind you, Mr Speaker, that early-day motion 310 has the signatures of 99 Members of this House who are concerned about this issue? The Government intend today to issue a written statement which seeks automatically to impose changes to the terms and conditions of civil servants via reforms to

the civil service compensation scheme. That is being done without the agreement of 98% of public consultation respondents, of whom there were 3,000. Can you inform me whether the Paymaster General will come before the House to make an oral statement on this issue, so that hon. Members who are very concerned about it can raise questions? Or are there other mechanisms by which Members can raise this important issue on behalf of millions of public sector workers who deliver public services?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer to him is that if a Minister wished to make an oral statement to the House, I would have received notification of that intention by now. Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that a Minister is looking to make a statement to the House today. I am familiar with the issue to which the hon. Gentleman alludes. It would not be proper for me to enter into a debate about it. I note the particular facts that he places on the record, but I am aware of counter arguments to which Ministers subscribe. It is only fair to point out that this matter has been the subject of discussion over a considerable period; in other words, it has not suddenly arisen now. It does not seem likely that it will be treated of today by anyone other than the hon. Gentleman, but he has used the parliamentary mechanism open to him to register his concern. Doubtless, given that he is a tenacious terrier, he will return to the subject after he has rested himself.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He could get another signature.

Mr Speaker: He may, indeed, attract further signatures in the process, as the hon. Gentleman helpfully observes from a sedentary position.

Small and Medium Sized Co-operative Development

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

1.4 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a bill to remove the requirement for small co-operative societies to appoint lay auditors; to increase the threshold for co-operative societies to disapply the full audit requirement to the same level as PLCs; to require auditors to report contingent on a threshold of share capital instead of turnover or on a special resolution at a general meeting; and for connected purposes.

Co-operatives are owned and run by the people closest to them, who may be customers, employers, suppliers or local residents. They all have one thing in common: they own the business and have an equal say in what it does and how its profits are shared. Historically, the public perception of co-operatives has been largely determined by the Co-op retail movement, but there are now more than 7,000 co-operatives, with 15 million members, and they contribute an estimated £37 billion to the economy. They range widely, covering retail, agriculture, consumer-based enterprises, creative industries, supporters trusts, local community energy schemes, housing and community care.

It is striking that according to YouGov polling from February carried out by The Hive, a new business support group designed to start or grow co-operative organisations, some 58% of people say big businesses are out of control; 59% of people say they have no control over the economy, and that rises to 62% for those who say they have a lack of influence over business; and 68% of people in work feel they have no control in their workplace. On the other hand, 62% of people see co-operative businesses as fair, whereas only 11% say the same of plcs.

It is clear that co-operatives offer a solution. They give people control of the businesses they are closest to, whether they shop at them, work at them or supply them. They also give people control over things that matter to them, in the process boosting productivity, harnessing innovation and giving them a real stake in their business. That is the co-operative advantage.

Most political parties have recognised and acknowledged the advantages that the co-operative business model has over its plc counterparts. The Labour party has committed to working with the co-operative movement to double the size of the co-operative economy in government; this would take the sector from £40 billion or so to £80 billion. To do that, co-operatives need to compete with the plc business model on a level playing field. That has been a long-standing aim of the Co-operative party and a long-standing demand from the co-operative movement. Too often co-operatives come up against the regulation and legislation designed with other business forms in mind.

This Bill aims to ensure that smaller co-operatives enjoy the benefit of a level playing field and to help unleash the potential boost from co-operation to the UK economy through higher employee engagement, which, according to Co-operatives UK could be well over £50 billion. Furthermore, through levelling the

playing field for smaller co-operatives, the economy as a whole benefits from increased business innovation. Innovation accounts for 70% of long-term economic growth in the UK, and the most common sources of innovation are employees and customers.

There are thousands of smaller and medium-sized co-operatives in this country, all of which bring the benefits of the model I have already described to their communities, members and local economies. It is important to note that eight out of 10 co-operatives created in the last five years are still going strong. A combination of sharing risks, harnessing the ideas of many and the stake members have on their own business means that co-operatives demonstrate significant business resilience. My Bill calls for small but important changes to the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014. These changes and the removal of red tape will bring the treatment of co-operatives in line with that of other business models.

First, the Bill would remove the requirement for the very smallest co-operatives to appoint lay auditors. That would mean that the very smallest co-operatives, with a turnover under £5,000 a year, were treated the same way as small companies, and would not have to appoint lay auditors to scrutinise their accounts.

Secondly, it would level the playing field between co-operatives and other types of companies by increasing the turnover threshold at which co-operatives have to apply full audit requirements from £5.6 million turnover to £6.5 million. This change would put small co-operatives on the same footing as companies regarding the turnover threshold at which they have to appoint professional auditors.

Thirdly, the Bill would make the requirement on co-operatives for an auditor's report contingent on the amount of share capital raised by a co-operative rather than a turnover threshold. It would allow small co-operatives that have not raised significant share capital to grow without facing additional requirements that are not applied to small companies. It will also mean those co-operatives that have raised significant share capital will have to have a professional auditors' report.

To provide added protection to members, the law would give them the right to require an auditor's report regardless of the share capital by passing a resolution at a general meeting. I anticipate that these changes would benefit thousands of small co-operative societies around the country.

These legislative changes are designed to give further impetus to a business model and movement that are flourishing but are yet to achieve their full potential. There is a powerful argument for a dedicated team of civil servants to be set up within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to act as a champion for co-operatives and—in line with the Prime Minister's thinking—to examine ways of developing a more inclusive society that works for working people. The proposals in the Bill are small but critical to that approach.

On 3 December we will be celebrating small business Saturday. Let us give small co-operative businesses an additional reason to celebrate by supporting the Bill today.

Question put and agreed to.

[Mr Adrian Bailey]

Ordered,

That Mr Adrian Bailey, Mr Barry Sheerman, Mrs Louise Ellman, Stephen Doughty, Luciana Berger, Mr Gavin Shuker, Mr Gareth Thomas, Anna Turley and Christina Rees present the Bill.

Mr Adrian Bailey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February 2017 and to be printed (Bill 90).

Backbench Business

Grammar and Faith Schools

1.14 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes recent proposals by the Government to expand the role of grammar and faith schools; and calls on the Government to conduct a full assessment of the evidence relating to the effect of grammar schools and faith schools on children's learning.

Today's debate asks the Minister to consider the evidence before making profound changes to education policy that will affect children, their lives, their communities and our prospects as a country for many decades to come. There is a raft of evidence on the impact of grammar schools on the children in them, and on the children outside them. We know that children who get into grammar schools are more than five times less likely to be on free school meals. We know from the Department for Education itself that they are less likely to have special educational needs. We know that children who previously attended independent schools are over-represented in grammar school intakes. For these and many other reasons, we know that grammar schools, as the Government have at times acknowledged, and as the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) eloquently put it in a piece he wrote this morning, are not engines of social mobility.

Most children do not get into grammar schools, and the situation for disadvantaged children in this country is particularly stark. The Government's case, which appears to be based on the notion that an expansion of grammar school places increases parental choice, is pretty flawed and pretty limiting. If someone cannot get into a grammar school, its existence has not given them a choice—it has given them a problem. That the Government have a plan only for some children in this country was revealed pretty well by the Education Minister Lord Nash, who said recently that under the Government's plans parents will

“have a choice between a highly performing grammar school and a highly performing academy, which may well suit that pupil better.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 15 September 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1572.]

But where is the choice for children who do not get into those grammar schools?

The Secretary of State recently suggested that university technical colleges might provide an alternative. I welcome her focus on UTCs—I have one in my constituency, in Wigan—and given the recruitment problems many of them have faced, leading to the closure of three, and to two not even opening, and the fact that provision in them, which Sir Michael Wilshaw recently called “patchy”, ranges all the way from outstanding to poor, this is an area that deserves her attention. However, her proposal is troubling because, in essence, she is proposing the tripartite system of old, which collapsed last time, for many reasons, including because local authorities could not afford to establish and sustain that system. What in the funding crisis that this Government have created for local authorities makes her think that it would be different this time?

The new plans will create a great cost. We do not yet know, however, how much they will cost. In the consultation paper, the Government set out that they are planning to

allocate £50 million a year to this experiment in education. This morning, however, when he appeared before the Select Committee on Education, the Minister said that he did not know how many grammar schools might emerge. The Green Paper also suggests that the Department will ask independent schools or universities to set up new schools or sponsor others as part of its bid to get all schools up to standard. How much will that cost? So far, the Government do not know and have not said. At a time when school budgets are under serious pressure in communities around the country, this is simply not good enough.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The hon. Lady talks about the cost of the proposals. Is she aware that grammar schools such as those in Kent and in my constituency tend to get lower per-pupil funding under the funding formula? Even though they receive a relatively low financial settlement, the vast majority are outstanding schools giving an excellent education.

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Lady makes my point for me. Grammar schools tend to receive a lower funding allocation because, as the Minister has admitted, they tend not to take children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the funding formula is skewed to provide additional funding for children from such backgrounds. In 2016, in Britain, we can do better than this.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister who will reply to the debate was a member of the Select Committee when I was the Chair. We looked at this question and we specifically considered Kent, but we had the rule that we should have evidence-based policy. Where is the evidence that people in Kent or outside Kent benefit from an educational system that is split in this horrendous way?

Lisa Nandy: I do not always agree with my hon. Friend on these issues, but I certainly agree with him on that point. The issue of funding and how we spend resources that, as a result of choices made by this Government, are incredibly scarce, is important.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): One way in which funds can be spent appropriately is through faith schools. In Leicester we have St Paul's Catholic School, the Hindu Krishna Avanti Primary School, the Sikh Falcons Primary School and the Madani Muslim schools. It is important that if parents wish to send their children to faith schools, they are allowed to do so, but such schools should be vehicles for integrating communities; they should not be exclusive, but open.

Lisa Nandy: I agree with my right hon. Friend's point about integrating communities. This highlights the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). There are many types of school that provide a good education, and provided that they are inclusive, have a broad curriculum and work hard to serve the needs of their community, they do very well by their children. The important thing behind today's motion is that hon. Members on both sides of the House, most of whom are troubled by the Government's plans, but some of whom support them, would like the Government to proceed on the basis of evidence, especially as schools

face a £600 million black hole since the Government abandoned their Education Bill, leaving councils around the country to pay for educational services without the grants to do so.

In their consultation document, the Government make a number of wide-ranging commitments to support their grammar schools plan, but they have not said yet whether this will be new money from the Treasury, or money taken from a schools budget that is already being cut for the first time in nearly two decades. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who has consistently campaigned against the Government's proposals, has repeatedly asked for this information; could we finally have it today?

The Secretary of State is apparently consulting on the school funding formula at the same time. The Green Paper says:

"We will ensure that the formula rewards those schools that support schools with a higher proportion of lower attaining pupils and those from less wealthy households."

Surely the issue of funding should be resolved first. Surely we should know how big the funding pot is and how the funds will be allocated before we are asked to respond to a consultation and vote on proposals that will have profound consequences for children in this country.

There is also reason to believe that people travel further to attend grammar schools. What assessment have the Government done of the additional cost of transport for children under their proposals? The proposed pot is £50 million a year for new grammar schools, but how much in total do the Government plan to allocate to the whole programme? If adequate funding is not forthcoming, that is another reason why children may be well disadvantaged under the plans.

There are other reasons, based on the evidence, to believe that the proposals will make life worse for children in this country. In their consultation document, the Government rightly identified a group of children whose parents are struggling to get by, but who are not eligible for free school meals. That group is much larger since the Government restricted access to benefits. The proportion of pupils on free school meals is now at a 14-year low, despite the fact that there are record projections of child poverty. Having created a hidden group in hardship, Ministers are belatedly going looking for them. They state in their consultation that they plan to develop some kind of methodology to understand where the children are and what impact the new plans will have on them. The most polite thing that I can say about this utterly absurd situation is that Ministers are putting the cart before the horse. May I remind the Minister that it is only a few short years since his Department commissioned Dr Ben Goldacre to help it to ensure that evidence informs policy? Now its approach appears to be to develop policy that informs its evidence instead.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have evidence about what helps poor kids to do well at school? It is high-quality early-years education, the best heads and teachers in the schools that need them most, and an inspiring curriculum for academic and vocational qualifications. Is that not what the Government should focus on—not on expanding grammar schools?

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting those aspects. I will say a little more about them in a moment, but in the meantime, I pay tribute to her for the work that she has done to make sure that we do not forget about the importance of investing in young people in their early years, not least because one of the great problems with the Government's proposals is that by the age of 11, disadvantaged pupils are already 10 months behind their peers, and so are less likely to be able to pass that entrance exam and have a fair chance.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The hon. Lady seems to be opposed to the Government consulting on these matters and opposed to choice, which Conservative Members support. What evidence does she have that children in Buckinghamshire are disadvantaged? We have 13 grammar schools, seven of them the lowest-funded schools in the country, and 90% of our schools are good or outstanding. There is no evidence showing anything other than the grammar school system in Buckinghamshire providing a good education right across the board to all children.

Lisa Nandy: The very troubling question for the right hon. Lady is: where is the choice for children who cannot get into the grammar schools? The Education Policy Institute recently produced research that showed that the more highly selective an area, the worse the schools are, disadvantaging everyone. I will happily give way to the right hon. Lady again if she will tell me what she would say to a child stuck in a system where education standards are worse due to the highly selective nature of education in their area, and who is not given a choice because they cannot get into a grammar school.

Mrs Gillan: I would say to the hon. Lady: bring me that evidence from Buckinghamshire. Our non-grammar schools provide an excellent education to children in Buckinghamshire, and if she is casting aspersions on the education that they provide, I invite her to come and see some of them. It is some of the best education, but it is different from the education provided in the grammar schools.

Lisa Nandy: Many children and young people, not just in the right hon. Lady's area but around the country, will be extremely disappointed by that response. The idea that in 2016 any child is better off by being segregated and branded a failure at the age of 11, or that we are better off as a country with that system, is particularly backward-looking.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent opening speech. Is she aware that Buckinghamshire has the largest gap in educational attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers of any borough in the country? Is that a record that the House should applaud?

Lisa Nandy: It is absolutely not a record that any Member of the House should applaud, as the chief inspector made clear only a few days ago.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the Government, in their approach to grammar schools,

appear to be trying to have their cake and eat it? They want to talk about increasing the number of grammar schools, but not about the side effects of that, which is recreating secondary moderns. Not one study shows that children are better off in secondary modern schools.

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend posed an interesting question to the Minister in the Education Committee's evidence session this morning. She asked why, if he was keen to ensure that all schools improved, rather than recreating a system of grammar schools and secondary moderns, he did not just enable children to go to good schools by expanding the number of places in good comprehensive schools. The Minister did not seem to give an answer, but I hope that he will have an answer by the time he responds to the debate.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, in my local authority of Trafford we have selective education. We also have high-performing schools, but they do not perform well for every child, and particularly not for the most disadvantaged. Nor does every parent, or indeed the majority of parents, get a choice of school. Most parents, if they put their child forward for the entrance examination for the grammar school, find that their child is not successful and is not admitted. The choice of which school their child goes to is made by the schools, not by the parents.

Lisa Nandy: I suspect that the Minister would reply that the Government want to expand the number of places in grammar schools, so that more children will get in. There is no question but that grammar schools outperform non-selective schools in terms of exam results, but the Government make a great leap in claiming that grammar schools are somehow intrinsically better for the children in them than other similar schools in the area. I want the Minister to consider for a moment that there is evidence to the contrary.

We know that when grammar schools were the norm, working-class children were far more likely to drop out of those schools. The Robbins report revealed that only 2% of children whose parents were semi-skilled or low skilled then went on to university. The Minister's claim that disadvantaged grammar school pupils are more likely to go on to a Russell Group university, which I have heard him repeat often, is based on research that does not control for prior attainment. He also often mentions the Sutton Trust research. The 2011 report concluded:

"Given their selective intake, grammar schools would appear to be underrepresented among the most successful schools for Oxbridge entry".

All I am asking the Minister to do is consider the whole range of evidence on this subject and base education policy on it accordingly. This morning before the Education Committee we saw what happens when Ministers do not do that. He was forced to admit that in areas of selection, the impact on children in non-selective schools is mixed. Until now, he has been fond of citing one report by the Sutton Trust, which says that there is no negative effect on children who are not in grammar schools in areas where there is selection, but against that the Education Committee was able to cite Dr Becky Allen, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Education Policy Institute, and the education journalist Chris Cook, who found that the only thing that shifts in areas where

selection is introduced is who does well, not how many do well, and that, put simply, the better-off do well at the expense of the rest.

Policy Exchange set out clearly the stark impact in terms of lost opportunities and earnings for those who do not attend grammar schools, and the Institute for Social and Economic Research says that for girls there was some raised wage potential, but not for boys.

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb):

The evidence this morning was that there was no negative effect in areas of selection or a slight negative effect of one tenth of a grade in those pupils in non-grammar schools in selective areas. There are other reports that say that the negative effect is slightly higher, but what the hon. Lady is describing and what those reports are describing is the current situation, and it is the situation that prevailed when Labour was in power for 13 years. The consultation document seeks to find a solution to that problem by requiring all new grammar schools that are established and all grammar schools that want to expand to help raise the academic standard in those non-selective schools in those areas—something that her Government did not propose, and her party today are not proposing.

Lisa Nandy: What I am asking the Minister to understand is that this new approach set out in the consultation document is based on no evidence. If he says that we have to discount all the evidence that we have had about the education system thus far, it is incumbent on the Government to prove that this new, expensive approach, which will be highly disruptive to children's education and to the education system as a whole, will be better for children. This morning at the Education Committee the Minister was forced to admit that there is no evidence that it will be better.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) put to the Minister a simple proposition: there are areas of the country, as we have already heard, where selection still exists. Kent is the one that my hon. Friend mentioned to the Minister when he said that if the Minister is so sure that the new system will work and if he is so keen to explore new ways of working, why does he not pilot it in one area of the country. I ask him please not to inflict an experiment based on such flimsy evidence on millions of children who cannot afford for the Government to fail.

Mr Sheerman: As chair of the advisory board of the Sutton Trust, I get sick to death of Ministers in this Government quoting Sutton Trust research out of context and selectively. They should read the report and see what the Sutton Trust actually says.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I was reflecting this morning when I listened to the evidence session that education policy is always plagued by ideology and by personal experiences. No Government have ever managed to escape from that, but I have never heard a Minister rely as selectively on the evidence base as I heard this morning. What the Government propose to do will have profound consequences for children. I welcome the fact that they are consulting, but I do not welcome the fact that so far, based on everything that I have seen from the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the Minister's evidence this morning, the Government are not listening.

The consultation paper says that the Government might ask grammar schools to

“take a proportion of pupils from lower income households. This would ensure that selective education is not reserved for those with the means to move into the catchment area or pay for tuition to pass the test”.

That highlights a very real problem and it is a very strong statement. Can the Minister tell us what he means by it? Many free schools introduced in the previous Parliament by Ministers in the Government in which he served claimed to be inclusive, because the proportion of children on free school meals that they took was similar to the national average. However, a closer look at what those free schools were doing revealed that many, such as the West London free school, were admitting as high a proportion of children on free school meals as the national average, but fewer children on free school meals than in the local community. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government are committed to schools that reflect their neighbourhoods and, if so, whether he means by that statement in the consultation document that schools will reflect the levels of disadvantage and diversity in their own communities?

The plans for a more inclusive intake get thinner by the minute. As I said earlier, by the age of 11 disadvantaged children are 10 months behind their peers. Does the Minister have any evidence that asking grammar schools to work with primary schools, which seems to be the big idea to address the issue, will eradicate that difference? How quickly does he think that will happen? More troubling is the finding from the Education Policy Institute that the more selective an area, the fewer the benefits to children in grammar schools. A wealth of evidence already exists. When that is assessed against the Government's stated goals, it shows their plans to be deeply, deeply flawed.

The consultation paper makes no mention of the impact on society. It is not that long since the Conservatives had a party leader who appealed to their one-nation tradition. Surely no Government of that one-nation stripe would seek to deny children and young people in this country the opportunity to get to know one another. Surely the goal of an education system is to give every child the opportunity to fulfil their potential, both academically and socially, and to allow children to gain social enlightenment, not just social advantage, and live a larger, richer, deeper life as a consequence.

Instead, this Government appear to be set on a path that will pit children against one another and make losers of us all. The tragedy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) has highlighted so often, is that there are real problems in the education system. Attracting and retaining teachers remains one of our biggest challenges. The National Audit Office report highlighted a shocking rise in the number of teacher vacancies between 2011 and 2014. In the face of this, it is baffling why the Government are rushing headlong down a road that will make the situation worse. A poll for *The Times Educational Supplement* found that more than half of teachers would not work in a grammar school. Three quarters of teachers and headteachers are opposed to these plans. Why does the Minister think he knows better than all of them?

It would make more sense if the Government said, “Look, we've considered every option for dealing with some of the problems in our schools system. We can't find anything else that works, so this is something that

[Lisa Nandy]

we are prepared to try”, but I saw recently that the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) had asked the Government whether they had considered the merits of streaming children in comprehensive schools, rather than pursuing the grammar schools route. The answer came back that they had not. This is the worst sort of dogma, of which we have seen too much in education policy over the years. Worse than that, it will cost the nation dearly.

There is no other country in the world that is proceeding in the direction of trying to segregate children over and over again. Poland, for example, which has delayed selection in recent years to improve its results, has seen a boost in maths, reading and science as a result. Finland used to be a favourite of Education Ministers. When I served on the Education Committee, we used to hear a lot from the former Education Secretary about how brilliant Finland was. We went to have a look for ourselves. It is one of the least selective countries in the world.

Many counties are now trying to end the divide between technical, vocational and academic education, recognising that in the decades to come most of us will need a combination of all three. The hon. Member for Stroud and I visited Germany a few years ago to look at its education system. As Sir Michael Wilshaw recently pointed out, Germany has had a similar model for most of the post-war years and is now attempting to disassemble it, because of worries about its effects both on students and on the country’s productivity, not to mention international rankings.

In the coming years, we will succeed less for what we know, and more for how we use that knowledge. The system of education that this Government are pursuing was not fit for the economy of the 1950s, let alone that of the 2020s and a world in which Britain stands outside the European Union, and we urgently need to address our growing skills gap.

This morning, the Minister told the Education Committee that those who shout the loudest in opposition to his plans are doing the least to address the problems we face. Let me say to him now, on behalf of everybody who cares about children’s education in this country, that that is profoundly offensive. Let me ask him first to put the interests of children above party politics. Will he acknowledge that the previous Labour Government put significant funding into the education system, bringing us up to the European average after years of our schools being terribly and harmfully neglected? As a result, we saw a 31% rise in the proportion of children and young people getting good GCSEs, and I know that because I was working with them in the voluntary sector at the time. The difference in those years was stark: there were more teachers, better buildings, and IT facilities in schools, often for the first time.

One of the things we learnt in those years in government is that frequent interference in the education system can be incredibly damaging; it can undermine the morale of teachers and school leaders and children’s achievement. Perhaps the Government could learn from what Labour got wrong in office, but they should please also learn from what we got right.

If we are to try to end the dogma, let us think about how we learn from the best schools. This morning, the Minister said that grammar schools are very good—I

have heard him say that repeatedly—but just for once could he admit that some comprehensive schools in this country are very good, too? The Education Policy Institute said in September:

“If you compare high attaining pupils in grammar schools with similar pupils who attend high quality non selective schools, there are five times as many high quality non selective schools as there are grammar schools.”

Sir Michael Wilshaw said this weekend:

“The latest research shows that the best comprehensives are doing better than grammar schools for the most able children.”

Why are the Government not praising them and looking to them?

I will tell Members why I think that is such a great problem. As Estelle Morris, the former Education Secretary, pointed out last month:

“Many selective schools do well by the children they choose, and of course they should contribute to education beyond their own doors. But does their success with bright, motivated young people from supportive home backgrounds give them the skills and experience to turn round schools with large numbers of struggling and disaffected children?”

The answer lies on Ministers’ own doorsteps, and if they would only take the ideological blinkers off, they would be able to see it for the benefit of children. The Minister recently admitted in a Westminster Hall debate on grammar school funding that grammar schools are, by definition, unlikely to take children who are struggling or on free school meals. Why, then, would they be the major source of expertise on how to help those children succeed?

Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), there are lessons we can learn about what works. The most dramatic improvements in education that we have seen in my adult lifetime came as a result of the London Challenge programme, which brought comprehensive schools together to lift standards for all their children. We replicated that in Greater Manchester, where I live, with great success—so much so that, even when the Government dismantled the scheme, those teachers carried on working together because they said, “If there is a child in any school in Greater Manchester who is not doing well, that is our collective responsibility and we will come together to sort it out.” They understand that collaboration is the key driver of school improvement, not competition, and that, as the OECD has repeatedly proven, strong autonomy coupled with strong accountability are the ingredients of a great education system.

Ministers have rightly pointed to the absurd situation we have at present where in some parts of the country we already have selection, by wealth and house price. I would have more sympathy with that argument if the Government had not pushed through a benefits cap that has socially cleansed large areas of the country and forced tens of thousands of poorer families to move out of inner London, and if they had not introduced a model of free schools in the last Parliament that allowed schools to draw their own catchment areas and exclude poorer areas.

The answer to the Minister’s problem is surely to make every school a good school. The fact that the Government appear to have completely given up on that, in Britain in 2016, is such a pitiful sight for young people in this country. There are far too many—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, and I appreciate that she is speaking with passion and that the House is listening to what she is saying, but I will point out that, even though we have quite a lot of time this afternoon and there is not an awful lot of pressure, she has now been speaking for over half an hour—it has passed quickly, because she is speaking with such passion. She does not have to finish immediately, but I am sure that she will be drawing her speech to a close soon.

Lisa Nandy: As a matter of fact, Madam Deputy Speaker, I intend to draw to a close, by reminding the Minister that too many children in this country are unable to learn because of overcrowded housing, poverty and family pressures, and by telling him that the education maintenance allowance and Aimhigher, both of which were abolished by his Government, lifted the number of academic children in my constituency who went on to finish college and go to university by 40% in just six short years. Nothing that the Prime Minister, the Education Secretary or the Minister have said so far on the subject leads me to think that those children are their priority. Instead, they are fond of telling us when we object to policies based on such flimsy evidence that these policies are deeply popular.

I say to the Minister that there is a warning from history here. The Crowther report, commissioned by a Conservative Secretary of State in 1959, highlighted the public clamour that had grown up against a competitive element in grammar school selection. By 1964, when the Conservative party lost the general election, grammar schools had become deeply unpopular with three out of four voters, because segregated education is, by definition, divisive. Perhaps that is why the policy was set out not in his party's manifesto, but in that of the UK Independence party, one of the most divisive forces in the country.

I will bring my remarks to a close, because many hon. Members wish to speak. In trying to divide children in this country, the Government have succeeded in uniting a range of voices, including the teaching unions, the chief inspector of schools, their own mobility tsar, the previous Education Secretary, the former Universities Minister, the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer and a significant number of MPs from all parties in the House. Together, we will ensure that the Government do better than this.

1.47 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me a great opportunity to discuss this issue once again today, because of course the Education Committee was at it this morning for two and a quarter hours. I must say that it is very impressive that both the Committee and the Chamber are busy dealing with the subject in this way. I wish that we were given an opportunity to do the same on matters connected with exiting the European Union, because it would be of great benefit if the Chamber could discuss those in similar detail.

One of the concerns with the whole question of grammar schools—this is proved by what I have just said—is that it is a bit of a distraction from some core requirements of our education policy, one of which, of course, is fairer funding. That was alluded to by the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who is a former

member of the Education Committee. We cannot escape the fact that too many schools are suffering because of the unfair system for allocating money, and we have to get that right. I suggest that that is definitely a priority for the Government.

Another priority must be to make sure that all primary school children can make the transition from primary to secondary in a way that lands them well. A good landing requires numeracy, literacy, appropriate life skills and the sense of confidence that comes from having been to a proper and effective primary school.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is an interesting contrast in this country? In health, the money follows the patient, but in education the money does not follow the pupil. One of the challenges with the funding formula is that many children get educated in a different local education authority but not at the level of funding they would have received had they remained within their own authority.

Neil Carmichael: I thank my right hon. Friend for that very good point. It is clear that the disparities between authority areas, and therefore schools, is too great for us to be complacent. We must take action.

The third area of alternative priorities is the post-16 sector. Too many people in any year group post-16 are not proficient in numeracy or literacy. According to the OECD, backed up by the World Economic Forum, about 20% of any year group are not comfortable with numeracy and literacy. That is not good enough for a modern economy that aspires to be open and to conquer social mobility and productivity. We have to focus on what matters, so I repeat that the issue of grammar schools is something of a distraction.

Whatever we say about education policy, we must be mindful of two things. First, social immobility in this country is simply too great. The fact is that there are communities with too many young people who are basically trapped, and who stay trapped—that is the difficulty. That is the first issue that we must always think of when considering education. The second point, which is just as relevant, is productivity. If we can have a more productive economy, we will by definition have one with more skills and higher salaries and wages. That is a contribution to social mobility—enabling people to improve and develop. The two things are linked.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that the third issue should also be about social cohesion? Does he share my concern about some of the proposals on faith schools? I recognise the contribution that they make, but can he think of a single reason why the child of an atheist parent like myself should be excluded from a school because of their parents' lack of faith? Does he also share my concern that 100% selection by faith risks driving communities into further segregation and does nothing to improve social cohesion?

Neil Carmichael: I thank my hon. Friend for that instructive intervention. It goes off the issue of grammar schools, which I was hoping to talk about, but she is right that the issue of faith schools should be addressed. I say two things. First, we must have an inclusive

[Neil Carmichael]

society; we cannot parcel people up in that sector and say, “That’s you—off you go!” That is not acceptable. We must make sure that our faith schools do not do that and instead are all embracing. It is the outward-looking school, of whatever faith, that will do a good job.

Keith Vaz: I have mentioned successful faith schools in Leicester. My first school was a convent school in Aden, Yemen, and atheist children went to that school. The point made by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) is right: although such schools are faith-based, they need to be able to take people from other faiths. Many members of the Hindu faith attend Catholic St Paul’s school in Leicester. Faith schools can be a powerful force for integration as well as providing faith for those of a certain religion.

Neil Carmichael: One day I will have to get to Leicester, given that it had such a good football team and all the experiences that the right hon. Gentleman has highlighted. It is important for people of faith and atheists to learn about each other. That has to be the guiding light when we are talking about such schools and communities.

The Education Committee held an evidence-check session this morning because we believe in evidence, which must be the cornerstone of policy making. Of course, values matter too.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend gathered valuable evidence from the excellence that he saw when he visited grammar schools in my constituency. Does he not recognise that that excellence across 163 schools is also valuable evidence from which we need to learn? We need to work out how we can magnify it across the country as a whole.

Neil Carmichael: I certainly did enjoy visiting the school in Salisbury and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to that visit. It was exceptional; we talked about politics and highlighted the great work of a former Member of this House, the right hon. Sir Edward Heath. I was pleased to do that, especially given that we are now discussing Brexit so frequently.

Grammar schools are good schools, but the question we have to ask ourselves all the time is about all the other schools. That is at the heart of the matter. There are 3,500 secondary schools: what do we do about the 3,400 or so schools that we depend on for the vast majority of our teaching?

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): When we heard evidence this morning from Dr Becky Allen, was the Chair of the Select Committee struck, as I was, by her comment that not a single study claims that children are better off in a secondary modern? The evidence from Anna Vignoles of Cambridge University was that selective systems are definitively not a force for social mobility. Does not following the evidence suggest that selection is not the way to go?

Neil Carmichael: I want to formally welcome the hon. Lady to the Education Committee; she spent her first two and a quarter hours with us this morning, and I trust that she will want to repeat the experience on a weekly basis. I am coming on to the evidence, but she is absolutely right: our witnesses were explicit.

We heard from a number of policy experts, academics and representatives from the Department as well as the Minister for School Standards himself. We had a feast of opportunity to probe these issues, and that is what we did. Witnesses told us that grammar schools do well but that schools in their surrounding areas suffer. That is fairly obvious if the best teachers and brightest pupils are pulled away.

One thing that was not properly addressed was the issue of capacity versus scale. We might well want to improve the capacity of schools, but if we do so by simply having more grammar schools, we risk weakening existing grammar schools by pulling pupils away from them. We heard from the Minister that many grammar school pupils are travelling three to four times the distance that they would ordinarily travel if they were going to a local school. That must suggest that the grammar school is picking up pupils from further away than their local area, so the issue of scale becomes relevant.

Professor David Jesson from the University of York said that reintroducing selective education is “perverse”—that might be extreme, but that is what he said. He went on to say that only 3% of grammar school pupils are on free school meals. Now, that is a fact—it is evidence. It may well be that grammar schools can be encouraged, stimulated or whatever to improve that figure, but it has been 3% for several decades. So the question must be, can we really expect it to rise? That is an issue the Minister for School Standards may well want to address in his closing remarks.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the comments he has made, but I am curious to know what he thought of the evidence we had today in the Education Committee about comparisons with countries such as the Netherlands, Singapore and Hong Kong. Selection is a very strong part of their education systems, and they dramatically outperform Britain in the programme for international student assessment tables and other international tables when it comes to achievement.

Neil Carmichael: What I did think was slightly amusing was that, again, in this time of Brexit, we were given the example of the Netherlands as a country to emulate, given that we are departing from the European Union and that the Netherlands is a component part of it. I take the point, but it actually rests on another, which is that we have significant cultural differences with those countries—certainly with the other two my hon. Friend rightly mentioned. The issue of whether we can actually transpose their systems, when there is such a cultural difference, would raise a few questions.

Mr Gibb: At this time of Brexit, would my hon. Friend not share my worry that, of those level 5 pupils—those able children—leaving primary school who go to grammar school, 78% achieve the EBacc, including a foreign language, whereas only 52% of those who go to a non-selective school achieve the EBacc?

Neil Carmichael: The Minister is right in what he quotes, but the solution is really to make sure that those schools that are not doing well enough do better—I would have thought that that was elementary.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach, because there may be parts of the country—Cheltenham being one—where the comprehensive schools offer fantastic social mobility and fantastic value added? That might not be the case elsewhere, but it certainly is in Cheltenham, so we should intervene only with great care.

Neil Carmichael: I think I can agree with my hon. Friend—he is absolutely right. His constituency neighbours mine, and I obviously know the situation in Gloucestershire extremely well.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Neil Carmichael: I am going to take just one more intervention, because I think you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are going to give me a telling-off like the one you really gave the hon. Member for Wigan.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for giving way—he is being very generous. Does he agree that quoting statistics about children who have been selected to go to a selective school to have a selective education is, by definition, not really a measure of the best solution for providing the best education for all children in this country?

Neil Carmichael: Yes, I would agree with that. The hon. Lady, who is also a member of my Select Committee—I will have to pay tribute to the whole lot in a minute—makes a very astute point. The fact is that if pupils are selected on the basis of academic testing to go to a school and then do very well, people really should not be surprised; they should actually be disappointed if one or two fail the grade, let alone get the sort of figures the Minister suggested they did.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is right, of course, that pupils who are selected and supported at home and who go to selective schools will, on the whole, do well. However, does he share my concern that, in my borough of Trafford, where we do have selective education, some grammar schools are beginning to see a rise in mental health problems among their students because of the academic pressures placed on those kids? Now, that can happen for a whole range of reasons, but it is certainly something that troubles headteachers in Trafford, and I wonder whether he would like to comment.

Neil Carmichael: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that interesting intervention. She is right about two things. The first is the specific point about children's mental health being put under pressure in certain circumstances. However, there is also the wider issue of the mental health of young people, and we need to think carefully about that, because there is evidence that the number of children being affected by mental health issues is rising, and rising too fast. That is something that the Committee, which I note the hon. Lady is not a member of, will consider in due course.

I want to finish this section of my speech, on Professor Jesson's observation. If grammar schools are introduced as new schools, they really must make a contribution to surrounding schools and feeder schools. One way for us to achieve that—rather than simply saying that we will punish grammar schools because they are not doing

something we want to do and that those punishments will include, for example, no right to expand further—is to say that such schools should be part of a multi-academy trust. If they are going to be new schools, and if we insist on having them, they should be absolutely responsible for, and indeed charged with the task of, making sure that the schools around them are really improved through direct action.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for being so generous in allowing interventions. As I am not going to mention this in my speech in a moment, may I ask whether he is aware of the example of Bright Futures—just one of a number of examples—which emanated from a very good grammar school in the Trafford local authority area? It was then expanded to take on other schools, especially those with a high proportion of disadvantaged children, but it has palpably failed to turn those schools around, because it found that its expertise in dealing with highly able, highly advantaged children is not transferable to some more disadvantaged areas.

Neil Carmichael: I am aware of the goings on in Trafford. The Select Committee went up there to look not at grammar schools or any other schools but at aspects of child protection. However, I did notice what was going on, and I take the hon. Lady's point.

The Committee noted that the current selective system favours children whose parents can afford to pay for tutoring, and that observation is absolutely right. One witness told us that entrance tests presuppose that a child's ability is fixed, and we all know, if we have children, that that just is not the case. We have to have a testing system that takes into account the fact that children develop at different paces and in different ways, and one of the many problems with the testing systems we have had in the past is that they do not do that.

The evidence suggests that it would be extremely difficult to create a tutor-proof test, and we explored that in some detail in the Committee this morning. One suggestion is to bump up children on free school meals by a certain number of points to equalise things. That effectively proves that any test can be fixed to achieve any aim, so we have to be really careful about how we shape such a testing process. The Government really have to look at how a test would be shaped and calibrated to achieve the outcomes they suggest they wish to see. That test would be further complicated if the Government would, as they have suggested in the Green Paper, like different age groups to go through it. We could be talking about not just 11-year-olds, but 14-year-olds or 16-year-olds, for example, so different tests might be required for different years, and that is something that will need to be considered.

The Minister told us that the Government are “trying to end the correlation between disadvantaged backgrounds and poor performance...we want to break that link and that is what is driving our reforms.”

We, on the other hand, emphasised that what is important, beyond more choice, is improving outcomes. We have to be very careful about this. Outcomes matter most, and we should be using them to measure the schools system, rather than simply saying, “Aha, there's plenty of choice.” Choice is a mechanism, not an outcome, and we must

[Neil Carmichael]

not confuse the two. If we do, we lose sight of what is most important, which is equipping our young people to leave school, leave college and benefit from the opportunities that they ought to be benefiting from.

I asked the Department for Education's chief scientific adviser about this issue. I always like asking such people questions because they can, in normal circumstances, isolate evidence, have control periods, and get down to what is really making the difference—although one can hardly do that in a school, as he acknowledged. He told us that this policy,

“like all policies, requires improvement”.

I thought that was helpful, because it does, but he also acknowledged the consultation process that we are now going through. It is absolutely right that we have a period of consultation on this proposal and on other aspects of the education system.

The Committee heard some powerful evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which was already in the news because of the forecasts connected to Brexit and the implications of falling taxable income. The institute told us something we already know—that the economy is completely different from what it was several decades ago. The sorts of young people we need are not academics and workers but we need them all to have skills. We know that because the evidence shows that we can produce only half the number of engineers we need each and every year and that one of the driving forces of migration has been a shortage of skills in our economy. We will all be aware of firms or professional bodies in our constituencies that cannot recruit the people that they need. We therefore know that the institute is right.

That is why our education system must reach into every home with excellence. This is about making sure that every school can safely take on a pupil and guarantee them a first-class education. It is not about lifting some pupils out of a system because they are of one type or have a certain advantage. It is about making sure that we provide opportunities for all children—excellence everywhere, which is, I think, the title, or at least part of the title, of a White Paper that we have considered. Let me reinforce that point by referring to the work of the OECD, which has already been cited. We know that the OECD likes autonomy, because it has told our Committee so several times, but it is not keen on selectivity. If we value the work that that independent organisation does in making international comparisons—I certainly do—then we should take some account of what it says. It is not particularly complimentary about the idea of having pupil selection, and we should remember that.

As I have said before, we need to have a large number of options for young people at secondary level. I describe that as fluidity—the fluidity for a young person to make the choices that they might want to make as they start thinking about their career options. That is why I am so keen on, for example, university technical colleges. It was terrible that during the '60s and '70s only 2% of any year group could get into a technical school. It is necessary to have good secondary schools in groups, so that they can help each other and give young people the opportunity to choose the direction of travel that suits them, on the basis of their aptitudes and ambitions, their knowledge of the economy and their employment opportunities. That is life fulfilment at its best.

It is really important that we link those things to what I said at the beginning about social mobility and economic productivity. Without both those objectives working effectively together and supporting each other, we will not make a success of anything in our country because we will be wasting talent and abandoning people. Instead, we must make sure that we use all our talents and do not leave people behind. That is what the education system should be about, that is why we are having this debate, and why the Minister is wise to have this consultation period. I hope that he responds to some of the points I have made.

2.15 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am very pleased to speak in this debate. It is the first opportunity I have had to speak in an education debate since I resigned from the shadow education brief. Almost a year ago, I led opposition to Government plans to open a so-called annexe of a grammar school in Kent. I cannot quite believe that in 2016 Britain we are seriously contemplating a return to selection at 11, given all the progress in education that we have made over the past 20 years.

Before I get to the meat of this debate, and why I believe that grammar schools will take backwards the agenda of opportunity for everybody that the Prime Minister says she supports, I want to mention social mobility, which the Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), spoke about. Too often, social mobility is thought of in terms of plucking the one or two lucky ones out of disadvantage and taking them to the top—the “council house to the Cabinet table” journey. This understanding is really unhelpful when looking at the deep-seated challenges that our country's education system faces and the complex policy solutions required to overcome them. Social mobility is, and should be, about people, starting as children, being able to make economic and social progress, unconfined by the disadvantages they begin with and achieving to their full potential.

The barriers to this in Britain today are manifold. In education, as the hon. Gentleman said, the long tail of underachievement and the educational attainment gap between the disadvantaged and their peers, which is now widening, not narrowing, under this Government, should be the focus of public policy, as it has been for the past two decades. A concerted strategy for narrowing the skills gap and the productivity gap would boost social mobility for the many. Breaking down the social barriers in accessing opportunities in work and in life is also key. None of these fundamental and deep-rooted problems is addressed by a policy that focuses entirely on the already high attainers and the already advantaged getting a more elite education. The Prime Minister says that she wants opportunity for everyone and every child to be able to get as far as their talents and hard work will take them. I agree with those aims, as would, I am sure, all of us in this House today, but her means are entirely wrong. Not only would the reintroduction of grammar schools push this agenda backwards and be “retrograde”, as the chief inspector of schools describes it, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said, the policies and interventions that do work will also go backwards under this Government.

Let us now look at both these issues. First, on academic selection and the reintroduction of grammar schools, the evidence is clear, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and others have said. Internationally, the systems in countries that make greater gains for children in the bottom half of the income distribution are comprehensive, not selective. That is why the OECD has concluded that countries with selective education systems perform less well on average than countries with more comprehensive systems. In England, the highest performing boroughs are comprehensive. London, for example, outperforms both selective areas and the national average in its bottom and top results at GCSE. By contrast, the attainment gap is worse than the national average in eight out of nine fully selective areas.

Mr Gibb: May I point out to the hon. Lady that seven London boroughs are either fully or partially selective?

Lucy Powell: These are figures that the House of Commons of Library has produced for me today on grammar schools and fully selective areas, and the Minister will be aware of them.

In Kent and Medway, poorer children lag behind while richer children move ahead, and the losses at the bottom are much larger than the gains at the top. That pattern is a feature of selective areas in England. Let us compare fully selective Kent with comprehensive London. Just 27% of children eligible for free school meals in Kent achieve five good GCSEs, while the national figure is 33% and the figure for London is 45%. I have to ask the Government yet again: why not focus on sharing the good practice of London, rather than spreading the poorer practice of Kent?

Furthermore, disadvantaged children in selective areas do worse for the rest of their lives. The practice of coaching children to pass the 11-plus in selective areas is rife, as we have heard. That is why the proportion of disadvantaged children at grammar schools is so extremely and embarrassingly low—just 2.6% of kids on free school meals attend grammar schools. Overall, grammars admit four to five times as many children who went to independent and prep schools than children who are eligible for free school meals.

That is why Lord David Willetts, the former Conservative Minister, has described grammar schools as an “arms race of private tuition for rich parents”.

Any parent would understand why that is the case. Of course most parents would want their children to go to a school full of clever children where their social networks would be developed, where it is easier to recruit and retain teachers and where success helps to breed further success. However, the majority of their kids will not get in. To suggest that the very existence of grammar schools does not disrupt the wider education system and outcomes for everybody else—the 80% who do not get in—is plain wrong. That is why, in today’s papers, school leaders in Conservative Surrey have said that they are vehemently opposed to grammar schools. They echo the many concerns raised by others about the impact of creaming off the brightest and the best and stigmatising the rest.

We, as policymakers, should be leading the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan has said, we should be shouting from the rooftops about how great many more of today’s schools are. The top-performing

comprehensives, which take in many thousands more poorer children than the grammar schools do, are just as good as, if not better than, the best grammars. Those comprehensive schools provide opportunity, stretch and good outcomes for all children, not just for a few. As I said at the start of my remarks, it is particularly important in today’s world that social networks and community cohesion should be available to everybody, and comprehensives offer those things.

I am really proud of the fact that I went to a local comprehensive school in Manchester. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan attended the same school. But hon. Members should be under no illusion simply because we have made it this far. In the era when we attended that school—Parrs Wood High School—too many children were failed. We had some great teachers, but education was poorly resourced and too many children were allowed to slip through the net.

I am proud that my eldest child now attends the same school. It is a truly comprehensive school, in which 40% of kids are on free school meals, and it achieved its best ever results this year, with 72% of children gaining five A* to C grades in subjects including English and maths. Like many of the best comprehensives, it has a strong gifted and talented programme—pretty much dropped by this Government when they came in—and fluid streaming and setting in many subjects. That is what the best schools do: they stretch all kids as they develop and create a school-wide ethos of success and achievement.

Even though education was not so great in my day, it mattered hugely to my peers and to kids from all backgrounds that they could mix socially and academically, raising aspiration and attainment for everybody. The dozens of Manchester school kids whom I meet every week can see that I went to a local comprehensive school, just as they do. They can see that there is no barrier to what they can achieve. What a damning verdict it would be on our country if we went back to an era when we told four out of every five children at the age of 11 that there was a cap on their potential and that only the grammar school kids could go far.

I could give Members many examples of outstanding secondary schools across Manchester today that are delivering real progress for huge numbers of disadvantaged kids: Wright Robinson College, Trinity High School, Manchester Enterprise Academy and Whalley Range High School—the list could go on. That is why the Education Policy Institute found that the overall improvements in education over the last 20 years, including the sponsored academy programme, have had a much more significant impact on attainment among disadvantaged children than any expansion of grammar schools could possibly have.

We are all sitting here and asking the same question: why are the Government proposing to bring back grammar schools, when the evidence is so clear? One can only assume that the decision is based on ideology and not on sound policy. In pursuit of this ideology, Ministers have scabbled together a pretty flimsy Green Paper and cherry-picked a few bits of—I am sorry for the pun—selective evidence. First, they cling to research that shows that the tiny number of children on free school meals who get into grammar schools do better than those who do not. What a deeply dubious argument. Not only is that tiny number not comparable with the

[Lucy Powell]

huge number of children who are not at grammars, but, by definition, those few children are already high attainers at key stage 2. If we look at the top attainers at key stage 2 from all backgrounds, we see that they do just as well at the best comprehensives as they do at grammar schools.

Mr Gibb: The point I was trying to make earlier was that that is not the case. Of the children who leave primary school having achieved level 5 in the key stage 2 SATS, 78% of those who attend grammar schools go on to get the EBacc, but only 52% of those who go to a non-selective school achieve the EBacc. So those children do not achieve as highly in non-selective schools as they do in selective schools.

Lucy Powell: If the Minister is basing an entire, huge change in education public policy on the narrow measure of modern foreign languages at GCSE, good luck to him. As he knows, we cannot compare a tiny number of pupils—I think it is 3,000—who are on free school meals in grammar schools with the tens of thousands of high achieving children on free school meals in other schools. Schools in which three or four children out of 700 are on free school meals face a completely different challenge from that faced by schools such as most of those in my constituency, where 70% or 80% of kids are on free school meals. The challenge for the latter schools in educating children on free school meals is significantly greater. The Minister is not comparing like with like, and he knows it.

Those who are not high achievers at 11—the vast majority of children, who do not get that level 5—do better in comprehensive systems than in selective ones. The Government also argue that by changing the nature of selection and somehow making getting into grammar schools tutor-proof will solve the problems. We have already heard how difficult that is, but I beg to differ in any case. If the Government are pushing forward with this policy on that basis, why not enforce a requirement on today's grammar schools to take a larger number of children on free school meals? They should do that first and prove their point, if they are so confident of their argument, and then they should come back to the House in two or three years' time and show us that it is possible to narrow the gap in selective areas.

The Prime Minister's final straw in justifying the policy was that

“it is wrong that we have a system in this country where a law prevents the opening or expansion of good schools.”—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 806.]

She seems to see no irony whatsoever in the fact that her Government has banned the opening of good schools by anybody other than a free school sponsor, which has led to the school place crisis and a system that is in utter chaos.

I almost find it depressing that we again have to rehearse these arguments when the overwhelming evidence is clear. The evidence base for policies and interventions that work and that tackle the educational attainment gap has also become much clearer. Let us recap what they are: quality in early years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West said; a deep pool of excellent teachers; and adequate resources targeted at closing the

gap and providing opportunity for all. I will look at what is happening in each of those areas under this Government.

For early years, yes, more resources have gone in, as the importance of affordable childcare becomes a political imperative and an economic necessity. I welcome the focus on enabling more parents to work, but the critical issue of quality early education in narrowing the gap has taken a backward step. We know that by the age of five, the developmental gap between disadvantaged children and their peers is already very clear—it is equivalent to at least 15 months—yet what is happening today is the opposite of what is needed to close the gap. Remarkably, in many parts of the country, after years of focus by the previous Labour Government and many councils, we have some of the highest-quality early years provision in some of the most deprived communities—the silver bullet of education—through many maintained nursery schools and free places in school nurseries. Yet in an attempt to deliver its pledge of 30 hours free childcare for working parents—by definition, they are more likely to be better off—the Government are prohibiting councils from investing in quality or subsidising places for non-working parents. I could go into many more reasons why the quality of early years provision is going backwards.

As hon. Members have mentioned, there is a growing teacher supply crisis in this country today. Unless urgent action is taken to address this acute problem, any other education policy is meaningless and will fail. We all know that the kids who pay the highest price when teacher supply falls, and therefore quality falls, are those who are least advantaged and least able to help themselves at home.

Finally, on resources, there have been welcome increases in education budgets during the past 20 years. Schools have been able to use additional targeted interventions, such as the pupil premium, to level the playing field in everything from one-to-one tuition and support to paying for uniforms, music lessons and school trips for kids who would not otherwise be able to afford them. However, I know from talking to heads in my area that with the biggest cuts to school budgets in a generation—about 8% during this Parliament—it is exactly such support that is going first.

Any Government who purport to have an interest in educational equality and social mobility must look seriously and quickly at these pressing issues, before we even get to those involving technical education and skills, and access to jobs. Such an agenda would keep any Minister busy, so why, after six months of unnecessary distraction with the forced academisation agenda, which has now been dropped, are Ministers creating yet another unnecessary upheaval in school structures? This time, support for their proposals is even more narrow, the evidence base even more flimsy and the outcomes even more divisive. It is time for the Government to drop these damaging proposals and get back to the task of investing in early years education, addressing the teacher supply crisis and stopping the harmful cuts to school budgets.

2.33 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I rise to speak on behalf of the Church of England in this important Back-Bench debate. The Church has a long and successful history of educating

children in our country. It provided education before the state did. In fact, it is still the largest provider of education besides the state. It has 4,700 schools, most of which are primaries, with 200 secondary schools. Some 84% of its primary and 74% of its secondary schools are good or outstanding.

Many of the remaining schools are in remote rural locations, although I should point out that there are some excellent rural schools. The challenge of trying to sustain a class for each year group in a remote rural area and the difficulty in attracting teachers there make it hard to achieve higher standards in those schools. The Church is committed to raising standards, and with the help of digital means and remote learning methods, it is possible to bring the best teaching to such schools. The Church has fought to sustain these schools for the sake of social cohesion, where other institutions might by now have given up. I am sure that hon. Members with rural constituencies will immediately identify with the importance of the village school, which, with the parish church, may be the only institutional hub for such communities. That underlines the importance of keeping them sustainable.

I want to scotch the myth that Church schools are forces for segregation. That could not be further from the truth. In fact, most Church schools do not practise selection at all. Where faith-based criteria apply, they do so only when schools are over-subscribed and alternative educational provision exists, so such selection applies in only a very small proportion of Church schools. The composition of Church schools reflects the social geography of their area. Some Church schools, such as those in Bradford and Blackburn, are 95% Muslim. Conversely, schools in rural areas are inevitably more likely to be less diverse, mostly as a function of patterns of migration to and settlement in urban areas. Professor Cattle, for whom I have the highest regard, observed in his recent report on ethnic segregation that inner-city people are more likely than ever before to live near those of a different ethnicity. The Church of England's policy of being open to all therefore promotes better cohesion and understanding.

The Church sees its role as one of nurturing people to live life to the full, educating young people for hope and aspiration, and to embody an ethos of living well together. We must be getting something right because, after all, Church schools are sought after by people of all faiths and none. In September, the Archbishop of Canterbury said something important about the times we live in:

“Religiously motivated violence and extremism are...presenting a challenge...not seen for a couple of hundred years. In such...circumstances, religious literacy is key: understanding the motivations and ideas of those who commit violence is essential, even if we, rightly, condemn it.”

I want to emphasise that the Church of England is firmly committed to delivering outstanding education and promoting academic excellence, and it is more committed than ever to training up creative and innovative school leaders, but it has not yet expressed a formal position on grammar schools. In the interests of transparency, I should declare that I am the product of a grammar school. I will be eternally grateful to the Hertfordshire and Essex Girls' Grammar School for the excellent start in life that it gave me. At that time, however, there was a binary choice between grammar and secondary modern schools, whereas there is now a much wider range of secondary education.

I could not agree more with what the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), said about the potential of university technical colleges. I listened carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who is not in the Chamber at the moment, including her comparison with other comparable advanced industrial economies with selective education. By observation, having been a German language school exchange pupil, I might say that technical education was already a much stronger alternative in that country, which promoted selective education, when I first did a school exchange at the age of 14. We now have university technical colleges in this country.

On the council estate in my constituency—its secondary schools, none of which had previously managed to get more than 20% of their pupils up to five GCSEs, are now all academies—attainment levels have risen to nearly 50%. We very much welcome the fact that we are to have a new academy for engineering. That provides an answer to the Select Committee Chairman's question about what we are educating today's children for. With the digital economy upon us, we need to rethink which skills and aptitudes will be needed by the next generation of the workforce if they are not to be digitally disadvantaged.

In an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, I touched briefly on pupils who cross borders from one education authority area to another. In the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull, we educate more than 8,000 pupils from across our borders with Birmingham and Coventry. That is a force for cohesion and integration. I firmly believe, however, that the money should follow the pupil, as it is only fair that education authorities providing an excellent education to pupils from other education authority areas see the resources that would have been allocated to that pupil had they been educated in their own area.

Returning to faith schools, parents of all faiths and none choose Church of England schools because of the broad and rounded education they provide. I want to finish with a little anecdote that perfectly illustrates the role that Church schools can play in addressing some of the difficult challenges of social cohesion and integration in our society. Every year, I hold a carols-and-mince-pies evening in my home. Last year, I was asked by a young lady of Asian origin doing work experience whether she could bring her mother and sister. I accepted with alacrity, not least because the sister was a professional cook, and hers were the best mince pies by far. That evening, as we stood together around the piano, singing carols, I saw them singing at the top of their voices, and I was really impressed. They turned to me and said, “What did you expect, Caroline? We went to Church schools and learned all these carols by heart.”

That is a powerful illustration of the openness of Church schools, and the important contribution that they make to some of the most serious challenges we face. I urge colleagues to remember that, and the secular world to remember that faith schools offer a great deal to people of all faiths and none. Out of courtesy to the House, and because I have now revealed that I enjoy singing, I must inform you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I cannot be here for the winding-up speeches, as the Parliament choir has its dress rehearsal for its autumn concert at 4 o'clock.

2.42 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I send my best wishes to the Parliament choir for a successful concert.

In Trafford, part of which I represent, we already have a selective education system. All our schools perform very well, but that is despite selection, not because of it. Trafford's success reflects excellent teaching, strong schools leadership, a culture of schools working together to support one another, and very good support from families and parents. I pay tribute to everyone—staff, students and the wider community—for the excellent results that Trafford achieves.

It is important to note, however, that selection at age 11 is not an unalloyed good for everyone, or even for the majority of our children. A few weeks ago, I went to meet the headteacher of one of our very successful non-selective girls' schools—well, I guess it is selective, in that it is single-sex—and she talked about the challenges that she and her staff team face when girls who have failed the entrance examination for our local grammar schools arrive at her school, at the very young age of 11, demoralised and dispirited, believing that they are failures and have been written off.

That headteacher's team do a tremendous job to recover the morale and confidence of those girls, who go on to perform extremely well, but I find it offensive that we should say to young children, "You are a failure", on the basis of an inflexible and unsuitable examination that does not reflect the wider context of what is going on in children's lives and what learning ought to be for. If we have a system in which only one in four of our children aged 11 are told they are successful and have potential, we are getting something very wrong.

As I say, the selective system does not perform well for all our children in Trafford, nor does it deal with the postcode lottery, which Ministers have said they want to address through their proposals. In Trafford, children from the richest wards are by far the most likely to be in Trafford's grammar schools. Those from the poorest wards, largely concentrated in my constituency, are the least likely to be in grammar schools. In preparation for this debate, I saw a graph of the numbers, and the curve was startling and shocking: a tiny proportion of children in wards such as Bucklow-St Martins and Clifford in my constituency go to grammar school, compared with a much higher percentage of children from Hale and Bowdon, in the more prosperous parts of the borough.

John Glen: I always listen carefully to the hon. Lady, but is the issue not sometimes aspiration and getting applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds? If more from such backgrounds applied, could we not make some progress?

Kate Green: I will be very honest with the hon. Gentleman: I do not know. I just feel that a system that says to parents, "Don't bother putting your child forward because they have no chance of succeeding," is not a very good system either. What that headteacher told me gives the lie to what he suggests. She said that parents felt under pressure to put their child forward for the assessment even when they knew that they were unlikely to succeed. The disappointment is being compounded

by a great deal of wasted effort and pain. He is right about the complexities around who applies and what happens when they do, but there is something very troubling about a graph that shows that only children from the richest parts of the borough have a high chance of entry into grammar schools. I suspect that their having supportive parents, and lots of assets in their home to support their learning through educational toys, reading, educational trips and leisure activities and so on, is the reason why they have a higher chance of getting into grammar schools. I do not negate what he says, but I strongly suspect that it is those wider social factors and family resources that dispose children from the richer parts of the boroughs to have a higher chance of entering grammar schools.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about her experiences in Trafford, but further to the intervention from the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), is she aware that the more selective an area—the higher the concentration of grammar schools—the wider the attainment gap? Conservative Members like to argue that if only there were more grammar schools, more poorer children would attend them, but that does not stack up against the evidence.

Kate Green: Headteachers in my borough believe that if there were more grammar schools, by definition there would be more secondary modern-equivalent schools, too, and that for every grammar school we create, we will have to create four secondary moderns, unless the ratios of children in grammar and non-grammar schools are to change.

The Minister indicated that there would be a range of different schools available to students, such as technical schools or schools with different specialisms, and I welcome that, but we have had the latter for many years, under the academy system introduced by Labour. I already have specialist sports, science and art academies in my constituency. We do not have to overlay that with academic selection to ensure a different emphasis in the education that children receive, and we must not use division to exacerbate the attainment gap.

I want to speak about a group of children who really lose out in Trafford: children with special educational needs and disabilities, who have not been mentioned much this afternoon. In a written answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on 2 November, the Minister appeared to say that the Government were not tracking the number of SEND children in grammar schools. I am surprised if that is the case. If I misunderstood the thrust of his answer, I would very much welcome his correcting me. I am certainly disturbed if we are not following the engagement of those children and their experience in the selective system.

I can tell the Minister and the House that the numbers of children with special educational needs and disabilities in grammar schools in Trafford are shockingly low. Based on the May 2016 school census figures, we had a grammar school population in my borough of 7,539 children, 224 of whom were receiving SEN support, and just 20 had education, health and care plans or statements in place—just 20 out of more than 7,500 kids. I have seen some figures subsequently that suggest that the numbers could be even lower now.

In practice, therefore, the selective system is clearly not working and not serving SEND children in our borough. The system is not working for them. It does not work for them in a number of different ways. First, for the children and their families, the entrance exam process is very stressful—compounded, I must say, in Trafford by the fact that each grammar school sets its own entrance exam. There is not a common 11-plus across the borough—each school has its own tests—so children sit, and quite often fail, not just one, but two, three or four tests. On top of that, they will have received intensive tutoring in advance of taking those tests, where their parents can afford it, that starts for many children from the age of nine or even younger, putting incredible stress on those families and children in preparation for those tests.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab) *rose*—

Kate Green: I shall give way to the shadow Minister, who is my parliamentary next-door neighbour and also a Trafford MP.

Mike Kane: I am grateful to my neighbour, who is making a very powerful speech. Does she agree that the pass and fail line of the children taking all those tests is absolutely arbitrary, because it will depend on how many grammar school places there are in the system for that current year?

Kate Green: Of course it will. Perhaps the Minister would like to say whether he wants to see more such grammar school places at the expense of a lowering of this arbitrary bar, or whether he believes that the right thing to do would be to ensure that every school offered a great education to every child, which would be my aspiration, and indeed was exactly what I received in my comprehensive school in the 1970s. I am a little bit surprised that, nearly half a century later, we are having to revisit the success of such schools.

In truth, it is not even selection at age 11 in Trafford; in practice, it is selection for most children at age 10, because the entrance examination is taken at the start of year 6 before many children have reached their 11th birthday. I think that putting little children of 10 years old through that kind of process is really wrong. I feel really uncomfortable about it, and I would like to hear the Minister tell us in his response what analysis the Government have made and what consideration they have given to the pressure that that kind of system puts on young children and their parents.

As I said earlier, selection is not really about parents making a choice; it is choice by the schools, which impacts particularly on children with special educational needs and disabilities. In Trafford, many parents have told me that they believe that grammar schools, deliberately or otherwise, deter or reject their children because they believe that admitting such children would have an adverse effect on their overall school results. The inspection and monitoring systems do not sufficiently incentivise grammar schools to take those children, and where they do take them, there is ample national—not just local—evidence that it is more likely that grammar schools will take SEND children only if they are at the milder end of the SEND spectrum. In other words, that means children who are more likely to be able to develop and improve.

I have heard far too many reports from parents in my constituency of the failure of the system to make adjustments for the way in which SEND pupils take the entrance tests—even if the schools have been alerted to the special needs of the students in advance. For example, a parent told me about her child with a hearing impairment. She had told the school about it and about the need for a quiet environment in which the child could take the test, instead of which the child was put at the front of the hall with about 100 children in it and no sound insulation, and the child struggled to perform. I have heard, too, that the tests fail adequately to recognise the special needs of those with autism or dyslexia. In truth, no matter how well the tests are administered and no matter how responsive they might try to be to the particular needs of children with special needs, the 11-plus system is inherently discriminatory against those special needs children, as indeed the exam board GL Assessment itself confirmed in its research of 2009.

In addition to the exam system, developments in the curriculum also discriminate against some SEND students. We have already heard about the EBacc, which the Minister appeared to regard as a measure of success among students, but in fact that measure does not work well for SEND children, and neither do some of the back-to-basics traditional teaching methods that are now being applied at GCSE in English and maths.

All this means that, in practice, the non-selective schools in Trafford end up taking a disproportionately large number of children with special educational needs. I must say in their defence that those schools do exceptionally well for those children, but it puts those schools under huge pressure and often means that parents cannot get their children into them, even though they are the local schools, because the children with special needs and statements have to take priority for the available places. Those schools also struggle to maintain sixth forms, which means they sometimes struggle to recruit the most academically specialist teachers. In practice, children in those schools are not necessarily getting the chance to have the best education and the best teaching.

It is my firm belief that greater expansion of grammar schools would make a bad situation even worse for SEND children in Trafford. I am therefore particularly concerned that the Green Paper makes no mention of SEND children at all. I specifically raised this matter with the Secretary of State on the very first occasion after the summer recess that we discussed selective education in early September, and she assured me that those children would receive careful consideration by Ministers. They do not make an appearance in the Green Paper at all. Yet, as I hope I have shown this afternoon, all my experience is that the proposals to expand the number of grammar schools will impact most negatively on those children. As the Alliance for Inclusive Education pointed out, 87% of respondents in a recent Nasen survey—this is the body of SEND professionals—said that they, too, believed that the expansion of selection would have a negative impact on those kids.

Ministers owe a very special obligation to those children—a special obligation to ensure that they can fulfil their potential, make the most of their education, and be included and educated alongside other kids. The Trafford experience shows that the opposite is true.

[Kate Green]

The result is that we are failing to protect the rights and interests of disabled children, and it is endemic to the selective system to fail to do so. I would argue that it is also at odds with our international obligations under the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as our obligation to serve the best interests of every child.

If the Green Paper and the Government really want schools that work for SEND students, here are some of the things that I would like Ministers to look at that I believe will work. They should ensure that there is a special educational needs co-ordinator and a dedicated SEND champion on every school leadership team. They should ensure that there are strong, firm processes for school-to-school knowledge exchange and opportunities for children in special needs schools to share some of their learning with children in mainstream schools. They should ensure that all SEND children receive the best-quality teaching and look at how school funding can incentivise teachers to be in schools to educate those kids. Overall, they should look at the resources, the inspection regime and the incentives for schools to give special attention to the needs of children with special needs and disabilities.

That is what I would have liked the Green Paper to concentrate on, and it is what I would like to see Ministers concentrate on now. I hope that the Minister will say this afternoon that he is prepared to consider rethinking and re-prioritising away from these damaging and divisive proposals, which do very little for a very large number of children in my constituency and which have the potential to do considerable harm to more children right around the country.

2.59 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on providing the stimulus for the debate. The House will possibly be pleased to learn that I have not a great deal to add to her forensic introductory analysis, but let me begin with some obvious admissions. There are excellent grammar schools, and no doubt we could all name some. Grammar schools, like all good schools, do a fair amount for social mobility, and it is probably not wise to dismantle a successfully functioning grammar school.

None of that, however, amounts to a defence of the grammar school system—a system that undeniably separates children at the age of 11 according to simple exam performance, which is taken as a proxy for their innate ability and potential. It is a very poor proxy, based on very poor and dated research conducted back in the 1950s. It is no sort of proxy for innate ability or potential, which is often discovered much later in a child's career. It is also—as we heard from the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) a few moments ago—a slightly arbitrary procedure, because whether a child passes or fails depends on whether there are grammar school places in the area and whether there are sufficient places. I passed my 11-plus, but when I arrived at my grammar school, I was placed firmly in the D stream. I wonder what would have happened had there only been a three-form entry.

The House would probably not be burdened with my remarks here and now, and indeed my whole future might have been quite different.

It is not socially desirable to separate children into passes and failures at the age of 11. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has just described emotively how bad it can be: after all, those children will have to mix with each other at some point later in life. However, it is not educationally sensible either.

My first job after I left university with a philosophy degree was teaching English at a secondary modern school. It was a good secondary modern school: it had streaming and uniforms, and much of the paraphernalia that good schools are supposed to have. After a year, it amalgamated with Bootle Grammar School—Bootle being a very deprived area—and became a comprehensive. I then became the form teacher of a mixed class, half ex-grammar school boys and half secondary modern school pupils. Six months on, it was impossible to tell who had started in the secondary modern and who had started in the grammar school, in terms of attainment, ability and attitude, and in many other respects. A year earlier, however, their destiny, their curriculum, their status, their feelings about themselves, their aspirations, their whole future—and how they were regarded—would have been markedly different.

In those days, most secondary modern school pupils in Bootle left without taking any public exams, and without aspirations; but at that stage—the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) made this point—they had jobs to go to. They could work on the docks; they could work as labourers. There were car factories around. Unskilled work was available in abundance.

I subsequently went to teach at a Catholic high school, also in Bootle. It was a former grammar school which had amalgamated with a secondary modern, St Joan of Arc, and no single pupil in its entire history had ever taken a public exam apart from the Bootle school leaving certificate, which has limited cachet nowadays. When pupils left, most of them got jobs on the docks. We know that jobs of that sort have gone, and gone for good, but there are still too many white working-class kids, boys and girls, with low aspirations and low attainment, who are likely to fail any 11-plus that is put in their way as an obstacle.

That is the problem, and the Minister knows it is the problem. It is a big economic problem for our country, and it is a big problem of ours that has been identified internationally. It is what is known as the tail. It is a huge problem, and we have had enormous difficulty in addressing it. I should like the Minister to tell me how grammar schools help to deal with it. How does plucking the brightest children out of comprehensives help? How can grammar schools solve the problem of the tail?

We have never really had a problem with making clever kids cleverer; our problem is with raising the average and closing the gap. The grammar school/secondary modern model only really worked in a world in which a basic education gave a job for life. That is no longer the case, and as far as I can see, education policy can no longer be based on nostalgia. It must be based firmly on evidence, and there is no evidence in favour of the Government's current proposals.

3.4 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing the debate, which is very timely, and on her impassioned speech.

Labour is obviously committed to an education system for everyone, not just a select few, and we will oppose this regressive policy of grammar school expansion every step of the way. The Prime Minister spoke about delivering for everyone, but what matters is what she does, and her actions reveal the Government's true colours: working in the interests of the few while everyone else is left behind; in one breath talking of creating a "great meritocracy", and in the next announcing a return to grammar schools.

However, it is not just Opposition Members who oppose the policy. Grammar schools will not improve the lives of the many. As the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) has just pointed out, it is not desirable to fail children at the age of 11. Even the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said that rejecting the stale old grammars debate was a "key test" of whether the Conservative party was fit for government. He described the debate as "backward looking", "completely delusional", and "an electoral albatross". He rightly pointed out that parents wanted us to do something about the standards in many of the 3,000 secondary schools, rather than tying ourselves in knots over the return of grammar schools.

The chief inspector of schools, Michael Wilshaw, has said:

"The notion that the poor stand to benefit from the return of grammar schools strikes me as quite palpable tosh and nonsense—and is very clearly refuted by the London experience."

A number of Members have alluded to that experience today. The implementation of the London challenge fund revolutionised education in the capital, but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, other schemes, such as Greater Manchester's, were cut in 2010 as a result of austerity measures.

The Conservative Chair of the Education Select Committee, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), who spoke so well today, told Radio 4's "The Westminster Hour" recently:

"We have serious issues about social mobility, in particular white working-class young people"

—that, too, was mentioned by the hon. Member for Southport—

"and I don't think that having more grammar schools is going to help them."

Lord Willetts, the former Universities Minister, who is now the chair of the think-tank the Resolution Foundation, said that he had not changed his views since the Conservatives were in opposition and that the evidence suggested that they had failed to help disadvantaged children.

Fewer than 3% of children on free school meals attend grammar schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) spoke eloquently about social mobility in that context. Only today, as we have heard, every headteacher in Surrey signed a letter to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State opposing the expansion of grammar schools. The Government, however, are simply not listening, even though there is no evidence to support the policy.

I mentioned austerity a little earlier. According to the National Union of Teachers and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, England's schools are experiencing the largest real-terms funding cuts for more than a generation. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, schools face unprecedented pressures, and, as we heard from the hon. Member for Stroud, the Government have yet to announce when they will consult on the fair funding formula. In real terms, schools will lose a huge amount of money, rising to £2.5 billion a year by 2020, and 92% of schools will have their funding cut. The average cut for primary schools will be £96,500, and the average cut for secondary schools will be £290,000. The average loss per primary school pupil will be £401, and the average loss per secondary school pupil will be £365. 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, so the schools budget is at the mercy of rising pressures, pupil numbers and the impact of inflation on true value.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on the issues facing schools today. On the budget, is he aware of the impact of the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) about fewer children now being in receipt of free school meals and therefore the pupil premium? As a result, the budgetary pressures are greatest on schools in the most deprived areas, and the families themselves are often no better off despite not requiring free school meals and the pupil premium.

Mike Kane: That is an excellent point. Schools in poorer areas are certainly feeling the budgetary pressures. Traditionally, we had a system of subsidiarity in education funding, but this Government are trying to pull that away. On top of the figures I have just given, schools are now worried about being further punished in the fair funding formula that the Government have yet to consult on.

The freedom to practise faith and to educate children in a faith—or not—of our choosing is one of the cornerstones of the free and diverse democratic society we enjoy. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) made a strong defence of faith and faith schools in our system. The grammar school row has been a distraction from the lifting of the 50% cap rule on faith schools. This policy was brought in by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). One of his first acts as Education Secretary was to require all new schools of a religious character to be open to admitting 50% of pupils from outside their faith. The measure was aimed primarily at Muslim schools, but paradoxically it had almost no impact on them. The right hon. Lady alluded to this point when she talked about the situation in Blackburn. This measure did, however, prevent the expansion of other faith schools, which has led to real shortages and a lack of choice in many parts of the country. The policy has been an abject failure. Governments must consider more sensible approaches to integration, such as establishing effective twinning arrangements with schools of different faiths, considering setting up mixed-faith academy trusts, and considering that a member of a different faith or none can sit on a governing body.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The point I was trying to make is that social geography is what determines the profile of the pupils drawn from the catchment, and there are fundamental reasons in society why particular groups tend to live in particular areas, often not unrelated to the cost of housing. But the Church of England's open-to-all policy should mean that pupils of all faiths and none have access to the school that is nearest to them.

Mike Kane: Faith schools also generally draw from a wider catchment area, which means they often draw pupils from a poorer subsection of society. Over 80% of them are doing well or outstandingly well, so it is no wonder that parents currently want to send their children to them. I take on board the right hon. Lady's point, however.

Labour wants the best for all our children. As a teacher during the previous Labour Government, I saw the roofs fixed or the schools rebuilt, I saw class sizes go down and attainment go up, and I saw unparalleled investment in our early years. But under this Government, we have a black hole in education funding. As pointed out in the eloquent speech of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), there was no mention in the Green Paper of special educational needs. We have a crisis in teacher morale, recruitment and retention, and we have scandal after scandal in academy trusts due to the lack of effective oversight. There is also chaos over the national funding formula and incompetence with regard to the testing and assessment criteria on a scale not seen before. It is a shame that Parliament does not have the equivalent of Ofsted to assess the competence of the Government; if it did, the Government Front-Bench team would no doubt find itself in special measures.

3.15 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) on securing this welcome and important debate on a crucial issue facing our country.

The Government are determined to deliver the good school places this country needs. Since 2010, more than 1.4 million more pupils are in good or outstanding schools, and we have created over half a million new school places in that period, in direct contradiction to the last Labour Government, who cut 200,000 primary school places at a time when the birth rate was increasing.

Yet too often, parents do not have the choice of a good school place for their child. In 65 local authorities, fewer than half of children have access to a good or outstanding secondary school within three miles of their home. For these pupils, the chance of getting the best education depends not on talent or hard work, but on where they live and how much money their parents have.

The focus of the Government under this Administration and the previous one has been on driving up standards in schools, so that every child receives the education they need to reach their potential. Thanks to the hard work of hundreds of thousands of teachers and the reforms we have introduced over the past six years, our school system has improved dramatically.

The Government have reformed the primary curriculum, so that it is on a par with the best in the world. Evidence-based teaching practice such as "maths mastery" and "systematic synthetic phonics" is revolutionising the way primary pupils are being taught maths and how to read. This year, as a result of our reforms, 147,000 more year 1 pupils are on-track to becoming fluent readers than in 2012.

Lucy Powell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I am happy to give way the shadow shadow Secretary of State.

Lucy Powell: The Minister is highly amusing. On a more serious point, I am sure I will disagree with much in his speech, but I have to take issue with him if he is coming to this House to talk about this year's SATs results. Is he pleased that after the chaos and confusion he has caused in this year's SATs, at key stage 2 we saw a drop in the proportion of those meeting national expectations from over 80% to just 53%? Is he happy with that appalling drop in results?

Mr Gibb: The standards are significantly higher, and schools are raising their game and adapting to the new significantly higher standards. Some 66% of primary school pupils reach the expected standard in the reading tests and 70% reach the expected standard in maths. The hon. Lady is right that the combined reading, writing and maths result came to 53% but that is for the first year of the significantly more demanding SATs, based on a significantly more demanding national curriculum that puts our school system on a par with the best education systems in the world. That is the way to prepare young people for life in modern Britain and life in a globalised competitive world.

Lucy Powell: Many parents and teachers listening will be aghast at that. I give the Minister one more opportunity to apologise to teachers and parents for the fact that the Government did not embed those changes properly and did not give enough time to teachers and that the poor kids who have just left year 6 have now been branded as not reaching the national expectation. There is no difference from the children or the teaching of the year before, but because of the difference he personally has made, those results have dropped by 30%. Will he apologise for that?

Mr Gibb: But the children are better educated as a consequence of a national curriculum that is more demanding and that requires children to become fluent readers and to understand grammar, punctuation and spelling, and to do long division and long multiplication instead of chunking and the grid method. Children will leave primary school better educated—more fluent readers and more fluent in arithmetic—as a consequence of our reforms.

These reforms do take time to embed, however. We published that new curriculum in 2013, and it became law in September 2014, but of course it will take some schools longer than others to adapt to it. But one thing I am sure of is that teachers up and down this country are conscientious; they are working hard and are responding very well to a brilliant, more demanding new curriculum.

In secondary education, we have ended grade inflation and empowered teachers and headteachers to deal with poor behaviour. We have also removed GCSE equivalents and prioritised the teaching of core academic subjects, so that more children are taught the knowledge they need to flourish. But we need to do more. There are still more than 1 million children in schools that are not good enough, and that is why we are consulting on a range of measures to look at more ways to increase the number of good school places. We want to tap into the knowledge and expertise of this country's world-leading universities and independent schools. We want to remove the restrictive regulations that are preventing more children from going to a high-quality faith school. We also want to end the ban on opening new grammar schools.

Faith schools make up around a third of all mainstream schools in England. As the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, the Church has 4,700 schools. Faith schools are more likely than non-faith schools to be rated as good or outstanding, with 89% of primary faith schools reaching those standards. The current rule, designed to promote inclusion by limiting the proportion of pupils that oversubscribed new faith free schools can admit on the basis of faith, has not worked to combat segregation. Worse, this burdensome regulation has become a barrier to some faith groups opening new schools. Most markedly, it is preventing the establishment of new Catholic schools. The absurdity of the current rule is exposed when we consider that Catholic schools are more ethnically diverse than other faith schools, more likely to be located in deprived communities and more likely to be rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. There is growing demand for them in this country. If this restrictive regulation is removed, the Catholic Church hopes to open up to 45 new schools by 2020, and the Church of England has said that it hopes to open up to 100 new schools in a similar timeframe.

With this greater freedom will come strict rules to ensure that every new faith school operates in a way that supports British values. We will also explore ways to use the school system to promote greater integration within our society, such as requiring new faith schools to establish twinning arrangements with other schools not of their faith. The Government are also consulting on lifting the ban on more grammar school places being created. Ofsted rates 99% of grammar school places as good or better, and 82% are rated outstanding. In a school system where over a million pupils are not getting the education they need and deserve, it cannot be right to prevent more good and outstanding selective school places from being created.

Lucy Powell: On that point, will the Minister look at the ban imposed by his Government on good and outstanding local authority schools opening new schools? Will he also ensure that maintained nursery schools—98% of which are also good or outstanding—can open new schools? That, too, has been banned by his Government.

Mr Gibb: We want a diverse education system. At the moment, 40% of secondary schools and nearly 80% of primary schools are still run by local authorities. We want to open that up to create a more diverse system of education with more providers coming in. That includes

providers such as the West London Free School, which the Opposition have severely criticised. It is providing very high-quality education. There are other examples of such a diverse system bringing in new providers, establishing parent groups and enabling teachers to establish their own schools. This is raising academic standards right across the system. We are proposing to scrap the ban on new grammar schools and to allow them to open where parents want them, with strict conditions to ensure that they improve standards for pupils across the school system.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that Torbay has retained some grammar schools as part of its schools mix. In the past, Torquay Academy, which was close to Torquay Boys' Grammar School, was not doing particularly well. However, following the establishment of a multi-academy trust and a partnership with the grammar school, the academy was for the first time rated as good by Ofsted in all categories earlier this year and, last month, it was for the first time listed in the top five schools in the west country. It is now providing outstanding education for its pupils, and I hope that the Minister will join me in congratulating Steve Margetts and his team. Does he agree that this proves definitively that there is no conflict in having good grammar schools and good other schools for everyone else?

Mr Gibb: I could not have put it any better. That is a classic example of a grammar school working with a non-selective school to raise the standards in both schools, and it is working extremely well. We want to see that replicated up and down the country, and that is what we are consulting on in our proposals.

Under our proposals, existing grammar schools and new grammar schools would be allowed to open only if they met strict conditions designed to ensure that increased numbers of less-well-off pupils have access to a selective education. The hon. Member for Wigan asked for evidence that the proposals would work. We know that selective schools are almost 50% more popular with parents than non-selective schools, based on the preferences expressed in the secondary school application process. The most recent GCSE figures show that pupils at grammar schools make significantly more progress, relative to their similarly able peers in comprehensives, with a progress 8 score in aggregate of plus 0.33, compared with the national average of nought. The results are even starker for pupils from less affluent backgrounds. Disadvantaged pupils from grammar schools are almost twice as likely to go to a top Russell Group university than their wealthier peers who attend comprehensive schools, and they are more than three times as likely to attend one of these prestigious universities as their comprehensively educated peers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

According to the Educational Policy Institute report, pupils at grammar schools achieve a third of a grade per subject higher than those at non-grammar schools, and 78% of highly able children—those who achieve level 5 at the end of primary school—who go to a grammar school achieve the EBacc, compared with 52% of highly able pupils who go to a comprehensive school. If we look at the Oxbridge entrance—

Kate Green *rose*—

Mr Gibb: I will give way to the hon. Lady when I have finished responding to the hon. Member for Wigan's points.

One in five of the state school-educated students at Oxford between 2012 and 2014 were from grammar schools. In Cambridge in 2015, 682 students came from the comprehensive sector and 589 from grammar schools, so almost as many students from the state sector came from 163 grammar schools as came from 2,800 comprehensive schools. Disadvantaged pupils are, as I have said, twice as likely to go to a Russell Group university.

The hon. Member for Wigan also asked me to praise some non-selective schools, and I am happy to do so. At the King Solomon Academy, 95% achieved five good GCSEs including English and maths. At the West London Free School, which she does not like, 37% qualify for the pupil premium and 46% achieve the EBacc. She also asked about capital spending. The 2015 spending review allocated £23 billion to all capital funding, including capital funding for 500 new free schools by 2020. I should add that none of that capital will be spent on schools without classroom walls, which the last Labour Government built in Knowsley and elsewhere. Those schools are now struggling to put those walls back at great expense.

Kate Green: A few moments ago, the Minister said that no new grammar school would be allowed to open without it accepting a certain proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Trafford, around 3% of children in grammar schools are on free school meals, compared with a borough-wide average of 11% or 12%. Will the Minister say whether existing grammar schools in Trafford will also be required to lift the proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds on their rolls? If not, why not?

Mr Gibb: If the hon. Lady had read the consultation document, she would have seen that page 28 states that we will require

“existing selective schools to engage in outreach activity... We therefore propose to require all selective schools to have in place strategies to ensure fair access.”

We want to extend the requirements to existing schools which, incidentally, is something that no Labour Member urged their Government to do over 13 years. This Government, however, are seeking to take measures to ensure that all grammar schools that want to expand and all new grammar schools do more to widen their social intake.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) mentioned alternative priorities for the Government. During his speech today and during the Select Committee hearings, he hinted that his alternative priority was Brexit, but he also mentioned the national funding formula, the transition from primary to secondary and post-16 literacy and numeracy. All three are priorities for this Government and we have taken and are taking action. We have already consulted on phase 1 of the national fair funding formula and will be consulting on phase 2 shortly. I have already described all the measures that we have taken to improve outcomes for primary school pupils, so that they are ready for secondary education.

Neil Carmichael *rose*—

Mike Kane *rose*—

Mr Gibb: I will give way to my hon. Friend and then to the shadow Minister.

Neil Carmichael: I just want to clarify one priority. It is not Brexit; it is ensuring that we make the best job of Brexit—there is a big difference. My other priority was primary schools and ensuring that they are all good and effective. The Minister reminded the House that 80% of primary schools are still in the custody, so to speak, of local authorities, so will he be thinking about ensuring that new grammar schools have links with those primary schools, some of which are where the biggest problems exist?

Mr Gibb: We have made extremely good progress in raising academic standards in primary schools in reading and mathematics with the knowledge-based primary curriculum. However, one of the conditions on which we are consulting is for new grammar schools to have relationships with feeder primary schools and to establish new feeder primary schools as part and parcel of the objective of widening the social intake into expanded, existing and new grammar schools.

Mike Kane: Will the Minister assure the House that no school will lose out as a result of the fair funding formula?

Mr Gibb: We have consulted on the principles that will drive the national funding formula. We had many responses to that consultation and we are working through them. We will say more in due course about the weighting that attaches to those different principles. We will then have another consultation and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will make his views known at that stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud also raised a concern about the proportion of pupils at grammar schools who are eligible for free school meals. He will of course know that central to the proposals in the consultation document is a requirement on all new grammar schools to take a proportion of pupils from lower income households.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) raised the issue of children with special educational needs and disabilities. She will know that all schools must make admission decisions over those with special educational needs and disabilities fairly. When a child with SEND meets a school's admission criteria of a selective school over academic ability, that will allow them to access the benefits of education at that school in just the same way as any other pupil. As I have said, we will expect selective schools to support non-selective schools and we will be looking to them to be engines of academic and social achievement for all pupils, whatever their background, wherever they are from and whatever their ability. Such support will benefit pupils with SEND in non-selective schools.

Two years ago, we made fundamental changes to how the SEND support system worked for families—the biggest change in a generation—putting children and young people with SEND at the heart of the process and ensuring that they are supported all the way through to adulthood. Since then, 74,200 young people have been given personalised education, health and care plans.

Lucy Powell: The Minister is using the flimsiest of evidence of how already high-attaining children have managed to break through all the barriers to get themselves to a grammar school in the first place—only 3,000 children in the entire country are on free school meals at a grammar school—to expand the policy. It is the most dubious use of evidence I have ever seen. He has not answered a single point raised by any Opposition Member about the wealth of evidence about selective systems as a whole and the widening attainment gap that they create. Bright Futures is a selective academy trust in Manchester that has palpably failed to transfer any good practice to Cedar Mount Academy, the other school that it was given in Manchester. When will the Government do something about that?

Mr Gibb: On that last point, I will write to the hon. Lady. There is nothing flimsy about the evidence that says that progress made in grammar schools is plus 0.33, which is way above the zero figure nationally. We want a higher proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and from low-income families to be going into grammar schools and selective education—that is our objective. That was never the objective of, or what was delivered by, the last Labour Government. We intend to address that issue; we acknowledge it and are taking action to deal with it. As well as the Oxford and Cambridge evidence, the other evidence I have cited compares level 5 pupils at grammar schools and at comprehensive schools; I am talking about all pupils, not just pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those in the grammar schools are significantly outperforming those others. [*Interruption.*]

It is a pity to interrupt the diatribe made by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) from a sedentary position, but may I just conclude by saying that this policy is not about returning to the binary system of the 1950s and 1960s, where the alternative to the grammar school was a secondary modern where pupils often did not even sit exams or take qualifications? Our reforms to the education system over the past six years have meant that 85% of schools are now good or outstanding, but we want 100% of schools to be that. We want areas of the country with poor academic results—for example, Blackpool, where just 9.2% of pupils achieve the English baccalaureate; Knowsley, where the figure is 10.4%, Middlesbrough, where it is 10.4%, Isle of Wight, where it is 13.3% and Hartlepool, where it is 13.7%—to be matching areas such as Southwark, whose figure is 35.6%, York, whose figure is 35%, and selective areas such as Sutton, where 45.8% achieve this. We want all those areas to achieve even higher levels of EBacc attainment, but the lowest-performing areas are our concern. Establishing new selective schools and new high-performing faith schools will help drive up academic standards in those areas. It cannot be right that in 65 local districts fewer than half of the secondary school age pupils are within 3 miles of a good secondary school. It cannot be right that there are still 1.25 million pupils in schools that are simply not good enough.

The motion asks this House to note the Government's proposals to expand the role of grammar and faith schools, as set out in our consultation document "Schools that work for everyone" and "calls on the Government to conduct a full assessment of the evidence".

That is what we have done; that is what we continue to do; and that is what we will do as we consider all the responses to the consultation document when that consultation closes on 12 December. Hon. Members should be under no misapprehension: this Government are determined to ensure that every child has the quality of education that helps them fulfil their potential. That is the drive behind all our reforms over the past six years, and it is the objective behind the proposals to end the ban on new grammar schools and the restrictions on new good school places in our faith schools.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I call Lisa Nandy. You have two minutes in which to wind up.

3.38 pm

Lisa Nandy: All this motion did was ask the Minister to consider the evidence before us and to pause for a moment and reflect before setting this country on a path that will damage children's life chances and the economic prospects of this country as a whole. Instead, throughout this debate, and especially in his closing remarks, he has given this House the strong impression that he will have to be dragged kicking and screaming before he confronts the reality of what the evidence tells us about children's life chances and the educational system in this country. He has done absolutely nothing during this debate to tell us how much the Government intend to spend on these reforms and what impact there will be on the schools budget overall and, therefore, on children who do not attend grammar schools.

The Minister barely mentioned the serious issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) raised about special educational needs. The point she was making to the Minister, based on experience of having seen this in her area, was that discrimination against those children is intrinsic to the system that he is proposing. He continued to cite evidence that was at best flimsy and at worst deliberately misleading. The Russell Group evidence that he cited ignores any issue around prior attainment, and he selectively quoted the Education Policy Institute. He holds up the EBacc as a measure of educational success and he ignored the evidence on Oxbridge admissions. This is a Minister who is looking for evidence to inform his policy.

I asked the Minister finally to acknowledge for the first time that comprehensive schools around this country are good schools that have something to offer their pupils and pupils in other schools. Instead, his answer was insulting to the majority of schools, the majority of teachers and the majority of parents, and therefore to the majority of children. He will have learned in today's debate that many of us on both sides of the House do not agree with him. We will seek to ensure that the Government do not proceed with these utterly divisive, disgraceful plans.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes recent proposals by the Government to expand the role of grammar and faith schools; and calls on the Government to conduct a full assessment of the evidence relating to the effect of grammar schools and faith schools on children's learning.

Veterans and Service Personnel

3.41 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel.

I hope that after a clearly rancorous and divisive debate, we might find more common ground as, in the season of remembrancetide, we consider the issues facing a new generation of veterans and service personnel across our country. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and colleagues from across the House for supporting the application for this timely opportunity to discuss these issues as we approach Remembrance Sunday. In particular, I thank the Royal British Legion for inspiring me to apply for the debate through its remarkable campaign to rethink remembrance, which I shall come on to shortly.

I am proud of the steps taken by successive Westminster Governments, as well as devolved Governments and local government, and the efforts of so many charities up and down the country to support veterans and service personnel. There are many areas in which we could do better and do more, and I will talk about some of those, but we also need to recognise the successes. In particular, I note the previous Labour Government's efforts on the veterans badge, which was an important symbol of recognition to many veterans. I note the efforts of the Co-operative party, of which I am a member, to establish a military credit union to support people and avoid their getting into debt. We can cite many other examples, but it is important in such debates that we recognise that there is concern, at all levels and in all parts of government, to ensure that we do right by our service personnel and their families, wherever and whenever they served.

I have had the pleasure of meeting representatives, and seeing at first hand the work, of the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, Help for Heroes and many other charities, small and large, up and down the country, including in my constituency. Penarth pier pavilion has named a room in its fantastic new facilities on the pier in honour of 617 Squadron; Guy Gibson was famously a resident of Penarth. That room is being used for fellowship and by charities to support veterans and former service personnel living in Penarth.

Another innovative step is the work of Pizza Pronto, a pizza service in Cardiff Bay and Penarth set up by former personnel: Kevin Halborg and Simeon Rabaiotti. Kevin is an ex-commando and takes great pride every year in ensuring that Pizza Pronto is covered with poppies in honour of remembrancetide. The funds that he raises from that go to the work of the legion and other charities and to work supporting personnel who might have served alongside him, or might have served decades before. They do fantastic work.

For many people, the image that springs to mind when they hear about such work, particularly that of the legion, is the iconic poppy. I have my poppy on today, and my wristband, too. The poppy is distributed during the poppy appeal in late October and early November. We also see iconic scenes of poppies falling at the festival of remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall; I had the privilege of attending that two years ago.

The Royal British Legion makes it clear that although its role as the nation's custodian of remembrance, and especially the ceremonies of remembrance, is important, its work and the work of other charities does not stop there. The legion's Live On theme has made it clear that its focus is as much on the here and now, and on working to improve the lives of veterans and serving members of the armed forces—and their families, crucially—in every way imaginable. I have seen that work locally and nationally, whether the handy vans that can make quick repairs to veterans' homes, or the excellent new pop-in centres. A pop-in centre is available to my constituents. It is in Cardiff city centre, not my constituency, but I have had the pleasure of visiting it and seeing the face-to-face support that is offered in new and innovative ways. The legion's promise

“To the memory of the fallen and the future of the living”

sums up very aptly what it and others are trying to do.

I have been on my own journeys of remembrance this year, remembering the great conflicts of the past. Thanks to the efforts of the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), I was able to travel with other members of the all-party group for the armed forces to Normandy. We visited Southwick House before we travelled over. In Normandy, we saw some of the beaches where that generation of incredibly brave men and women from not just Britain, but across the Commonwealth, the United States, France and other countries fought to defend our freedoms and defeat the tyranny of Nazi Germany.

I also visited the Somme this year. I took my own trip; I wanted to see some of the locations, particularly on the 100th anniversary. I visited Mametz wood, so famous for the sacrifice of Welsh troops who fought so bravely there. I walked into the wood and saw many moving tributes, often left by descendants and family members of those who had lost their lives or been terribly injured there. I travelled to Beaumont-Hamel, the site of terrible losses by the Newfoundland regiment on the first day of the Somme. I travelled up to Pozières on the Albert-Bapaume road, where George Butterworth, the famous composer of “A Shropshire Lad” and “The Banks of Green Willow” lost his life 100 years before the very day that I visited. In a small mark of tribute, I played his beautiful, stunning and moving music as I travelled through that iconic French countryside that had been scarred so brutally 100 years before.

I attended the RAF Battle of Britain memorial in Penarth, which is an annual event. We had a brilliant turnout from the air cadets and service charities, particularly the local branches of the Royal Air Forces Association and others, recognising the role that people from our community had played in the battle for our freedoms.

We paid tribute recently to Members of this House—our predecessors—who lost their life. My predecessor as MP for parts of Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan, Lord Ninian Crichton-Stuart, lost his life when he was in his early 30s in 1915 in the battle of Loos. He is commemorated here on a wall and on the memorial as we enter through St Stephen's.

I attended a merchant navy memorial service in Cardiff Bay to recognise the sacrifice of mariners not only in our Royal Navy but in the merchant navy. Mariners came from around the world; their heritages were wide and varied. We have a strong community of people from Somaliland and Yemen in my constituency, many

of whom served our country bravely during both world wars. Their names were commemorated at that inter-faith service; there were representatives from the Muslim, Jewish and Hindu religions and from different Christian denominations, all paying their respects to those who fell.

I thought about my own family. I have written about this and spoken about it in the House before, but I thought about my great-grandfather Peter Marsh, who served in the King's Own Scottish Borderers, we believe at the Somme. He returned from world war one having been gassed, and was traumatised for the rest of his life. My grandfather James Smith fought in the battle of Arnhem and also in the battle of Sicily. He was taken as a prisoner of war after he landed in a Horsa glider. He was shot running across the fields and was taken to Stalag 5B in Germany.

I also discovered a new story, which exposed for me the amazing role that women played in both world wars in keeping this country going through its darkest hours. My great-grandmother Hannah Marsh, Peter Marsh's wife, served in a secret ordnance factory in the area of Gretna and Eastriggs. There is a museum there called the Devil's Porridge. A former cotton worker from Wigan, she had gone up there with her sister and had been involved in producing the armaments that were needed in world war one. The women were exposed to great risk while mixing vats of nitroglycerine and other chemicals, and their skin was often stained yellow or green by those processes. The remarkable role that women played in active service and behind the scenes in both world wars must never be forgotten.

As the Royal British Legion said this year, we need to rethink remembrance. Although we must and will always recognise the sacrifice of the world war generations, we also need to think about those who served in conflicts since world war two. The legion has put out four very moving 60-second films featuring the experiences of a younger generation of armed forces members. In each film, a story of conflict or injury is narrated by a second world war veteran aged between 88 and 97, in military dress, some proudly wearing their berets and medals. At the end it is revealed that the stories belong not to the speaker, but to a younger veteran or member of the armed forces aged between 29 and 34. Those films have been released to emphasise the commonality in the experiences of veterans from age to age. The legion is urging people to support the poppy appeal this year in aid of younger veterans as well as older ones.

Let me relate a couple of the stories. Roy Miller, 92, a Navy veteran from Wallington in London, narrates the experiences of Stewart Harris, 32, who served in 1st Battalion the Welsh Guards for 13 years. Stewart Harris got remarkable help from ABF The Soldiers Charity when his family was burgled in 2014. He suffered brain damage and was left blind in his right eye and partially deaf after the Mastiff vehicle in which he was travelling was hit by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan in 2012. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and said, his words being spoken by the older veteran, "I was so low, I was shouting at the kids, getting angry at my wife. I begged her to leave me. I felt alone, helpless. I was taught that soldiers don't discuss feelings."

Royal Navy veteran Marsie Taylor, 97, from London, reads the story of Corporal Ben Poku, 34, also from London, who is still serving; he works as a nurse on the

neuro rehabilitation ward at Headley Court. Geoffrey Pattinson, 92, a sergeant with 9th Battalion the Parachute Regiment during the second world war, shares the experience of Sam Jack, 29, from Stansted in Essex, who served for five years in the Army with 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal), like my cousin Kevin. Sam Jack was shot by friendly fire in 2009 while on patrol in Afghanistan. His story is narrated by the older veteran: "I can't remember my injury. One minute my mates were all there, the next I'm in hospital. I couldn't speak, couldn't move."

Royal Navy veteran Jim Radford, 88, from London, thought to be Britain's youngest D-day veteran, narrates what happened to Anna Pollock, 34, from Catterick in north Yorkshire. She is a former medic in the Royal Air Force who completed two tours of Iraq but has been left heavily reliant on a wheelchair following a sudden bleed on her spine. She says, in words read by Mr Radford, "I love the feeling of being strong. I'm not weak, I'm a warrior. I'll never stop mourning the person I used to be, but I'm beginning to like the person I've become." Those are all very powerful stories, and I encourage anyone who has not watched the films to do so and to share them widely. They speak to the link between generations and the shared experiences.

The campaign is needed because one of the legion's surveys showed that most adults associate remembrance, the poppy, and the Royal British Legion's work with the two world wars and elderly veterans. Just over a third of those surveyed identified remembrance with thinking about those who are currently serving or who have recently left the forces.

I have done my own work with the legion locally, which gave me an insight into the experiences of veterans of more recent conflicts. I took part in a programme called Journey into the Legion, in which we spent a year looking at the legion's four central activities—representation, comradeship, remembrance and welfare. I vividly remember during that year meeting two legion beneficiaries, Neil Adams and Dave Ireland. Neil served in the Royal Marines from 2005 to 2012 and saw active service in Afghanistan and numerous worldwide deployments. After leaving the Marines he took up a career in personal training and fitness and was trying to set up his own business. He received valuable support from the legion and other charitable trusts to buy equipment for his business and get going, taking the first step in civilian life and success in business.

Dave Ireland served with the Queen's Dragoon Guards from 1988 to 1993. After service he worked in the telecoms industry, but he ended up being supported by the legion with essential housing goods and financial advice after he got into difficulties. He said:

"The Legion does vital work in so many ways and people need to recognise the broad range of work they do. The Legion was there for me when I needed a helping hand more than ever, and because of that, I am now looking forward and getting on with my life."

Most memorably, I met a gentleman called Andy Davies, who served as an RAF technician at St Athan. It is a location I know well, because my father was a councillor there and my mum taught in the local school—indeed, they had had contact with Andy when he was still serving there. For him to come and tell me his story at the remembrance ceremony in the field of poppies at Cardiff castle was incredibly moving. He told me that

[Stephen Doughty]

when he had known my parents he was doing well in his RAF career; he had a family and a home, and everything was going well. He then told me how he was made redundant when the various maintenance units were shut down in 2006. He descended into chronic alcoholism, ended up sleeping rough and lost his family. He was even in prison for a period. Thanks to the support of SSAFA and the legion, he got into rehabilitation and got sober. He has taken incredible steps in his life. It was a really moving story.

For Andy to have not only made that incredible journey, but been able to talk about it to other people showed the utmost bravery. That courage was already clear from his service history, but it was also clear when he told his story. He spoke powerfully about the challenges he had faced, for example in relation to benefits, housing and accessing services. I encounter many such cases in my work as a constituency MP, as I am sure many other colleagues do.

Andy told me about some of the other issues he had faced. He told me that identification is crucial:

“From time to time I call into the local service providers. They say, ‘Hello Andy. Were you a squaddie?’ I will tell...that is like asking a Canadian which state in the U.S. they are from! I am conscious that squaddies are very proud of the cap badge they wore, so in order to preserve dignity and self-respect the language of ex-service personnel needs to be properly understood, particularly if they are struggling.”

He had been an RAF serviceman. We can all see the types of mistakes that could cause.

We need to be aware of the scale of the challenge we face. How many of us are really familiar with the numbers regarding the most recent veterans? Kings College London and Help for Heroes have produced research showing that between 1991 and 2014, some 757,805 regulars served in the British armed forces; 235,187 were deployed on one or more major operations, and an estimated 36,506 were medically discharged. They have done an extensive study, and estimate that at least 66,000 ex-regulars—this does not include the issues for reservists—need or will need support with physical or mental health issues, let alone other issues. They told me that they have upwards of 9,000 people taking part in their fellowship groups, and over 800 taking part in their Hidden Wounds programme, which deals with anxiety issues, particularly lower-level anxiety. Referrals to Combat Stress are up by 71%.

There are many other statistics that we could go through to identify the scale of the challenge that we will face in the coming years. Help for Heroes really wanted to impress on me the importance of the right services being available to people. There is a tendency to focus on higher-profile conditions, particularly PTSD—Combat Stress and others do amazing work with people in those circumstances—but it is important that people with lower-level anxiety get the support that they need.

We also need to think about the needs of different generations, and the differences between people who did national service, and those who served in the cold war, the British Army of the Rhine, the Falklands, Northern Ireland, Germany, the Balkans, and the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We also need to think about attitudes. The Help for Heroes study showed that 82% of respondents think that British

troops and veterans need more support when they return home, and 75% think that veterans are forgotten once they return home. However, only 7% of the public knew how many troops actually served in Afghanistan, and less than 1% knew how many troops served in Iraq to the nearest 20,000. Less than 3%—this is quite shocking—knew that British troops are currently posted to over 80 countries globally. Only 5% knew how many conflicts the UK has been involved in since the Falklands war.

Those are among the issues that have led the Royal British Legion to come up with their campaign, and that led me to secure this debate. We need to rethink the profile of the veterans and service personnel in our country, and the scale of, and differences in, their experiences and needs, whether in health, housing, support on engagement with benefits and tax services, or getting into employment.

Younger veterans face particular issues. How are we ensuring, for example, that services are signposted properly through digital methods? The Government are setting up a new website, one-stop shop and one-stop phone line—great. But are we thinking about how younger people who have recently left the forces are engaging, through social media, online apps and so on? My experience with local veterans is that they often struggle to find the right sort of advice and progress.

I am sure that other colleagues will want to go into detail on some of the specific issues, but I want to make one last point. It is shame that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), is not here today. He has his own distinguished service record, and he and the Minister had an extensive exchange the other day about specific issues. The hon. Gentleman raised some really important points about the plethora of charities and different organisations.

The one point that I would like to open the debate with is how we can work better to co-ordinate and build partnerships and relationships. There are many good examples at local government level. Vale of Glamorgan has set up a community covenant and great work is also taking place in Cardiff. There is more great work in Cumbria, Lancashire and other places, but progress is too patchy. The armed forces covenant report from last year points out what the services charities say. We have to consider how we can better co-ordinate the different services, particularly when faced with the scale of the challenge and the needs and diversity of people who will need our support for the years to come.

It is crucial that we rethink remembrance, not out of disrespect for the generations before—they will always have our respect and gratitude for what they did for us—but because we need to think about the challenges facing the younger generation. I hope this debate will take some steps towards eliminating some of those issues.

4.2 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate, which is so important in this important week. It is a great opportunity to stand up and talk about our exceptional armed forces—the personnel and their families, who quietly support them all. Our forces have the best training in the world. We are renowned; other nations come to Britain to be part of what we do here.

What I find extraordinary in the work that I am doing with the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust is the depth of patriotism in every single member of the armed forces as they put themselves in harm's way on our behalf. Their families quietly support that wish. Members of the armed forces are very happy to go and do exciting and dangerous things too, but fundamentally there is an extraordinary patriotism and belief in our great nation. The Royal British Legion's work, which the hon. Gentleman highlighted so well, shows a profound respect for the patriotism, effort and risk that these individuals take on our behalf.

The key point is that every member of our serving armed forces will become a veteran; that is a self-evident truth in many ways, although we do not necessarily think about it. The fact that nearly three quarters of a million members of our communities have served in the armed forces since 1991 is extraordinary. Having set up the all-party group on the armed forces covenant when I arrived in the House last year, I am a huge fan of the fact that the former Prime Minister set into law the belief that the covenant should be a total commitment for the nation as a whole to embrace, to ensure that our military family suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service to our nation.

I begin by asking about how we are doing. This is a journey; to go from a standing start to creating a legislative framework, and moving forward in supporting those serving, and their families and veterans of all ages, is a long and complex thing. I pay enormous tribute to the Ministry of Defence, which drove forward the challenge set by the Prime Minister to put the covenant into law. Some really interesting work has been going on over the last six years to do that.

I have RAF Boulmer and the Otterburn Ranges in my patch, so I see a lot of young men and women doing training of all sorts. One of the key challenges I have found is that our serving personnel and their families have no voice, and that is part of the contract they make when they take the Queen's shilling and stand at the frontline on our behalf. It is so important that we in this House can be their voice, because they want to serve, and they grin and bear it as they face all sorts of things that are unimaginable to a lot of us in our daily civilian lives. We must make sure that we speak up for them in this House, so it is fantastic that this debate is taking place.

I want to mention just a couple of charities I do a lot of work with. One, which I have recently become a patron of, is called Forward Assist. It is based in Northumberland, and it is run by an amazing man called Tony Wright, who is a former Royal Marine. He explained to me how he views the journey of those who serve, and his explanation sticks in my mind—if I could do cartoons, I would turn it into one. He said that we go out and seek young men and women to become members of our armed forces—they are the sheep, and we pick the sheep from the great flock that is our nation. We then turn them into wolves; that is quite a harsh statement, but that is what we do—we take them and we train them to the nth degree to become incredibly honed fighters, able to defend us with all the tools we provide them with. They then go out and fight, and they live in teams—in packs, as wolves do—fighting for us and taking on the enemy.

However, when they leave the armed forces, what do they do? They become a veteran. What is that? What we need them to become is sheepdogs. We will never turn wolves back into sheep, but if we get things right, we might just turn them into sheepdogs. The sheepdog is one of the farmer's most important tools and a critical part of looking after the community. The challenge we have is to ensure that, as members of our armed forces become veterans and return to civilian life, we give them the tools to become sheepdogs and to lose the wolf—to park that as part of their history—so that they can live a full life as civilians, channelling their skills in new ways, and they have such extraordinary skills.

Forward Assist, this wonderful small charity in Northumberland, has developed a programme that ensures that, as these people—quite a lot of them are young men and women—come out, they maintain team activities. One of the key problems is that they live in teams—that is how they fight as military personnel—and they never work alone. However, they then come away from that environment, and ensuring that they maintain those relationships restores their confidence as they get to grips with civilian life.

We have to help veterans understand what their skills are. They have a very diffident view of the extraordinary talents they are given as they are trained to the nth degree, and they need to understand what those can be worth in the civilian world. So many do not value themselves, and we clearly have to challenge that. We have to ensure that we support the charities and organisations that help to empower these men and women to get into the modern workplace.

We also have to help veterans to get to grips with what one might call day-to-day life challenges. When people who have lived in an institutional framework as part of the armed forces, and who have been focused entirely on the defence of the realm, come back, they have to deal with a lot of stuff that they have not dealt with during that time. Those are critical things, which so many of our charities help these people to do, and we need to make sure that charities are able to do that.

Another charity that is a wonderful representation of how those who have served bring their talents to our communities is a small charity called Challenger Troop, which is run by Simon Dean. His team of veterans take the military ethos of discipline, self-belief, personal motivation and challenge and go into deprived communities. They take groups of children out into the big outdoors. Many of these children have never been beyond their small community, and he empowers them to discover who they can be. He tests them and pushes them to their limits, and that revolutionises the vision they have of what the world might offer them. It is extraordinary to watch the charity's staff do that and to hear how they talk about the challenge of helping those in our communities who have probably had little, if any, contact with the military to discover just how far they can go and to do what they thought they could not do. It is extraordinary to watch what the Royal Marines would call "commando morale", when at the point when someone thinks they cannot go any further, they keep going and find that they can do something extraordinary. That has been brought to our most deprived communities and children who otherwise would not have such opportunities.

[Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan]

A very small charity called PTSD Resolution does, in a baby way, what Combat Stress does, working individually with those who need psychological support to bring them through what can be a very traumatic side-effect of having dealt with these incredibly stressful environments, and quietly making sure that they can be supported. They may hold down really good jobs, but sometimes it becomes too hard. We have seen that this weekend with fireworks, which can often trigger PTSD-recurrent behaviour. It is extraordinary to know that there are people out there who understand and quietly provide that support, so that we ensure that the wolves can be sheepdogs, doing amazing jobs while sometimes feeling that parts of them have been damaged by their service.

As the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said, the big charities do extraordinary work across the board. They have been in the system for 100 years, looking after veterans from 1918 right through to now. We all support them at this time of year, and it is important that we make sure that people support them all year round.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is telling us about lots of laudable charities that are doing excellent work with veterans, but does she agree that the state has a role in supporting them fully rather than leaving it entirely to the charity sector?

Mrs Trevelyan: The hon. Lady makes an absolutely critical point. This is about the great question of what the covenant might become—how, as a nation, as a Government, and as Departments we might consider the best way to take it right through our nation's consciousness, so that we not only feel that it is a good thing but it becomes a reality across the board. Then, wherever serving personnel who come back into civilian life and their families live, the communities they return to understand, respect and support them, and can value and make best use of the extraordinary talents that they have brought back.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady is making some important points. Does she agree that one of the ways in which the Government could do more would be in ensuring the consistency of data on veterans? Many of us have been campaigning for the “Count them in” campaign to ensure that there is a question on the census, but there are also issues about what is included on the service leavers form—for example, it has signposts to only two charities and not to others. There are things we could be doing a lot better to understand who needs our support, where they are, and how we can get to them.

Mrs Trevelyan: I absolutely agree. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are working hard to see whether we can get the Cabinet Office to ensure that we have the census marker, because that will give us a starting point from which we can tackle the question of how big our military family is and how we are making sure that we look after them.

We all want our armed forces to be there when we need them, but in—thank goodness—times of peace here at home, we do not think that much about them, as

the statistics prove, horribly and truly. In reality, though, our armed forces are not sitting about in barracks with nothing to do, or on the dockside twiddling their thumbs. Our Navy is absolutely at full stretch across the oceans and under our seas, our Air Force is fully engaged in the fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and our Army is going through an extensive re-basing programme as troops return from Germany and we prepare for ongoing NATO operations in the face of uncertain times ahead.

I have serious concerns about the impact of the current levels of undermanning on families and on the retention of our highly trained personnel whom we cannot easily replace once lost. I worry that we are putting too great a strain on the offer to our serving personnel. As one recent veteran said to me only last week, “Redundancies, pay restraint, pensions slashed, new pay model, CAAS, FAM, and now future base closures. What a way to boost morale!” With the impact on the next generation of personnel as we recruit and want to retain them, it is critical that we understand what it looks like from the inside and how we can support those who are serving now, because they will be our future veterans and we need to make sure that we surround them with the right package to ensure that they will be able to serve for as long as they choose and we can hope to keep them.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate. Along with the new generation of service personnel, there will be a new generation of children, young people and young carers of veterans who are profoundly impacted by pre-deployment, deployment and reintegration. Does the hon. Lady agree that in existing policy documents, particularly around health and social care, we need to revisit the idea of the broader family supporting the veteran back into community and civilian life?

Mrs Trevelyan: I agree. It is absolutely critical that we look at a whole-family approach to military family support, and there is a lot more work to do. We have a small charity in Northumberland that supports the children of military family carers. The charity is working, with some support from the Department, on how we can understand that better and provide support in a more holistic way, with the hope of achieving a more constructive outcome.

Although there was much in the statement yesterday from the Secretary of State about better use of MOD estate assets and the technical side of things, we must actively start to value in a financial way—I speak as a chartered accountant, and I apologise if that lowers the tone—our armed forces personnel. They are our human capital. Our armed forces are often thought of as big tanks, shiny ships and fast jets, but none of that works without the humans making it work. Human capital is a critical military asset. People are vital to the whole process, and without them we have no armed forces. We do not value our military personnel as an asset. They are listed in MOD accounts as an overhead, and that fundamental mindset is a huge challenge. I challenge the Department regularly, as the Minister knows, to think differently. To assess, for instance, retention risk—how to keep our finest when we really need them—we need to look holistically across the MOD, on a value-for-money basis, at how we value those individuals.

The Minister is a great advocate of our personnel and veterans at a personal level, but I urge him to encourage the Department to adopt a more holistic perspective on how we invest in our human capital: the men and women of our Army, our Navy, our Air Force and our Royal Marines. Those people have spouses and children, without whose silent commitment and loyalty to our nation's protection we would not have the world-class armed forces that we are all so proud of and grateful for.

I had the unexpected privilege of attending the submariners' remembrance parade last Sunday. I still do not know why it happens the weekend before Remembrance Day, rather than on the main weekend; that must be one of the mysteries of submariners. It was an extraordinary privilege to meet an enormous number of men who had served—they were all men, although there are a few women who are serving now—in what is known as the silent service. That remarkable group of people, with whom I have previously had very little to do, have spent decades under our seas quietly and continuously looking after us, protecting us and keeping an eye on our enemies. They continue to do so day in, day out.

It is so important that the nation understands that this is a continuum. People are putting their lives on the line for us every day and every night. People such as the Northumberland Fusiliers who died in the third-to-last week of the war in 1918, for whom I am going to lay a wreath this Friday in Tezze in northern Italy, and William Chapman, whose grandson still lives in Berwick-upon-Tweed and has asked me to lay a special wreath for his family, were extraordinary men whom we must always remember. But today there are people serving across the globe—British men and women who are putting their lives on the line, and whose families are quietly waiting at home, supporting them. As we remember those who serve today and those who have gone before, we must never forget.

4.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to make a contribution to this debate, which is close to my heart and to the hearts of all of us in this Chamber. It is pertinent that the debate comes at this time of year. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on setting the scene so well. I think he speaks almost as fast I as I do.

This is the time of year when we see the poppy stands again. We are all wearing our poppies, and we are very much aware of the time of year. For the past few years, I have been anxious to see what new pins are available. The Royal British Legion usually brings out a new wee badge, and regimental associations do likewise. This is the time of year when we remember those who paid the ultimate sacrifice by giving their lives for the protection of Queen and country, and the families who have been left behind to grieve for them. It is always important to keep that foremost in our minds at this time of year. Every year, there are fewer veterans from the second world war. In the Royal British Legion, of which I am a member, we notice every year that some of the old soldiers have passed on. We miss them because they made a valuable contribution not just in uniform and on service, but in the Royal British Legion.

This is also the time of year when we remember those who have given their lives since the second world war—that is the thrust of this debate—in wars in the Falklands,

Iraq and Afghanistan and, of course, those who have lost their lives to terrorism in Northern Ireland. It is poignant that today is the 29th anniversary of the Enniskillen bombing, when the IRA directly attacked a number of service personnel and civilians. It is always good to remember such events. There have been many other atrocities in Northern Ireland, such as those at the Abercorn restaurant, on the Shankill Road and at La Mon restaurant. The atrocity at Ballydugan is pertinent to me, because three of the four Ulster Defence Regiment men who were murdered were friends of mine.

There was also the bombing in Ballykelly. I see that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is in his place. As he knows, we are all very fond of him in this House. We thank him for his contribution in uniform and for what he did during his time in Northern Ireland. The peace process today owes a lot to people like him. We thank him and several other hon. Members—I see them sitting in the Chamber—for their contribution in uniform and for helping us in Northern Ireland to move, through a peaceful process, to a new beginning. I say that in all sincerity, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I want to put on the record that we wish to thank him in person.

This is the time of year when we show respect for those who have died, those who were left with irreversible physical and mental injuries, and the families who have had to live a life that would never be the same again. This is therefore an apt time to discuss and raise awareness about our new generation of veterans.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth mentioned his visit to the Somme. In my former role as mayor of Ards Borough Council back in 1990-91, I was very privileged to go to the Somme. I will never forget the sacrifice of the 36th (Ulster) Division, or indeed the sacrifice of all those who gave their lives. We feel very close to the 36th (Ulster) Division. In this the centenary year of the battle, we certainly remember their sacrifice at the Somme.

I recall clearly the youth of those who died. Some young boys said they were 18 when they were only 14. When you go around the gravestones, if you have had the opportunity to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will see their ages and clearly understand that these young boys thought it would be over by Christmas, but it was not. We are very conscious of that. There would not have been a home in Newtownards that was not affected by the loss of the youth at the battle of the Somme in 1916.

I am an ex-soldier. I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years, in what I suppose was an anti-terrorism role and for 11 and a half years in part-time service in the Royal Artillery—14 and a half years in service. Some of my greatest experiences, other than the births of my sons, have been while wearing uniform. The births of my sons were obviously the best experiences of my whole life, although not for my wife; they were good experiences for her as well, but more painful ones.

I like to think that wearing that uniform has, in a way, shaped who I am today. I saw things and experienced things that are difficult to deal with, so I can easily understand that mental health support is needed by those in service if they are to make the transition back to civvy street. I will speak about that for a few minutes because we must always note that what happens to a soldier is not always physical. They may be mentally

[*Jim Shannon*]

and emotionally affected, with the trauma remaining in their brain. There is no doubt that service shapes those who serve; the question we must ask, however, is: how are people being shaped today? How are those who leave our armed forces today being shaped by what they have experienced, and how are we supporting their outcomes? That is what the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said in his introduction and it is what we seek to address today.

I have been an avid supporter of better mental health support for our troops, and I have worked hard for organisations such as SSAFA. I have been very privileged these past few years to hold a coffee morning—September or October is our coffee month—to raise money. This year, the people of Newtownards gave generously and committed some £5,500. Some of that was down to donations, of course, but at the end of the day, the people of Ards and the local district ensured that the £5,500 was there for SSAFA, so that it, in turn, could help those in need—those who have served in uniform but now find life very difficult. I understand that over the past seven years, £25,000 has been raised through those coffee mornings, which is good work.

What better organisation can there be than Help for Heroes? We all recognise its work in our constituencies and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have also been a supporter of Beyond the Battlefield, a project that seeks to make mental and physical health facilities available to veterans, not just in my area but across Northern Ireland. According to recent reports, those facilities are needed now more than ever before. The former Minister, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), when she visited Northern Ireland, had an opportunity to meet them, and I must say that they were impressed by her commitment to and interest in veterans' issues. I recognise, too, the commitment of the Minister here today but just wanted to put on the record my thanks to the right hon. Lady for making that time available. It left a lasting impression among the soldiers, and it was good to be reassured that at every ministerial level in the House and at home every effort was being made to address these issues. I also just wanted to highlight the work of Beyond the Battlefield

A few weeks ago, a BBC radio documentary highlighted the fact that 100 Army veterans in Northern Ireland had tried to take their own lives—that can only be described as epidemic levels. We need to recognise the enormity of what is happening. It is particularly tragic because the regimental associations, the health services, the MOD and the charities were not aware of those soldiers; they were under the radar. I asked about this in an Adjournment debate a fortnight or so ago, when the Minister was in his place, but it is good to put it on the record again, with a bit more detail, rather than in an intervention. There are serious issues in Northern Ireland when it comes to addressing the issue of soldiers and personnel who have served and come back with terrible memories from Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. We need to address those issues at every level.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): To my mind, one of the greatest tragedies is the loss of regimental headquarters, which are increasingly being cut, as a result of which people do not know about veterans and they just disappear.

The more regimental headquarters there are, the more likely we are to know about people who others might not pick up. This is a big tragedy.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. I greatly respect the Minister and look forward to his response, but there is an anomaly here: there are those who are under the radar and slipping by. Whether it is because the regimental associations are not aware of them, or because those with the responsibility are not there, they are being forgotten about. We need to address the underbelly of those who are missed by the charities and others.

The MOD has responded, but has it responded hard enough? I say, with the utmost respect for the Minister, that I do not believe that it has done so fully. The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham has perhaps highlighted that point in his intervention, as I have. It is my duty in the House to say that with all sincerity.

After bringing up this issue in my role on the Defence Select Committee—some Committee members are in the Chamber—it was determined that a sub-committee would be set up to collect evidence on the mental health of our troops. The Committee members have kindly asked me to chair that sub-committee, which will take place in April 2017.

What are we looking for in Northern Ireland? We are looking for a rehabilitation centre. I have sought a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), who is a former soldier. He has agreed to meet us and representatives of Beyond the Battlefield in Newtownards to discuss these matters. We need to ensure better co-ordination between the Ministry of Defence and the health service, so that they work better and closer together. If they are to work in tandem, it has to be a family—a marriage—with two organisations working hand in hand to ensure that we look after all those people. We need to make sure, too, that the counsellors and those who work in the health service have an understanding of what it is like to have severe trauma, so that they are able to give them the advice they need.

When these people present themselves at the NHS, we need to remember that they have often been through the utmost, most severe and horrible trauma. They sometimes find themselves facing someone at the other end of the desk who will say, “Well, what’s wrong with you?” There has to be training so that people understand how these traumas work and what post-traumatic stress disorder means.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking very persuasively, as he always does, about this matter. Does he agree that there is a role for charities to support the NHS and that Combat Stress in particular offers an extremely impressive level of care that we cannot expect the NHS to match, because of the specialism required to deal with military personnel suffering from mental health issues?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head. That is the sort of co-ordination that we need to have with the MOD, the NHS, charities and so forth. If we can all work together better, we can achieve a whole lot more and collectively address those issues.

I had the chance to meet some of these servicemen. At the age I am, when I see a young man who has served in uniform, I can sometimes remember him being born. That is a fact of life. I am thinking of one man who came back from Afghanistan with serious head injuries. He was one of those people from Northern Ireland who had suffered greatly. I shall not mention his name—it would not be fair to do so—but his marriage is over and he is only just about holding on to a job. He is severely ill. Anyone who met him would know right away that there was something wrong with him—he just gives the appearance of someone who is not well.

I am conscious of where we are. The facts are stark and heart-breaking. One of our servicemen or women commits suicide almost every two weeks, and nearly 400 members of our troops killed themselves between 1995 and 2014. Those most likely to take their lives are male single soldiers aged 20 to 24, who comprise a quarter of deaths. Almost half hanged themselves, while 21% died of gunshot or explosive injuries. Others killed themselves by poisoning, suffocation, throwing themselves off buildings or from stabbing and cutting. In 2012, it emerged that the number of British soldiers and veterans committing suicide had outstripped the number that had died fighting in battle. What awful statistics they are to have to report in this House. That year, 21 soldiers killed themselves and 29 veterans committed suicide. That compared with 44 troops who died in Afghanistan, 40 of them in action. Today, veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Falklands or even further back have their memories and their nightmares to deal with every day.

In the past 12 months, more than 100 British Gulf war heroes have asked for help from the charity Combat Stress, which the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) referred to in his intervention. Some 25 years after the end of the conflict, they are still fighting the wars. In a further possible indication that the true scale of the mental trauma caused by Afghanistan and Iraq is only starting to emerge, the number of claims rose by 35% in the last year, from 429 to 580.

The armed forces covenant is one that we are most concerned about. In responding to me in Parliament yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) said that the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland has achieved some 93% of its commitment. Let me say this gently to the Minister—we have a role to play in Northern Ireland, and I want to be quite clear about that. The 93% figure means a shortfall of 7%, and we need to address that 7% shortfall. It was 93% in the last Session of Parliament, so we have not advanced at all. More effort is needed.

We know how important it is for soldiers to obtain suitable housing when they leave the Army. That can happen through the selection scheme and the points system, both here on the mainland and in Northern Ireland, which is good news, but we need to do more.

Healthcare is also important, particularly care for those with mental health issues. Has there ever been such a strong effort in this regard? Northern Ireland contains the largest number of veterans suffering from mental ill health. Is that due to the 30-year conflict that we experienced? It probably is, partly, but it is also due to the constant stress experienced by those who serve in uniform. Thank the Lord that, in partnership with the Government, we have moved to a better place, which,

although not ideal, has enabled the democratic process to secure the delivery of peace, and funds on the back of that. Perhaps the Minister will say something about LIBOR funding for mental health services. A fair amount of money has been set aside, but I should like to see a wee bit more of it coming to Northern Ireland, so that we have a chance to play a greater part.

The Government, and the Ministry of Defence in particular, are doing many good things, including the armed forces compensation scheme and the armed forces pension scheme. Support can be drawn from the Government and go directly to the people who need it. The Northern Ireland regional disablement service specialises in the rehabilitation of patients, including veterans, who have experienced the amputation of a limb or limbs. We must ensure that we address issues relating to both mental and physical health. I thank the Government for what they have done, but I think that the regional disablement service could do more to address the issues affecting those who have fought in both Afghanistan and Iraq, including amputees and people with brain injuries.

Money has been set aside in Northern Ireland and, I believe, on the UK mainland to upgrade memorials throughout the land. That is a good thing, because it means that many people will be able to attend services at 11 am this Sunday with memorials that are clean and have been upgraded. The War Graves Commission does fantastic work in my constituency, involving both the forgotten graves of those who gave their lives in the first world war and whose families have passed on, and those who lie in far-off lands and whose families cannot visit their graves. We should never forget the families. We have been referring directly to the soldiers, but we should also remember the mums and dads, the wives and husbands, and the children.

There are indications that the true scale of the mental trauma caused by Afghanistan and Iraq is larger than we think. Where do we go from here? We must ensure that help is not simply out there if people search for it, but is there before they ask. We must ensure that every veteran has a place to go where they are able to talk—or not; whichever it is that they need. They may want to chat, or they may not. Sometimes they will just need someone to be close to them.

I have been a major supporter of the Beyond the Battlefield project in Newtownards, as well as other charities such as SSAFA and Help for Heroes. Our commitment should not end when the plane comes in and brings our men safely home; our commitment to our troops must equal their commitment to us. It must be more than a vision statement; it must be a reality. The new generation of veterans are no less deserving than others of complete support and help. When we say that we will remember them, that must be a promise and not simply a phrase.

4.39 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who shared many wise words with us. His comments on the sacrifice made by the men of Ulster back in 1916 on the first day of the Somme were particularly poignant. Earlier this year, I was pleased to visit Belfast City Hall and see the original of the famous painting commemorating those who went over the top. Those men had all volunteered

[Kevin Foster]

of course; everyone at the Somme was a volunteer—nobody had been conscripted into the forces at that point. We will all of course be reflecting on the impact of their sacrifice on politics immediately following the war and for many years after. There are memorials across Belfast to the many hundreds who did not return, and they prompted me to reflect on the impact that would have had on communities, with so many young men signing up, going away as groups of friends, and then never coming back. That, for me, is the most poignant aspect of all this.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. It was a pleasure to hear his application at the Backbench Business Committee and I am glad we have been able to find such an opportune time for this debate, as we are in the centenary period, we are about to commemorate the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, and in two years we will be marking the actual centenary of that moment. This year's event will follow the centenaries of the Somme and the Battle of Jutland. One of the things brought home to me by attending the 100th anniversary marking both those battles held at Paignton war memorial was how close together they were. I think of the families having just finished receiving the telegrams to let them know who had died at the Battle of Jutland—with a particular impact in south Devon, given its naval tradition—only then a few weeks later to start getting the first notifications of those who had been killed in the Battle of the Somme. Sometimes it is difficult to comprehend just how close together these events were—the bloodiest day for the Royal Navy and the bloodiest day for the British Army, just a few months apart—and the impact that must have had.

That helped inspire the idea of wanting to remember these events as more than just a series of battles and episodes in military history, but also as involving individuals. That is why we have the process of remembrance, which has now started and which, for me, very much originates from those communities. I looked at the newspapers at the time, including some local papers, which at the start of the war had thought it would be good to commemorate those who had given their lives for their country and to put them on their front page. Some newspapers in the summer of 1916 were just a tablet of names, which made me think of the impact all this must have had.

It is easy to think about these events as acts of historical memory—of black-and-white films of battles from the first and second world wars—but it is right that we focus on veterans. Many in Torbay proudly wear their veterans badge. To be fair, it was the last Labour Government who brought that in, and many take huge pride in being able to go around on a day-to-day basis and say they have served their country in that way.

One of the most interesting people I met in my first steps into politics was a veteran called “Johnny” Johnson and his wife. He was a former chairman of Torbay Conservative Association and former Torbay councillor, but most famously of all the last surviving British Dambuster. He was such an unassuming man and a true hero in every sense; he would never want to dwell on what he did, but was only too happy to do so. I first met him when I was doing a project for my A-level history course. I talked to him about the raid and got

the sense of not just the sacrifice he made, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) commented on, the impact on the family. His wife was in the women's air force at the time and they had no knowledge of what their husbands were doing. One of Johnny's comrades had been disciplined for ringing his girlfriend up to say, “I won't be able to make it tonight.” He asked in his defence, “What should I have done? We had arranged to meet at the cinema; she would have stood there for an hour.” The response was, “You should have let her stand there for an hour and the next time you saw her said, ‘There's a war on' and left it at that.”

Stephen Doughty: I had not realised that the hon. Gentleman's constituency had a connection with the Dambusters, just as mine does. I mentioned Guy Gibson earlier. Sadly, we recently also lost Eileen Younghusband, who famously served in the filter room on the night of the Dambusters raids. She had a distinguished career in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force and beyond, and she told her stories with great vigour. We are very sorry to have lost her recently.

Kevin Foster: It is wonderful to be able to pay tribute to so many who have given so much.

To finish my story about Johnny, I want to mention his reaction to the campaign to get him knighted. A lot of us probably feel that that would have been an appropriate honour, but his reaction was typical of the unassuming gentleman he was. Basically, he said, “Why me?” He felt that he would rather be remembered along with the rest of his comrades. He had faced so much danger, he lost many comrades, and he was among the first to sign up to do his bit for king and country and defeat Adolf Hitler. It is wonderful to think about the past and to remember the huge sacrifices that have enabled us to have a free Parliament here today.

I want to pay tribute to the work done by the Royal British Legion, which was also touched on by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth. Its Rethinking Remembrance campaign is a thought-provoking project in which second world war veterans read out experiences that sound as though they are from the 1940s until, at the very end, we realise that they are experiences from Afghanistan, Iraq or the Gulf war. They are the experiences of people who are the same age as me, and that certainly cut through to me. I suspect that it will have the same effect on many others.

I took part in an event earlier this year in Paignton entitled the “22 for 22”. I am sure that many other Members took part in such events as well. The idea was to do 22 push-ups to mark the shocking statistic—it is an American statistic—that 22 US veterans take their own lives every day. We think of the controversy of the losses on the battlefield in Vietnam in the 1960s, but even today, 22 veterans will take their own life. A chap called Rich McDonald is a resident of Torquay and a constituent of mine. He is a veteran of tours in Northern Ireland and of the Gulf war, and he arranged what he described as a “press-up spectacular” for a few of us at the local leisure centre. It was designed to get us together to mark the campaign. It was all very interesting and enjoyable to show our solidarity, but I do not think he will mind me saying that he then shared his own story of how the non-physical impact of his service nearly defeated

him not long ago. It was great to see him not only helping veterans but trying to get the message out to people that if they have a problem, they must tell someone by getting one of the veterans charities involved. He was prepared to use his own experiences to show how valuable those charities had been to him.

When considering the work done around remembrance, it is only right for me to pay tribute to the two very active branches of the Royal British Legion in Torbay. The Paignton branch has long-serving stalwarts in Kevin Jeffery and Major Ron Goodwin—better known as Major Ron—and its new poppy appeal organiser, Nigel Monks.

Bob Stewart: Major Ron Goodwin was the regimental sergeant major of my battalion and a very great man. It is delightful to hear my hon. Friend mention Ronnie, who is a legend.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. Yes, Major Ron is quite a figure in Torbay. I understand that he was quite a figure in the military as well, although there was someone that he had to try to keep in order—I am just trying to remember the name of that particular serving officer. Who might it have been? Perhaps my hon. and gallant Friend can tell me afterwards. Major Ron has certainly been a great figure in remembrance in the Bay, and in supporting the Royal British Legion branch and enabling it to help others today.

Sometimes we think that the poppy appeal is just about injured veterans from particular wars, but it is not. It is about giving support to the whole family that has been affected, perhaps by helping the son or daughter of a serviceman or woman to achieve a dream, or simply by dealing with more practical day-to-day needs if someone has fallen on hard times. That is why we should all rightly be proud to wear our poppies today.

One of the most thought-provoking things that I attended before being elected to this House was in St Marychurch on the 100th anniversary—to the minute—of war being declared in Europe, which led to the famous remark about the lights going out all across Europe. It was arranged by a local lady called Meg Jolliffe. As we stood there as a group, it occurred to me that there was a wall of 94 names—virtually all volunteers—from what was a small rural community at the time. They had all lost their lives in world war one, and every person named on the memorial was younger than I was. What really struck me was that these people did not go on to have families and that their hopes and dreams had all been lost in the maelstrom of world war one. It was particularly poignant. We naturally think of veterans as being a bit older—if one is younger—but the majority of people who lost their lives in those conflicts were younger than many of us who are considered young Members of Parliament today.

It is good that we are focusing on how we support the veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf war and ongoing deployments. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, I have taken part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which included a survival night in a tent with six commandos. For those who are wondering, we were all assured that we would be safe.

Mrs Trevelyan: Just for clarity, my hon. Friend and I had the great honour of sharing a tent in minus 23°C conditions 3° north of the Arctic circle with a group of 19-year-old Royal Marines—pretty much the same age as my son. They were extraordinarily gentlemanly and none of them commented on whether my hon. Friend or I snored.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for that thought-provoking intervention, which will go down in the annals of *Hansard*. The point was about being out there and seeing what people volunteer to do on our behalf. Accusations are sometimes made about MPs' foreign travel, but when I told people about signing myself up for a trip to go camping in northern Norway in the middle of winter, it was not seen as particularly glamorous trip.

While maintaining our military traditions, it is also right to ensure that we give people the tools they need to fight in today's conflicts. Having grown up in Plymouth, I know that there will be some significant feelings about yesterday's announcement on the Royal Citadel. However, no one would want to go into battle with a 350-year-old rifle, so it is right to ensure that we have not only modern equipment and vehicles, but modern facilities where our troops can train. Some places will have much associated history, but the priority must be to create a 21st-century battle force. We would not give horses to the cavalry to charge into battle on because of tradition. There will be some sad decisions to make as parts of history come to an end, but it is right that the MOD focuses on the modern equipment and facilities that our soldiers need.

This is about how we rethink remembrance on the basis of our communities today. I support some of the comments about the best way of doing that being knowing exactly where our veterans are, which could be done through the census. It does seem rather bizarre that I can tell just how many Jedis there are in my constituency or how many people loved Terry Wogan's radio show thanks to some, shall we say, entertaining uses of the "What religion are you?" question. It would be much more useful to know exactly how many veterans live in particular areas and roughly how old they are. That would be much more useful in working out what services need to be provided, allowing local authorities to plan and enabling Government to make informed decisions about funding to support veterans' needs. I hope the Minister will outline what sort of discussions are being held with the Cabinet Office about the census to ensure that we can get that useful information.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): Let me take this opportunity to say that, although the national statistician is very much part of a subset of the Cabinet Office, it is right that Ministers do not have the power to influence exactly what questions are on the census. None the less, I would hope that the national statistician is listening carefully to the will of this House, as it is sending a clear message that that question should be included.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for such a useful intervention. I agree that it would not be right or appropriate for Ministers to sit around deciding exactly

[Kevin Foster]

which question is on the census and what areas it goes into, but it is right that we are raising this issue in this House. I welcome the comments he has made, adding his voice on those points. I hope the national statistician is taking them seriously and will bear them in mind when making the final decisions.

In conclusion, I am always clear that wearing a poppy and remembering those who have given their lives is not about glorifying what happened, adding a gloss to warfare or lessening its reality. It is not about showing particular support for one conflict or another, although I suspect that some are far less controversial than others, including those in more recent years. It is about fundamentally remembering the sacrifice made by people who have gone away from their families and their homes to serve this country and who have lost their lives or sustained the injury that meant they lost opportunity in their lives—that can be both physical and mental. It is also about remembering what Robert E. Lee famously said:

“It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it.”

In the remembrance season, that quote has added resonance.

4.57 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate, and I thank the mover of the motion, because it is timely to debate this as we mark the contribution of our armed forces and veterans and the debt of gratitude that we owe them. I want to highlight some of the things being done in Scotland to support veterans and touch on some of the issues that they face and the action being taken. I am sure that these issues will be familiar to Members from across the Chamber and across the UK. I hope that the positive experience in Scotland in recent years can provide the rest of the UK with ideas for developing policy in this area; the same happens in the other direction, too.

In common with the UK Government and other devolved Administrations, the Scottish Government have sought to ensure appropriate assistance and support for veterans in Scotland. Their stated ambition is to make Scotland the destination of choice for those leaving service, and to advance that, they have become the first devolved Administration to have a dedicated Veterans Minister. That has been part of a ministerial portfolio since 2012, when Keith Brown was appointed Minister with responsibility for veterans. Although other parts of the portfolio have changed, Keith still has the veterans portfolio as part of his own. That sent a significant message about the importance placed on supporting our veterans.

As an additional step, Scotland appointed a Scottish Veterans Commissioner, who researches and reports to the Scottish Government to inform policy properly and identify areas where further support is needed. The commissioner has operational independence, dedicated funding and a wide remit to improve outcomes for all veterans. The office is intended to be progressive, pushing at the barriers that prevent service leavers and veterans from realising their full potential, shifting thinking about veterans and forging a new image of them as tremendous assets to Scotland’s economy and communities.

The areas that the commissioner’s work has focused on so far have included the transition from service and housing information for veterans. I know that those are important issues in other parts of the country, too. Forthcoming priorities will include skills and education, and healthcare provision. Although these issues undoubtedly affect veterans across the UK, there is recognition that Scotland is different from other parts of the UK in its demography, legislation, administration and culture, so it is important that an approach is taken that fits what happens in Scotland.

The commissioner’s work has aimed to develop partnership working; it encourages people and organisations to step out of professional silos, combine their efforts and work together towards a common goal, in the interests of both veterans and the communities of which they are part. The commissioner’s work has also sought to recognise the many benefits that veterans and their families bring to our communities and workplaces, to stop people seeing these individuals through the prism of need and obligation and to ensure that we recognise them far more for their strengths and qualities and their contribution to Scotland.

In 2012, the Minister for Transport and Veterans commissioned the report “Our Commitments”, setting out the Scottish Government’s strategic direction and complementing the values of the armed forces covenant. In February this year, the Scottish Government published “Renewing Our Commitments”, a review of progress that considered what further areas of work were required.

More than £1 million has been committed to projects and organisations supporting veterans, including £830,000 through the Scottish Veterans Fund. The armed forces and veterans champions network has been established and includes senior representatives from NHS boards, the 32 local authorities in Scotland, Police Scotland and other bodies advocating support for the armed forces community through the public sector. The Scottish Government have also announced that, from April 2017, they will exempt war pensions for veterans and guaranteed income payments under the armed forces compensation scheme from consideration in assessments for care charges, to provide further tangible support to Scotland’s veteran community.

Scotland has made notable progress on specialist healthcare provision and mental healthcare. For example, Scotland has a state-of-the-art national specialist prosthetics service, which was announced in June 2013 and became fully operational in April 2014. The centre works through a single multidisciplinary team across two specialist centres in Edinburgh and Glasgow, with links to other limb-fitting centres in Aberdeen, Inverness and Dundee.

Another important element of health provision is supporting veterans in the area of mental health. In 2015, in partnership with NHS Scotland and Combat Stress, the Scottish Government committed more than £3.6 million in funding over three years for specialist mental health services for veterans resident in Scotland at the Hollybush House Combat Stress facility in Ayr. This will fund a range of specialist clinical rehabilitation and social and welfare support at the facility. The evidence-based treatment programme includes an intensive post-traumatic stress disorder programme, a trans-diagnostic programme, and stabilisation and anger management programmes. The Scottish Government

have provided £1.8 million to establish and support the Veterans First Point, a one-stop shop for help and assistance for veterans and their families living in Lothian. It includes a clinical mental health service, and it is hoped that the pilot can be rolled out to other areas. Over the past year, work has taken place in 10 health board areas across Scotland to help each local area to establish key partnerships, identify premises, plan requirements and recruit and select staff.

Bob Stewart: Are these centres run by the Government or by charities, subsidised by the Government?

Steven Paterson: The ones that I am talking about are run by 10 of the health boards in Scotland. They are funded by Government but run at the NHS level, and these are things we should definitely build on. There is work to come on Tayside to advance that.

Housing for veterans is of central concern to the Scottish Government, as I am sure it is across the rest of the UK, and a number of actions have been taken recently to provide support in this regard. For example, it is now easier for veterans to qualify for council and housing association housing because of legislative changes to the way that veterans can establish a local connection when being assessed for housing need. The Scottish Government have also extended priority access for service personnel and veterans to the low-cost initiative for first-time buyers—a shared equity scheme—and has abolished means-testing for disabled veterans who need adaptations to their houses. A number of interventions have also been made to ensure the construction of dedicated housing for veterans in Edinburgh, Carnoustie, Inverness, Motherwell and Wishaw. Scottish Veterans Residences provides valuable housing support services to vulnerable ex-service personnel; it has facilities in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee.

On education, the Scottish Government, local authorities, schools and the armed forces in Scotland work closely together to make sure that children and young people in service families benefit from the same standard of and access to education as any other child in their area. Changes made by the UK Ministry of Defence on basing—which is in the news after yesterday's announcements, one of which affects my constituency—have an impact on service personnel, their families and schools because of the movement of personnel that is often part of being in the armed forces. The Scottish Government set up the Scottish service children's strategic working group to focus on the challenges faced by children and young people in service families, share best practice and make support available. They also encourage and support applications to the Ministry of Defence educational support fund. Her Majesty's inspectors are finding that a great deal of good work is being done to ensure that children and young people in service families are not disadvantaged in their education, and it is important that that continues.

Employment and skills are important areas for veterans and their families. Veterans are a great asset to the private and public sectors in Scotland, as I am sure they are across the UK. A growing number of employers are actively targeting veterans to fill their skills gaps. To facilitate this, in September 2015 the Scottish Government provided an additional £1.3 million to the Community Jobs Scotland pilot scheme to develop and

deliver 100 additional CJS places, including places for up to 50 early leavers from the armed forces. Moving forward to 2016-17, ex-service personnel are now part of the core of people who are eligible to apply for the scheme's 700 places.

Former service personnel aged 16 to 24 have been identified as a priority group eligible for support under Scotland's employer recruitment incentive. The scheme offers employers funding over the course of the first 12 months of employment, which can be supplemented by a £500 payment if the employer pays the participant the living wage. That responds to the demands of employers by delivering a consistent and simple recruitment incentive that ensures that employing young people remains attractive to employers.

From April 2017, employment services for long-term unemployed people are being devolved to Scotland, and the Scottish Government aim to provide targeted employment services that meet the needs of unemployed people, including ex-service personnel. They will support ongoing collaborative, investigative working between the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Ministry of Defence on accrediting military skills, so that those leaving the forces are in a better position to apply for jobs and are recognised by employers. That may be worthy of attention elsewhere in the UK. Perhaps the Minister could say something about accrediting skills learned in the armed forces, so that employers can see those skills when veterans apply for jobs.

In conclusion, Scotland has a long and proud military tradition, and we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our armed forces, veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice. This time of year, as we commemorate previous generations of servicemen and women, is also an opportune time to consider today's veterans and service personnel and their place in society. When personnel make the transition to civilian life, they sometimes need additional support; occasionally, they require specific help accessing public and support services that most people take for granted. The Scottish Government are committed to ensuring that our veterans do not find themselves at a disadvantage and receive appropriate support that shows how we value them and their service.

5.7 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this important debate. It is notable that, although it has been sparsely attended, we have had contributions from every part of the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke for England; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke for Northern Ireland; the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth spoke for Wales; and my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) spoke on behalf of Scotland. I have deliberately not mentioned the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) because frankly we have still not accepted that we have lost you for good.

As we have heard so many times this afternoon, our veterans are an asset to our society and they deserve our sincerest thanks, our fullest support and our deepest respect. With Remembrance Sunday fast approaching, it is right to take this opportunity to consider today's veterans and serving personnel as well as to remember those who have gone before them. It is right that today

[Brendan O'Hara]

veterans are so highly regarded by their fellow citizens and that Governments of all the nations of the United Kingdom continually seek to improve the care on offer to those who have served their country and those who have suffered terribly as a consequence.

It is also right that we work tirelessly to ensure that our veterans are cared for properly, but let us be honest: we still have a long way to go before we get it absolutely right for those who have served in our armed forces. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made an important point about the funding of veterans care. I am reminded of the slogan "Justice before Charity", which was coined at the end of the first world war by the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers. The federation, which was among the founders of the Royal British Legion, was a veterans campaign group which even founded a short-lived political party, the Silver Badge party, named after the small silver lapel pin that was given to each of those who served in the great war and on which were engraved the words "For Services Rendered".

The Silver Badge party, under the banner "Every man once before any man twice", fielded candidates in the 1918 general election on a platform of representing the political interests of former service personnel. Although it is no longer a campaigning political party, what it stood for—"Every man once before any man twice" and particularly "Justice before Charity"—remains just as true and as relevant to the debate today about our veterans as it was 100 years ago.

As I said previously, although we have come a long way, we are not there yet and I hope that the sometimes complex needs of those who have served are never seen as a burden on our resources, but rather viewed as a responsibility that we willingly accept in return for the sacrifice that they have made. We must never relegate that responsibility for veterans care entirely to the charitable sector, which, although it raises hundreds of millions of pounds and does wonderful work, cannot become the primary source of assistance.

We are all too well aware of the statistics and we have heard many of them this afternoon—40% of veterans report having health or welfare issues, with a growing emphasis on the need for long-term care. According to research by King's College London, an estimated 60,000 of our veterans who served between 1991 and 2014 will need support for mental health issues. Although mental health and other health issues are critical, the range of concerns facing our veterans extends to financial, employment, social and housing issues, and the need for relationship support. Worryingly, the research showed that a number of our veterans, when interviewed, called into question the commitment of the armed forces to supporting their transition and that of their families back to civilian life.

It is fitting that on this occasion, when we pause to commemorate service personnel, particularly those who have fallen in the past 100 years, we commit ourselves to honouring them by looking after today's service men and women in the manner that they deserve. I have no doubt that every Member across this House wishes to provide the very best care for our veterans and their families, and I am sure we would be willing to learn from the example of others. Without going into too

much detail, I point to the Danish model of veteran care, which provides continuous and comprehensive support for veterans and their families. That support is viewed as the responsibility not just of one Department, but of all Departments, and its success is examined and is evaluated every two years.

When creating the document "Our Commitments" in 2012, the Scottish Government looked to the Danish model and the comprehensive strategy that supports service personnel during and after their service. That document sets out the Scottish Government's approach to our armed forces. Much of what it contained is already enshrined in the armed forces covenant.

Scotland has a large and vibrant armed forces community, encompassing both regular and reserve personnel and their families. In 2014, Poppy Scotland estimated the size of the community to be 530,000—in excess of half a million—including dependants. That is almost 10% of the Scottish population. Many were born in Scotland and, having enjoyed a fulfilling military career, have returned home, but more and more people who grew up elsewhere are choosing to make Scotland their home in retirement. I am delighted that many decide to settle in my constituency of Argyll and Bute, where they are very welcome indeed.

Approximately 1,800 men and women end their service career each year in Scotland. Most find the transition to civilian life straightforward and take it in their stride, but some find it a far greater challenge. To ease that transition, in 2014 Scotland's First Minister—my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond)—appointed Mr Eric Fraser to serve as the first Scottish Veterans Commissioner. In establishing that unique role, Scotland has blazed a trail for the rest of the UK to follow. The commissioner, who is a Royal Navy veteran with 37 years' experience, has operational independence, dedicated funding and a wide remit to improve outcomes for veterans. He has published a strategy and a work plan and already submitted two detailed reports, on transition arrangements and housing. He has extensive and regular engagement with the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government have also introduced an armed forces advocate and created a comprehensive network of armed forces and veterans champions who are represented in the Scottish Government, local authorities, NHS boards and Police Scotland, among many other bodies, thereby embedding support for the armed forces community throughout the whole Scottish public sector.

The vast majority of people leaving the services settle into civilian life in Scotland with little effort. However, a small number experience difficulty accessing services and therefore require additional support tailored to their specific needs. The overriding principle of the Scottish Government's approach to caring for our veterans is that no one should suffer any disadvantage as a result of military service.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, and I very much welcome the Scottish Government's efforts on behalf of veterans, many of whom are English, Welsh and Irish, and many of whom retire to his constituency, as he has said. Does he not recognise, however, that this is not just a Government role; many charities and individuals have a role to play?

For example, Mrs Pam Bates and Mr Carl Lewis in my constituency do an awful lot for local veterans in Kent. That individual effort is just as important as the Government effort of which he speaks.

Brendan O'Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Indeed, I have met one of his constituents—one of Britain's finest—who is doing fabulous work. I commend the work that those people do. The point I was making is that the state must not abdicate its responsibility. I fully support the wonderful work that charities do, but we have to recognise that the care of our veterans is first and foremost the responsibility of the state.

The Scottish Government have fully embraced the responsibility to assist serving and former personnel and their families, both in the Scottish national health service, where a financial commitment has been made, and in housing, education and employment needs. We recognise that military service fosters leadership, organisational skills, resilience and specialist skills such as medical training and technical expertise. Veterans and their families are a great asset for the private sector, and a growing number of employers are actively targeting veterans and their families to fill the skills gap.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published an updated version of the document called "Renewing Our Commitments" in which they reaffirmed what they had said in 2012: making good jobs, affordable homes and excellent public services a priority for our veteran community. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling said, Scotland's ambition is to be the destination of choice for those leaving military employment and seeking a fulfilling life, while wanting to make an important contribution to society. Scotland values our armed forces community as a true asset, and we renew our commitment to support them and pledge to make our country the most attractive destination for those leaving the armed forces.

As we approach Remembrance Day, it is absolutely right that we stop and pay tribute to those who have served and remember those who have fallen. But let us also look to the future. In doing so, let us be guided by the words of 100 years ago from the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers, whose demand of politicians back then would be echoed by veterans today: it wanted justice before charity. As a nation, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to support veterans and their families. Yes, charity has an important role to play, but the primary responsibility for caring for our veterans must lie with the state—and we should never forget it.

5.21 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing today's debate and all those Members from across the UK who have taken part.

My hon. Friend started by telling us about Pizza Pronto and its efforts down by Penarth pier. He also referred to the absolutely excellent work done by the Royal British Legion. Members on both sides of the House wish to thank the legion and the many charities who do so much for our armed forces and veterans.

My hon. Friend referred to those of many faiths who will be coming together this week to pay their respects. He also looked back at the role of women in the first world war, including the Canary girls in the munitions factories, one of whom was his grandmother—

Stephen Doughty: Great-grandmother.

Nia Griffith: My hon. Friend is so young. He told us some very moving stories of veterans he has met who have suffered major trauma, both physical and mental.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), chair of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant, stressed how important it is for MPs to speak up for servicemen and women, as they cannot speak up for themselves. She spoke movingly of her own experiences, having seen the fine work done by many charities. She reminded us, too, of the current engagement of our armed forces, the stress caused by under-manning and the dreadful effect on morale of redundancies and base closures.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded us poignantly of those who were killed or injured in Northern Ireland. He paid tribute to the work done by charities and talked of the high number of veterans who have taken or tried to take their own lives. He mentioned the problem of veterans who are under the radar and not known to the authorities or to charities.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) told us the wonderful tale of Johnny the Dambuster and paid tribute to the excellent work of the Royal British Legion. He mentioned his participation in the "22 for 22" challenge. I took the lazy way out: I just abseiled for Combat Stress, which is an awful lot easier than doing 22 press-ups. Many hon. Members have contributed to charities that are working hard for our veterans, and we appreciate the work being done.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) described the specific provision for veterans in Scotland and stressed the need to recognise the strengths and qualities of veterans and the contribution that they can make to society, rather than seeing only problems. He also discussed the importance of working outside traditional silos.

Remembrance time is when we remember all those in our armed forces who have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in service to our country. Later this week, people from all walks of life—young and old—will turn out for events across the country to pay their respects. For many people, the image they have of veterans is one of elderly servicemen and women at the Cenotaph or the local war memorial—an image that has been reinforced in the past two years by the events that have, quite properly, been held to commemorate the first world war.

This week is an especially poignant time for families and friends who are still living with the loss of loved ones. I was very privileged last week to attend a special service to unveil and dedicate a new memorial in Llanelli in readiness for Remembrance Day. The memorial commemorates the 15 brave servicemen from Llanelli killed in eight conflicts since the end of the second world war, including those killed most recently: Lance Corporal Ryan Francis, killed in Iraq, and Lance Corporal David Dennis and Corporal Jamie Kirkpatrick, killed

[Nia Griffith]

in Afghanistan. On behalf of us all, I would like to thank all those who have worked hard and given generously to ensure that we have a fitting and lasting memorial in Llanelli to those brave men.

I very much welcome the decision by the Royal British Legion to choose rethinking remembrance as its theme for this year's Remembrance Day, reminding us that the poppy appeal is about not only commemorating those who died many years ago but remembering our modern-day veterans, showing our gratitude for their service and ensuring that the armed forces covenant really does deliver prompt access to the quality services they need.

It is important that our perceptions and priorities move with the times. In our parents' generation, practically everyone personally knew a family member, friend or neighbour who had served in the armed forces. However, nowadays, not everyone knows serving members of the armed forces or veterans personally, so their perceptions may be more heavily influenced by what they see in the media. It is vital that, as we discuss the provision of the best possible services for our veterans, we do not let our focus on some of the problems lead to negative stereotyping. Many ex-servicemen and women adapt very well to civilian life: they use the skills they have acquired in the forces, or they develop new ones, and they settle well into workplaces and communities.

Regardless of whether veterans have any particular difficulties, all of them should have prompt access to appropriate services. The aim should be to provide a smooth transition and to deal with concerns before they develop into problems. When Labour was in government, we did much to pave the way for the introduction of the armed forces covenant. The first military covenant was published in 2000, and it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) who, as Health Secretary, ensured that veterans got priority treatment on the NHS. It is encouraging that there has been such enthusiastic recognition of the armed forces community covenant by many local authorities and local service boards, but application and outcomes are very variable.

In Labour's 2015 manifesto, we recognised the need for the covenant to be strengthened. One action we proposed was to create a veterans' register to make certain that our veterans receive proper support on leaving service. We therefore support the Royal British Legion's "Count them in" campaign, as I understand Members on both sides of the House do, to have a question on the next census to identify veterans. That would be a simple way of acquiring an additional source of information, which would tell us about the veterans living in our communities and allow public services better to meet their needs.

Service leavers and older veterans could be given more encouragement to mention the fact that they are veterans. There may be many reasons why they do not self-identify: it simply does not occur to them, they do not wish to be pushy, or they feel there is some form of stigma attached. Therefore, identification needs to be done proactively, through a scripted question. One starting point highlighted in the best practice guide is the way that some local authorities have included a question about veterans on some of their forms to help them

collate data on veterans. What consideration have the Government given to developing that into a standard format on a number of forms—for example, questions on GP registration forms or local authority forms?

It is simply not enough for the Government to say that the community covenant has been embraced by various public bodies. The will is there, but how effective is it in practice? It can be tempting sometimes just to visit those who are taking the lead and who are proud to show us what they are doing, whereas the focus needs to be on ensuring that there is effective practice everywhere.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend's point about data—it is one that I made myself—is important, not least in the light of the comments from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about people who have fallen through the gaps, often with tragic consequences, in Northern Ireland, and what charities have told me about the difficulties they have in re-acquiring relationships with veterans because of that lack of information and data. Does she agree that we need to make a lot more effort to ensure that there is a consistent approach across the UK and across all services?

Nia Griffith: We do indeed need a much more consistent approach to the whole use of data, as the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) said. Consistency of services is absolutely critical.

It is no easy matter when dealing with the many varied ways in which our public services are organised, with different systems of local government, health trusts and clinical commissioning groups—and that is just in England, never mind in other parts of the UK. We should not forget, either, that many of these public bodies are also under considerable strain as they face cutbacks and increased demand. The Minister may point to the annual report and to the best practice guide, but these alone will not drive change and improve outcomes, so what strategies are the Government proposing to ensure that service providers—health boards, local authorities and so on—are implementing the armed forces covenant effectively? Are veterans being effectively identified and helped? Has the Minister developed ways to measure not only the experience of veterans and their families, but what is being done and whether it is effective? The challenge is to find how to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the covenant in ways that are effective but not too burdensome or bureaucratic.

There is a need to enable the Government to identify and rectify areas of weakness and to inform future policy. What progress is the Minister making in this respect? The forces charity, SSAFA, has reported that forces families are still facing real challenges when accessing housing or school places for their children. It is therefore clear that the Government need to do more to make councils aware of the local needs of forces communities. What consideration have the Government given to finding a consistent way of measuring and monitoring what is actually happening and the experience of veterans and their families?

Half the ex-service community has a long-term illness or disability, and it is therefore essential that the MOD ensures that all veterans get access to the healthcare they need—and likewise for mental health conditions. While most members of the forces community have good mental health, there is a higher prevalence of

conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in the forces, particularly among groups such as reservists and early service leavers. Under the armed forces covenant, the forces community should receive priority healthcare where their condition relates to their service, but as the health service in England becomes more fragmented and there is growing pressure on the NHS budget, what monitoring are the Government doing to ensure that our service members and veterans get the help they need?

Mark Lancaster: I am taken by the hon. Lady's comment that there is a higher prevalence of mental health problems among our veterans. Could she possibly point to the evidence that supports that?

Nia Griffith: I think we all recognise that there are certain problems that may not have been identified, and perhaps people are reticent in coming forward. As the Minister suggests, many other people who are not veterans suffer from mental health problems as well.

The employment gap is not one of the four areas covered by the covenant—housing, health, education and inquests—although it is very much linked to the first three. However, there is help from some firms who are signed up to the corporate covenant. We should be very concerned that only 80% of service leavers are employed six months after leaving the armed forces. A lot more needs to be done to understand why that is and to remedy it. These are people of working age who have skills and experience, and who have recently been in employment, so the figure of 20% not in employment is far too high. Job centres do not run specific programmes for service leavers, but nevertheless, those seeking employment should have access to the usual support. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions to improve outcomes for service leavers? Is appropriate information about service leavers collected and analysed, and what analysis has been done of the effectiveness of the support given to those who were made redundant? Has anything been done to upskill jobcentre advisers to deal specifically with service leavers? Are those advisers fully aware of the skills that service leavers have, and are they matching those skills to appropriate job opportunities and interviews? Service leavers bring with them a whole range of skills: the job skills that they acquire, the personal qualities that they develop and the organisational and team-working skills that they learn. What are the Government doing to promote the advantages of employing ex-service personnel among employers who are not signed up to the corporate covenant?

Will the Government look at practical ways of helping veterans to access employment, such as the veterans interview programme, which Jim Murphy piloted, in which companies voluntarily guarantee to interview jobseeking ex-forces personnel? It is very worrying to hear anecdotal evidence that some employers seem to be prejudiced against service leavers, perhaps because of negative stereotyping. It is extremely important that we tackle any negative stereotypes, and I would like to ask the Minister what we are doing in this respect.

Mark Lancaster: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady—I am certainly not seeking to pick a fight—she talks about negative stereotyping, having just a moment

ago talked about veterans having a higher prevalence of mental health problems. Although I asked her to demonstrate the evidence that veterans have a higher prevalence of mental health problems, she is yet to provide any. I have not seen any such evidence, but she runs the risk in her own speech of promoting stereotypes about veterans having problems, having just criticised such stereotypes.

Nia Griffith: The point is that I prefaced my speech by saying clearly that, while we may be focusing on problems today, we should think as well of the good side of veterans and ex-servicemen and women, and the very many positive qualities that they can bring to employment and to their communities.

Before the last general election, Labour made a manifesto commitment to outlaw discrimination against the armed forces, because it is completely unacceptable for any service member or veteran to be denied a job interview or access to public services because they have been in the forces. Indeed, it goes against a core principle of the armed forces covenant, namely that our forces community should suffer no disadvantage. Sadly, that is not reflected in the experiences of some service members and veterans. Research by the Local Government Association recently showed that nearly 40% of those who had served in the forces felt that their service left them disadvantaged. We have all heard of completely unacceptable examples of service members being turned away from shops or restaurants because they were wearing uniform. Will the Government look again at outlawing discrimination against our forces community?

I turn to the worrying news that we had today that the Government have identified a £438 million shortfall in funding for the armed forces pension and compensation scheme. Can the Minister explain how that substantial error occurred in the estimates and give us categorical assurances that the money will be found to provide this vital support for our veterans?

Ahead of Remembrance Sunday, we remember all those who have served and we honour their sacrifice. We also need to see firm action from the Government to ensure that our veterans and our forces community receive all the support that they are entitled to.

5.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to reply to what has been an excellent and mainly consensual debate. This is certainly not a subject on which we would wish to find division across the House, but it is absolutely right that we should debate it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate. He could not have chosen a more poignant time to discuss a new generation of veterans and service personnel than the week in which we mark Remembrance Day, and the issues that he raises are of huge significance. He really set the tone for the debate with his passionate account of the contribution that service personnel, including many of his own family members, have made to this nation over many years. I especially want to underline his acknowledgement of the often-overlooked contribution that women have made during the world wars and other conflicts.

[*Mark Lancaster*]

Equally, we have had some fantastic contributions by other hon. Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who has rapidly established herself in this House as a true champion for the armed forces in the various pieces of work that she is undertaking. I regularly have exchanges with her, and I welcome her challenges to Government about increasing support for our service personnel. I absolutely agree and I am ever mindful that our service personnel are the single greatest asset in our armed forces.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is an equally passionate supporter of our armed forces. I thank him for his 13 and a half years' service.

Jim Shannon: Fourteen and a half years.

Mark Lancaster: I apologise. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his 14 and a half years' service, even if most of it was in the Royal Artillery. He will understand that comment from a sapper and take it in the good spirit in which it is intended. I acknowledge his commitment to veterans in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman is particularly concerned about mental health. I will turn to that in a moment, but it is worth putting on the record that a bespoke aftercare package is in place in Northern Ireland to support former members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Rangers, and their dependants and widows. It consists of welfare teams across Northern Ireland that offer vocational resettlement training, medical support and a benevolent fund. In August 2015, we agreed that the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish aftercare service should continue to exist and continue to be funded. Although the circumstances leading to its inception have markedly changed, the need is still evident and the demand on its services is being met effectively. This is in addition to the services available to all veterans, including the Veterans Welfare Service, which has welfare representatives based across the UK, and service and ex-service charities, such as the Army Benevolent Fund, the Soldiers Charity, the armed forces charity SSAFA and Combat Stress.

The hon. Gentleman said a few words about the armed forces compensation scheme. He may well be aware that the quinquennial—five-yearly—review of that scheme is currently under way, and I hope that its report will be made available in late spring. That demonstrates that the scheme is constantly under review.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) demonstrated his support for our veterans, and indeed for the work of the Royal British Legion and other service charities in his constituency. He talked about the poignant moment while visiting various war memorials when he realised the age of many of those who had died. That is exactly the experience I had when I visited the Somme to see my great-uncle's grave. I was hit by the shock of realising that he was just 19 years old when he died. I went there as a young man, but I was already seven years his senior. Such experiences very much dispel the image of veterans as being from a much older age cohort. That is not the case, and I will turn to that—it is very much the theme of this debate—in a moment.

I thought the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) gave an equally excellent description of the ways in which the Scottish Government are addressing veterans' issues north of the border. Despite our political differences, I have a very good working relationship with Keith Brown. I have spoken to him this week, and I will meet him again shortly. Such a cross-border relationship is absolutely vital, because we all recognise that veterans move around within the United Kingdom.

This is a broad-ranging topic, and it is at such moments that I realise what an honour it is to do this job. I mean that not only as a Member of Parliament, since we are all honoured to be in the House, but, given that I joined the Army almost 28 years ago—I remind the House that I still serve in the Army Reserve—as a Minister in a Department in which I have a passionate interest, as I hope hon. Members recognise. I am not yet a veteran, but my time will come, as it does to all of us who are servicemen, so I will start by discussing veterans.

There is a misconception that veterans are older people. In the popular mind, they are people who fought in the great conflicts of the mid-20th century—the second world war, the Korea campaign and the Suez crisis of 60 years ago. However, veterans are of course from a younger generation. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) served in a much more recent conflict in Bosnia. Such a picture is only partial: it omits the 220,000 personnel who served during a period of 13 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it fails to take account of the fact that some of our veterans will have served only for a very short period.

It is vital that we think carefully about this younger generation, lest we fail to give them the specific support they need. That concern is reflected in the Royal British Legion's excellent Rethink Remembrance campaign. As the campaign reminds us, society as a whole has a responsibility to help all those who lay their lives on the line for the needs of this nation, especially as so many of our service veterans utilise public and private sector support across our devolved Administrations. At the same time, we believe that the MOD can play a critical role in joining the dots and ensuring that the right support goes to the right place at the right time. We are using the covenant as our mechanism to make this happen.

First, we are helping out on health and housing. The Government have channelled £13 million from the LIBOR fund into supporting mental health in the armed forces community. Meanwhile, NHS England is currently piloting a veterans trauma network, providing a safety net for those with lifelong healthcare needs who are returning to civilian life. Furthermore, as has been explained, NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government have put £1.2 million into providing specialist mental health services for veterans in Scotland.

Nia Griffith: I refer the Minister to figures from the Royal British Legion pointing out that, whereas the general population has a 6% incidence of depression, the figure for veterans is 10%. Will he therefore withdraw his earlier comments?

Mark Lancaster: Forgive me, but my comments were to ask for evidence. If that is the evidence the hon. Lady is providing, I look forward to seeing it, but of course there are many sources of evidence. I am concerned

about the general point: we need to be careful in the House not to paint a particular picture of our veterans as a cohort in our society. There have been some disturbing newspaper articles recently suggesting that employers should not be employing veterans. We should be careful in the House not to fall into a trap—I would not dream of accusing the hon. Lady of doing so—but rather to spend as much time as possible talking up our veterans community and dispelling some of the myths. Otherwise, we could fall into an awful trap.

Questions were raised earlier about the ability to track our veterans. The health service might be one area where we have that opportunity. Work is ongoing to ensure that the electronic record system used in defence medical services matches that used in the national health service and—I would imagine—NHS Health Scotland as well, so that there can be a seamless transition of our service personnel's records once they move out of the armed forces. Effectively having a marker on those records might be one way to begin that process of helping to track veterans.

On housing, the Department for Communities and Local Government has extended the period within which ex-service personnel and surviving partners are given priority for Government-funded shared ownership schemes from 12 to 24 months after service, and we have allocated £40 million of LIBOR funding to projects that provide veterans' accommodation. When it comes to both health and housing, we are using the Cabinet Office-chaired covenant reference group to link up health, DCLG, the local government authorities and the devolved Administrations, so that covenant principles, particularly with regards to veterans' access to healthcare and social housing, are applied consistently and correctly across the United Kingdom. I hope that that addresses one of the questions from the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith).

On employment, which was raised by several hon. Members, we are working with business to offer ex-service personnel job support. Our career transition partnership provides one-to-one guidance, training and employment opportunities to about 15,000 service leavers. Its success rate is significant: 85% find a job within six months of leaving the armed forces, compared to a 73% employment rate in the rest of the UK population. So our ex-service personnel are achieving a better employment rate than the average in the UK. All personnel—without exception—are eligible for this support. Furthermore, the employment support available to our service leavers through the CTP continues for two years after their date of discharge.

Separately, we are using the covenant to raise awareness of the benefits of hiring service personnel. Where else can business get highly skilled, highly motivated team players with leadership attributes tested in the most challenging of environments? Already, more than 1,200 businesses have signed the covenant and are offering veterans everything from skills training to guaranteed interviews.

We know, however, that we need to do more—we all absolutely accept that. With the end of the era of enduring campaigns and the drawdown from Germany coming to its conclusion, we can expect the numbers of veterans to increase in the short term. So we are making sure support is in place by using £2 million from our annual £10 million covenant fund to set up the veterans

gateway. This will be a single point of contact, open 24 hours a day, that can give veterans the advice they need, wherever they are located.

Finally, we are keen to learn more about all those veterans who fail to make a smooth transition to civilian life. We need to know who they are, so that we can help them. As the Royal British Legion points out in its "Count them in" campaign, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay said, after the 2011 census, we knew more about the Jedi population of the UK—or indeed about the fact that Rushmore in Hampshire has the highest concentration of Buddhists—than about those who have served in our armed forces. That is ridiculous, but true. So I am working closely with the Office for National Statistics and the chief statistician to include a question on veterans in the national census. As I mentioned earlier, we do not have the power to force Mr Pullinger to do that, but I hope that he is listening to this debate and gets the very clear message that it is this House's will that that question be included on the next census.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does the Minister agree that it is not only the veterans that we need to identify, but their direct families as well? The covenant is very clear that it supports the families against disadvantage and that it is important to identify the spouses and the children who will carry forward that military family—they need to be identified forever.

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and reasonable point, and I will ensure that it is conveyed. The more we do to show that veterans are well looked after, the more we will encourage a future generation of soldiers, sailors and airmen and women to come through our doors.

That brings me to the second element of this debate. In the years to come, our armed forces will face an increasing challenge to recruit the people in the face of increased competition from companies that offer more money and more flexible ways of working.

That is why we are determined to transform the MOD into a modern force that does not provide its people only with modern equipment, but with better accommodation, better terms and conditions and even greater flexibility. We fully recognise that the current offer that we make to our servicemen and women is not keeping pace with modern needs, which is why we are committed to changing and improving it better to reflect the realities of today's society.

Stephen Doughty: On that very theme, I was delighted recently to attend the PinkNews awards, where the British Army was awarded the public sector employer of the year award for its work, particularly on the Army LGBT forum. Does the Minister agree that we have a particular issue with older LGBT veterans who were not perhaps treated the way they should have been in the past and that we need to do more to right that wrong and show a good example as we go forward, just as the Army is doing today?

Mark Lancaster: That is a very fair point, and I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman who, as I recall, has been a champion for such people in the past. That work will continue.

[Mark Lancaster]

The new employment model represents a significant update to the offer, providing support to service personnel who want to buy their own homes; promoting greater domestic stability and lifestyle choice for service personnel and families; and delivering simpler and more transparent systems for pay and accommodation grading—but the challenges placed on defence and the needs of our people continue to evolve. In SDSR 2015, we committed to build on the foundations of the new employment model to ensure that the future offer remains competitive and sustainable. We have grouped this under the armed forces people programme.

For example, we are now looking to see how we can make life easier, where possible, for those struggling to meet their full military commitment. With the flexible engagement system, we will be able to offer service personnel the opportunity to work part-time and, when needed, protect individuals from deployments. This means that we can reduce liability for deployment for a period, so 27-year-old Sergeant Jenkins, for example, can support his pregnant wife and spend more time with his young family in those important early childhood years.

We know that the provision of affordable, good-quality accommodation is also central to our offer to service personnel. Yet again, though, we recognise that the current accommodation model does not always support how service personnel might choose to live, forcing some to opt out of subsidised accommodation or compromise on family life. The future offer will look to provide current service personnel with more choice of housing and help to meet their aspirations for home ownership—regardless of age, rank or relationship status.

That is just a glance at what we are doing. Let me reassure the House that the armed forces people programme will deliver real improvement, developing a future offer that will promote diversity and individual choice, support flexibility and take account of personal circumstances. Above all, it will continue to evolve, reflecting changing needs and aspirations. In short, it will be more effective for our people and more efficient for defence.

Kevin Foster: Is not a change taking place in our requirements for the armed forces? The Navy is desperately short of engineers, but we should also bear it in mind that someone whom we send to deal with an event in the cyber environment will be a very different sort of person from someone whom we send with rifle and pack into the frontline. Is that not an important reason for us to change the employment model and ensure that people know they are exactly the sort of people whom we need in our armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is right, and we are considering a variety of options to ensure that we can attract a greater variety of people. One of the biggest challenges that we face is the fact that, historically, we have been a bottom-fed organisation which people join either as private soldiers or as junior officers, although many of the skill sets that we need are possessed by people who have developed them outside the armed forces. We are considering carefully the possibility of some form of lateral entry to take account of that.

The issues raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth are topical, pertinent and increasingly important. Support for a new generation of veterans and service personnel will be critical in the coming years, and the Government will continue to honour their covenant responsibilities. However, I began by saying that we all have a duty to serve those who serve us, and it is our job as Members of Parliament to keep reminding local authorities and businesses in our own constituencies of the needs of a new generation of ex-servicemen and women. Only then can we guarantee our heroes the fair treatment that their service deserves.

I am sure that this weekend Members will be returning to their constituencies to commemorate Remembrance Sunday, but for my own part, I shall not. I shall be travelling nearly as far south as it is possible to travel when I go to the Falkland islands to join the Falkland islanders, because I think it equally right for us to support them on that important day.

I thank all Members for taking part in the debate. Today's attendance is heartening and sends a clear message to our service personnel that they have the support of the House of Commons.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Stephen Doughty to wind up the debate, very briefly.

5.57 pm

Stephen Doughty: I thank all Members—including those with distinguished service histories, not least the Minister—for their powerful contributions. I am glad that the House has discussed a series of issues affecting the new generation of veterans and their families. We discussed the most serious examples in detail, but we also discussed a range of issues—including the transition to civilian life and access to housing and employment—which I think are just as important as some of the much more serious cases of which we are all aware. It is vital that we remember the present generation as well as previous generations, which is why the Royal British Legion campaign is so crucial.

Public perceptions of veterans and their families clearly present a challenge, and—this is particularly important—so do the perception of veterans and their families of whether we as a country are continuing to do our duty for them as they did their duty for us. Reports such as the SSAFA report, published in July, which stated that four in 10 veterans who contacted the charity believed that they had been disadvantaged by their military service when it came to housing or employment, must be of concern to us all and serve as a stark reminder of the challenges that are out there.

I hope that all of us, when we stand at our cenotaphs and memorials on Remembrance Sunday, will not just say “We will remember them.” We also need to say that we will do right by them as they have done right by us, which will be a fitting tribute to all those who serve our country so bravely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel.

PETITIONS

Closure of Belgrave Library and Lunch Club at Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre, Leicester

5.59 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I wish to present a petition that has been signed by 1,740 local residents, predominantly in Belgrave in Leicester. The petition was collected by volunteers in the local area: Mr Praful Mashru, Mr Kishorebhai Bojak, Mr Amratbhai Shyamji, Mr Vajubhai Madlani, Mrs Lilaben Doshi, Mr Vinod Kotecha, Mr Gagendrabhai Chhatrishia, Mr K. Kotecha, Mr A. Sevak and Mrs M. Mashru, and local councillors Mo Chohan, Manjula Sood and John Thomas.

The council proposes closing the Belgrave library and neighbourhood centre's lunch club. The proposals have been brought forward by the assistant mayor, Councillor Kirk Master, who is consulting people and will consider what to do next, but residents are very concerned that these important projects might be closed, and that is why they are urging the city council to think again and to keep the library open—and the lunch club, too, which serves many elderly constituents, who have been going there for the last 40 years.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Leicester East,

Declares that Leicester City Council's plans to move the Belgrave Library will have a detrimental effect on the whole community, local school children and other members of the public; further that it will have to downsize the services currently provided such as access to computers, national newspapers, reading classes and book review sessions; further that moving it to Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre is not conducive to the atmosphere of what a library is and should be; further that the Belgrave Library is one of the few libraries remaining in Leicester; further that the residents are also concerned about Leicester City Council's plans to remove the cooking facilities at the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre, which currently serves the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre Lunch Club which provides freshly cooked and culturally appropriate vegetarian hot meals to the elderly, disabled, diabetics and vulnerable people in the community; further that if the cooking facilities

were to be removed, these communities would be deprived not only of a hot meal but also of their ability to be sociable and receive support on things that they do not understand; and further that they will become isolated and a burden on Leicester City Council who would need to provide more specialist individual care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Leicester City Council to reconsider their decision to move the Belgrave Library to Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre and further encourage the Council not to remove the cooking facilities in Belgrave Neighbourhood as it provides a vital service to the elderly in the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001977]

Bozeat Branch of the Post Office

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Bozeat in my constituency. The lead signatures are those of Brian Gibbins, chairman of Bozeat parish council, and Margaret Docker and Sheila Alderman. The petition has hundreds of signatures, and it describes the problem of Bozeat post office, which is open for just two half-days a week. The postmaster would like to open for six days a week, which would be much better for my constituents and relieve pressure on the Wellingborough post office.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of Bozeat, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the Bozeat branch of the Post Office should extend its opening hours to 9am until 5pm six days a week; and further that to accommodate greater usage of the facility and to prevent congestion at other facilities used elsewhere by the villagers.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to encourage the Post Office to extend the opening hours of their Bozeat village branch.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P001976]

Capita Contract (Coventry)

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Christopher Pincher.)

6.2 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): I thank the Speaker for granting this debate. It is timely, because while the issue has been raised by local GP practices and their senior managers in Coventry, I am well aware, following a gracious call from the Minister's office and given the presence of other hon. Friends, that the problem has a wider significance and that it has echoes in many other parts of England, at least. I thank Jane Moxon and others who came to see me—all very senior practice managers in Coventry. They alerted me what is evidently a growing problem throughout the country.

The Minister, who is aware of the situation emerging across the country, kindly asked whether she should address the wider issue, or concentrate on Coventry. The topic of the debate is the impact on patient care and the health service in Coventry of the privatisation of the thoroughly well-executed existing service for GPs in our area. The same thing is happening in other areas, however, and I will be very happy to give way to my hon. Friends. Sufficient time is available—not that I want to detain you unnecessarily, Madam Deputy Speaker, or the Minister or other Members, but if there is interest, I am sure that we can accommodate others, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher); all three Coventry Members are properly on parade this evening to take part in the debate.

The position was very simply summarised by the senior practice manager from Broomfield Park, Jane Moxon, when she came to see me. She acted as chair for the group, and still does. Warwick University is in the same position: students from the EU face the loss, absence or lateness of their patient records. Allesley Park hosted our meeting; Kevin Arnold is the practice manager there. They have all alerted me to the fact that GPs are simply unable to do their job without having their patients' records to hand.

An excellent manual service was provided under the national health service, but the Government were taken in by the lure of apparent savings and the prospect of cutting 40% from a £1 billion bill, and they contracted the work out to Capita, of all people. Only last week, we saw what could happen in the absence of a properly thought-through privatisation programme. These contracts are gaily handed out to companies that do not have the skills, preparation or sheer commitment necessary to provide the service.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for initiating this debate. I have been contacted by my GP practices in Bristol South about this issue. In a previous role, I worked in a commissioning group and I have employed GPs. The arrangements for doing that are very complex, requiring specialist local knowledge and a lot of experience. Does he agree that the decision to put the entire service out to a national tender was driven by a desire to make massive wholesale savings, and that the savings target completely ignored the service need locally? Does he also agree that we are in a very poor situation across the country? I hope that the Minister can address that point.

Mr Robinson: My hon. Friend speaks pointedly to the issue. She is absolutely right in every respect, and I thoroughly agree with her. I would go a little further and say that the irony is that we have ended up with a terrible service that is costing more than the previous service ever would, because the company was not properly prepared, did not have a commitment to providing the service, and was unable to do so, and because of the competing and irreconcilable claims about short-term gains in the form of profits and illusory savings for the health service.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The situation in Coventry that my hon. Friend describes is also being experienced by GP practices in my constituency. GP practice managers have told me that the system was trialled in west Yorkshire and proved unsatisfactory, yet the contract was rolled out regardless. Does my hon. Friend not agree that that is a further irony?

Mr Robinson: Well, we learn something every day. I did not know that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing it to my attention. That fact was not mentioned to me in Coventry, where people felt that the new system had been sprung on them completely without trial. When I was a Minister, I was a great supporter of the idea of trialling programmes. After all, we trialled them for a purpose, which was to see whether we were ready for them and whether the contractor was able to provide them. However, that seems to have been ignored in this instance. I shall say a few words at the end of my short contribution about learning lessons. This is not the first time we have been in this position. It is not as though we have suddenly discovered that contracts are not easily transferred, and there are lessons to be learned.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this problem does not just affect GP practices in Coventry? It has also had an adverse impact on individual residents, including people who have requested a copy of a late relative's medical records from the primary care support service. Partly because of the service's failure to appoint a medical adviser to deal with such requests in the Coventry area, many of those people have been forced to wait for more than twice the maximum 40 days that it should take to process such a request. It is utterly unacceptable to put anyone through that kind of delay, but it is inexcusable for it to happen to anyone who is already in an extremely vulnerable position following the death of a relative.

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who puts her finger on another aspect of the situation that reveals the true motives of private sector contractors. They are not in it to improve the service and make real savings; they are in it for short-term profit. I have nothing against the private sector making profits—I am all for it—but the irony is that the companies cannot make a profit from a proper service, so they turn to such measures as imposing a £40 charge for access to a deceased relative's records, as my hon. Friend mentions. They do not have to impose that charge—I think it used to be left to the GP's discretion—but they now insist on it, and people have to pay postage and delivery charges on top, which is a disgraceful pursuit of short-term gain at the expense of the people they are meant to serve.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue to the House. Capita holds the contract for locums for the NHS; no one questions their ability, but does the hon. Gentleman have any concerns about the scheme's value for money? The Government should look at filling those vacancies from within the NHS, making a saving and keeping that money in the NHS for NHS services.

Mr Robinson: Just as I am in favour of a profitable private sector, I am in favour of savings in the NHS. We all know that we have to make savings, but let us make real savings from properly thought-through programmes. The NHS is often the best place to carry them out. We should not have badly planned impositions from the private sector, which does not know what it is going to do or how to do it.

We have to learn the lessons. It is not as if we have not had plenty of examples, as we saw in our debate last week on another private sector company that reviews benefits. That case was an absolute disgrace, but let us not get diverted on to that, because we had a good debate on it last week. Let us stay with the problem before us tonight. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to tell us, but I must warn her that I have a few things to say yet; I have only just started. Correct me if I am wrong, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I understand that the debate can go longer than half an hour. I do not want to detain the House, but I urge any Member who wishes to contribute to do so, because we have at our disposal at least double the normal time. If I say that to the dismay and disappointment of the Minister, I am sorry, but we will not delay anybody unnecessarily.

Others have been in touch with me on this subject. I am pleased to say that the good old BBC was made aware of an issue and initiated an excellent survey of what is happening in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. The survey was carried out by Nikki Fox, who did a good job and presented a programme on this. She discovered that no fewer than 9,000 records had been lost. Some had been found flying loose on the ground in a car park. God knows what happened to the others—nobody knows. Some 9,000 patient records have gone missing in those three counties alone. It is very much to Mr Paul Conroy's credit that he has written to me issuing a challenge, which I will come to later, to fulfil our public duty to reveal what has happened, which, as is usually the case, others are trying to hide. Capita says that it is unaware of the problems, yet three counties are up in arms and the BBC has conducted an exposé; it beggars belief.

No fewer than 20 practices in Coventry and Warwickshire have been surveyed, and every single one of them has said that there has been a more or less serious deterioration in services. NHS England itself has now stated that patients could be at risk. The whole purpose of tonight's debate is to reveal that risk and to urge Capita to correct the problem.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have been approached by several GPs in Blackburn who feel that the service they are providing to the public is going under. They can no longer cope with the burden placed on them. Would it be in order to ask the Minister whether she can

urgently step in? GPs are under a lot of pressure right now, and this added burden is a false economy and could put patients at risk.

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with that. We see the problems extended across the border, and indeed they are not peculiar to any one part of the United Kingdom. By their very nature, they are systemic and infect, for want of a better phrase, the whole country, and I am pleased to welcome the Member from the Scottish National party to—

Kate Hollern: No, I am from the Labour party.

Mr Robinson: I am so sorry, dear. I shall not live that one down in a hurry, but I thought I had detected a Scottish accent. I welcome my hon. Friend to the debate. She is the only one who did not tell me she would be participating tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do apologise, but I cannot correct *Hansard* and I am afraid to say that the error will stand. I am sure she will forgive me, even if others may enjoy the mistake I have made.

There is no doubt that we are facing a major threat with this situation, and we hope we can stop it before we get to a major incident or catastrophe of some kind. That is the point of tonight's debate. There is no doubt that this threat exists in Coventry, and we want to see what the Minister has to tell us about it. It is also clear from the interventions, which I have been pleased to take and to respond to, that this problem is widespread in England as a whole. As we have heard, in Bristol and in Manchester, and in the constituencies of those others who have made interventions, the problem is growing, not waning. Given the situation, we have to take steps.

Although we have risen to the challenge put out by Mr Paul Conroy, it is not enough for any Member just to speak up and expose this situation. That is a public duty we have as Members of this House, and the BBC has a duty as the national broadcaster to speak about these problems. We have all had experience of this. Not only have I had my business experience, but I have had experience of problems of this kind while in ministerial office and from others. Everybody in the country knows—it is no secret—that these privatisations, unless they are carefully controlled and well thought out, go wrong, so why do we keep doing them? This particular one involves Capita—it is in the hot seat tonight. It should know what this is about by now, as it has been through several of these and got them all wrong—Capita seems to learn nothing either. Ministers change, and it may be that the Minister knows about it but then gets moved. That is the nature of our appointments system, and I would not want to change anything there, but the civil servants who run these Departments should start to understand these things.

Contract management has many attractions to Ministers and to Government, who contract the problem out and lose direct responsibility for things. Everybody then heaves a sigh of relief and closes the file as if the thing is nothing more to do with them, but that is an illusion, because it comes back to bite them harder than it would have done had they kept the problem under their direct responsibility. It is an illusion to think that we can contract out. The responsibility for a contract remains with the person issuing that contract, and where it is for a major national public service, that contract must be

[Mr Geoffrey Robinson]

taken seriously. What I did learn in the private sector is that the best companies spent more time preparing the bids for a contract, the assessments of the validity of the contracts and the validation process for a contract than they ever spent in negotiating the thing, which civil servants and Ministers often like to think they are good at. They say, “We had a hard-nosed negotiation on that one. We got them down from Y to X and we saved all this. It is great. We really screwed the private sector, didn’t we?” That is all a total illusion.

The most important thing when we do a contract of this complexity and of this kind is to get to the basis of the issues: to see who is really competent to take it on; who can make the savings that are being claimed in the real world; and who can do the other elements of the contract that have to come into play in a difficult situation competently. It is a question of competence.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend brings his extensive business experience to the debate about value for money when issuing private contracts. Does he agree that whatever the cost savings that may apparently be achieved under this contract, the cost to GPs and to practice managers of coping with the chaos, chasing records and trying to contact the help desk but failing to get through has been substantial? Does he also agree that those GP practices deserve compensation for the additional costs they have incurred?

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with every single word my hon. Friend says. I would add, by way of a warning, that it is not a question of trying to punish the private sector by making it pay for this. Capita has to put the necessary resources into trying to correct the problem, and that must be its first priority. Something must give in the drive for profit, the drive to cut the costs of the services and the drive to improve the services. Those are irreconcilable objectives to start with, and in rectifying them the first thing that has to go is the drive for profit. Capita must realise that when it comes to put this right, it has to put the resources behind that. Compensation for GPs is important—I do not disagree with my hon. Friend for a minute on that—but I put it secondary to the provision of resources to get the contract right. I am sure that she would agree.

One other aspect of this shows an unacceptable, unpleasant and displeasing aspect of the privatisation process. It appears—I do not know this first hand—that Capita has turned to CitySprint to deliver these things. The effect of that is that we are employing drivers with no contracts, no sickness benefits and no breaks. This continual turning of the screw downwards is leading to a low-wage, low-productivity, low-output and impoverished economy. The workforce is suffering from that and it seems to be characteristic in many areas. For the public service to be involved in that process and almost to accelerate it, tightening that screw, is unacceptable.

This is another aspect of the commitment to negotiation and to the evaluation and validation process. The Government must learn to consider the quality of the service being provided and the quality of the means by which they intend to provide that service. CitySprint does not measure up to the standards we would expect from a good public sector contractor or employer.

To return to the main theme of tonight’s debate, what do we learn from this? The Government—principally the civil service, but Ministers, too—must learn to evaluate and validate the process of contracting out services. They cannot be driven by short-term savings, which are invariably illusory, but must consider the quality of the underlying contract. That is an art that must be learned, but I think it can be.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is being generous with his time. I do not know whether he is aware that the Public Accounts Committee recently held an evidence session on the contract awarded to UnitingCare in Cambridgeshire. Many of the issues he has rightly outlined about the scoping of such contracts and expertise within the NHS were highlighted, particularly as regards whether the expertise was there to do the sort of detailed and specialist work he mentions. Should that expertise be built back into the NHS, so that it can conduct those contracts in the spirit of good public service as opposed to yet more taxpayers’ money being spent on expensive external consultants?

Mr Robinson: We are ranging wide of the debate, but again I have to say that I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I saw something about that Public Accounts Committee hearing. That is absolutely right; the problem is getting these lessons learned by the Government. I do not know what it is; it is as if there is an institutional or cultural inhibition leading to resistance to doing the technical job properly. People can be brought in to do it, but—I think that this was my hon. Friend’s point—there is a wealth of knowledge and expertise about the health service in the NHS that needs to be released and employed. Being able to do that is the art of management.

That is my plea. Yes, we want to bash Capita tonight, but more than bashing Capita and hitting out at incompetence and inexperience in the civil service, the real point of tonight is to tell Capita it is in disgrace and needs to get this right. It is obviously a nationwide—an England-wide—problem and it is not just restricted to Coventry. Capita’s overriding No. 1 objective is to put it right. That is our message tonight: “Get your finger out, put it right. Put the resources into putting this whole problem right and do not go for the short-term solution.”

6.24 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I will just make one or two observations because my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) has covered the subject very well. Like him, I have received representations. Since the last reorganisation of the NHS, problems such as this seem to be coming to light. There is a pattern. There was the problem with Concentrix and benefits, which of course is nothing to do with the NHS. We had debates about that a couple of weeks ago. Now this problem with Capita and primary care support is emerging.

When the Government look at such companies, they should look at a schedule of terms and conditions for the service they are going to deliver, the people they are going to employ and their qualifications, and whether people will be employed on zero-hours contracts. I have heard all sorts of stories about companies that subcontract out to smaller companies. That is where the problems start to arise.

There was a ruling a couple of weeks ago on taxis after a case was brought by a trade union. It may well mean that there will be a problem with zero-hour contracts, holiday pay and so on. The Government should look at that when they award contracts.

Like my hon. Friend, I have had GPs in Coventry complain to me about the inadequacy of the services, delays across the board and records being lost. Even the British Medical Association has accused Capita of failures. These delays are making it impossible for GPs' surgeries in my constituency and across the country to do their job properly. For example, a surgery in my constituency faced delays in receiving patients' notes. As my hon. Friend has mentioned, that can go on for a long time, and if someone is terminally ill, the situation can be life-threatening. Doctors sometimes have to meet patients without records or knowledge of their medical history, so they have to rely on the patient to provide their history. Patients at the end of the day are not doctors; they can only express in layman's terms what they think is wrong with them. They need qualified doctors.

Colleen Fletcher: Does my hon. Friend agree that the difficulties experienced by GP practices are being compounded by the inability of Primary Care Support England service centres to deal with inquiries about ongoing problems either by phone or email? Staff from one practice in Coventry said that any response to emails was unusual, long-awaited and often failed to address the question posed. This type of comment is echoed time and again by exasperated practice staff across the city.

Mr Cunningham: My hon. Friend puts it very adequately. I and all my colleagues behind me have all experienced that and the Minister as a constituency MP may well have experienced something like that because it is widespread.

At the end of the day, GPs are having to bear the brunt of the failings of Capita. It is unacceptable that a private company can bid for an NHS contract without the infrastructure in place to deliver. I have already explained to the Minister what that means. Will she allow GPs to be given additional support and help to cope with overstretched services? As I said, a lot of this came about with the last reorganisation of the health service. When people provide a service that is funded on the basis of a policy of cuts, they can expect people to take shortcuts. The patient is important, the GPs are important, but the employment rights of those people who are subcontractors or sub-subcontractors should be upheld.

The Minister should really look into this. I detect a pattern of Government contracting out of services and problems developing with those services. I have already mentioned the problems with the benefit service. Sometimes services are contracted out because Ministers do not want to be answerable at the Dispatch Box. We have had that in the past. The Minister says, "I am not responsible." We try to get through to the company that is providing the service for the public; we cannot get through to them and the Government pass the buck. I had that last Christmas with Concentrix, but that is another debate. I will end my comments there.

6.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) on securing a very important debate. As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, his business acumen was clearly on display. The importance of this debate is clear from the presence of a clean sweep of Coventry Members, but I know that the issue is important to colleagues across the House, so I am pleased to respond to the debate this evening.

I will start with Coventry, as it is in the title of the debate. Coventry is at the forefront of providing extended access to GP services seven days a week through the GP access fund, and it is doing excellent work to ensure that frail or elderly patients can avoid unnecessarily long hospital stays, using integrated neighbourhood teams to make sure that patients have the right primary and community care in place. As has been made clear by the speeches and interventions that we have just heard, excellent primary care such as this relies on effective and efficient support services. The hon. Member for Coventry North West is therefore right to be concerned that the service provided by Capita under the primary care support services contract in Coventry and elsewhere has so far fallen well short of the standards that we expect, and GPs have borne the brunt of these failings, as we have heard today.

It is true, as the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) said, that NHS England needs to make efficiencies. I was pleased to hear that the hon. Member for Coventry North West supports that in principle, and I am happy to confirm that all the savings that are made through this contract are ploughed straight back into frontline NHS services.

It was always clear that Capita's services needed to be at least as good as those that they replaced. Quality was always part of the tender process. The contract was let via a competitive tendering process, which was subject to scrutiny not only by the Department of Health but by the Treasury, and the bids were assessed for quality, not just cost. Capita put forward the most credible of any of the bids accepted on the short list, and at the time both the Department and NHS England had every confidence that the programme would be a success. However, it is evident that Capita was inadequately prepared for delivering this complex transition.

Mr Robinson: First, does the Minister agree that part of the process preceding the award of the contract should have been to assess whether Capita was ready for it? That is precisely the point that I was trying to make and that my hon. Friends referred to in the debate. Secondly, how can the Minister talk of savings? How can any savings have been made when 9,000 patients records have been missing for more than two months, without which they cannot attend doctors surgeries? It is illusory to speak of savings. There are none, unless the Minister would care to tell us where they are and how they came about. I would be pleased to hear that.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman's point about scrutinising whether Capita was competent as part of the tendering process is purely common sense and obviously that should have been done as part of the process. If he will allow me, I will come to the other points in the

[*Nicola Blackwood*]

course of my speech. I would like to concentrate on how we resolve the problem that we find. We need to make sure that GPs and their patients receive the service to which they are entitled.

We want to restore acceptable services, and the contract contains sufficient financial incentives to ensure that Capita shares that goal, which is an important part of the contract and process. Let us be clear that the problems encountered with medical record transfers and overdue payments are entirely unacceptable. The Department shares that view. Both Capita and NHS England are co-operating fully with the Information Commissioner's Office to address the implications for information governance, and I accept the need for urgent action to address the impact that this is having on patients and practitioners. That is why I have been holding regular meetings with Capita's chief executive for integrated services, Joe Hemming, its new managing director for primary care support, Simon England, and NHS England's national director for transformation and corporate operations, Karen Wheeler, and I will continue to hold such meetings.

Both NHS England and Capita openly acknowledge that the service has not so far been good enough. NHS England has demanded and received rectification plans from Capita for the six most affected service lines and has embedded a team of seven experts within Capita to support it as it resolves these issues.

As the hon. Member for Coventry North West said, it is also about having the right resources in the right place at the right time. Capita has informed me that it is adding around 500 more full-time equivalent staff to the service, at its cost, and that it is improving the training provided to ensure that new staff understand the importance of the service to both patients and practitioners.

I know that these problems have caused great inconvenience and distress, but with reference to risk—the hon. Member for Bristol South raised this point—NHS England has assured me that it is not aware of any direct cases of patient harm that can be attributed to service issues. However, NHS England is working closely with regional and local medical directors, so that we can be assured of patient safety. In particular, Dr Raj Patel, medical director of NHS England Greater Manchester, has joined the embedded team to ensure that clinical risks and concerns are appropriately addressed.

The priority now is to deal with any backlogs, particularly with medical record requests, and to ensure that services are stabilised with the capacity to deal properly with new requests. There has been progress on that, which is encouraging. The backlog of medical record requests has reduced from 17,262 to 3,465 in the past two weeks. Capita assures me that it has an effective triage system in operation for new requests and is confident that the situation will not recur. However, I will be monitoring the situation closely.

Kate Green: On the point about reducing the backlog, which is something the Bodmin Road practice in my constituency has raised with me, it is not just Capita that needs to put in extra resources; the GP practice is now receiving an onslaught of incoming records, but it does not have the personnel to manage them.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the impact on GP services in recent weeks and months, and I will move on to that point later.

Capita has piloted a new way to move medical records. I think that is the pilot in west Yorkshire to which the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston referred, but it was not a pilot for the overall Capita project. Capita assures me that ultimately it will be more reliable and secure by tracking the end-to-end movement of every record. It is piloting that approach in west Yorkshire and plans to be ready to roll it out nationally in March 2017. I am aware that some GPs were left short of basic supplies as a result, including syringes, and that they have had to source those from other suppliers at their own expense. NHS England tells me that it has reimbursed practices for any costs incurred from having to buy local supplies of needles and syringes.

I know that many of the hon. Members' GP constituents have experienced frustration with Capita's contact centre. I share those frustrations. Capita assures me that the contact centre has improved the way it responds to urgent queries by investing in more staff, improved processes and enhanced training. Capita is confident that these measures will deliver a quality service to customers. We will monitor its progress closely, including through meetings.

Karin Smyth: I am listening carefully to the Minister, and it is obviously reassuring to know that Capita, NHS England and the Minister are having these conversations at a national level. In those discussions, has any consideration been given to my point about the loss of local, specialist knowledge and expertise? Is any consideration being given to putting back some of those local arrangements, given the importance of primary care to the entire system?

Nicola Blackwood: I shall come a little later to the problems with the existing system that meant it needed to be replaced. However, the hon. Lady's point about the value of institutional knowledge, especially among NHS workers and personnel in other roles, is very important. They have been engaged in a lot of consultation processes as we try to put this issue right with NHS England and Capita. If the hon. Lady writes to me, I will be happy to give her more detail.

I also expect Capita to address issues with the courier service. I am aware of several steps that have been taken to ensure that all practices receive regular collections and deliveries. Both NHS England and Capita have taken steps to demonstrate that they are committed to restoring their reputation and re-establishing a quality service, and I am encouraged to see them working in partnership to do so. That said, I recognise that GPs, and ophthalmologists in particular, have suffered financial detriment as a result of late processing of payments. NHS England is working with Capita to explore what can be done to support affected stakeholders, and I have made it clear to Capita that I expect it to consider compensation as an option.

Some have suggested that the old model for provision of primary care support should be reinstated, but we must remember that it relied on localised services that did not connect with one another, with much duplication across processes. The quality of these services varied greatly—in some areas, it was outstanding; in others,

it was quite poor. That was simply unsustainable. Furthermore, the system was unable to generate useful management information and so, honestly, issues such as the ones that we now face would be very unlikely to have surfaced. They would have gone unreported.

A new model, with efficient and modernised processes, is the right approach to deliver to our primary care providers the service that they deserve. The Department and I will continue to closely scrutinise Capita and NHS England as they work to resolve current problems and build a quality service that is sustainable. I acknowledge fully that there is a long way to go before the service can

be considered acceptable and that Capita has much to do to earn the trust of practitioners and patients.

This is clearly a live issue. I want to be clear today: I am listening. The issue is at the top of my priority list and will remain there until I am satisfied that an efficient and effective service is being delivered that meets the needs of patients and providers.

Question put and agreed to.

6.41 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 November 2016

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

CPS and Disability Hate Crime

9.30 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Crown Prosecution Service's approach to prosecuting disability hate crime.

It is nice to speak in this debate under your stewardship, Mr Bone. I welcome the Government's action plan for tackling hate crime. I know others have been less complimentary because they do not see, for example, a "prevent agenda" for disability hate crime in it. Nevertheless, it is important to hold on to the plan that the Government have produced. "Action Against Hate" sets out that

"Any crime that is motivated by hostility on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity can be classed as a hate crime."

There are three categories of hate crime in legislation: incitement to hatred offences on the grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation; specific racially and religiously motivated criminal offences, such as common assault; and provisions for enhanced sentencing where a crime is motivated by race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity.

It is worth noting that annex A of the plan sets out the College of Policing's hate crime operational guidance and shared definitions established by the Crown Prosecution Service and the Association of Chief Police Officers. That guidance goes into a little more detail for those who will implement the actions on the ground, so to speak. Disability hate crime remains both underreported and under-prosecuted. That needs to change.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that improving the understanding of disability hate crime among prosecutors is an essential step in giving more victims the confidence they need to come forward, as we have seen in other areas?

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will touch on that point a little later.

We are seeing intolerance rising, particularly in relation to disability, which does not lie well in a society where we claim to be liberal and tolerant. I increasingly get the sense of an intolerance to all sorts of people since the referendum—I do not want to bring that issue up, but it is important that we do not pretend that things have not happened and are not happening. In fact, even the most eminent people such as Lord Thomas, the Lord Chief Justice; Sir Terence Etherton, Master of the Rolls; and Lord Justice Sir Philip Sales are not immune to the pervading intolerance stalking the country. I deplore the abuse of those public servants for doing what, at the end of the day, is their job.

Even the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination said it was "seriously concerned" about British politicians' rhetoric in the lead-up to

and following the referendum. Reports indicated that immediately following the referendum, hate crimes surged by 42% in England and Wales, with a total of 3,076 incidents recorded across the country between 16 and 20 June. That rise was in less than one week, and it almost inevitably raises concerns about hate crime in a broader sense and particular groups' prospects in the future.

For clarity, the disability hate crime statistics I am about to use are from the CPS's own website on 13 July 2016. It said:

"The volume of cases referred to the CPS by the police for a charging decision increased from 849 in 2014/15 to 930 in 2015/16, an increase of 9.5%."

It went on to say that the number of convictions had gone up over the two years from 503 in 2014-15 to 707 last year—a big increase of 40.6%. The conviction rate remained broadly consistent over the two years at 75.1%, which I believe compares with an 83% conviction rate for all other hate crimes. Finally, it said:

"The proportion of successful outcomes arising from guilty pleas was 66.1% in 2014/15 and fell slightly to 63.4% in 2015/16." That is the context.

The co-ordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network has stated that those figures underestimate the true scale of the problem due to significant underreporting and believes that as many as 60,000 disability hate crimes could occur annually in the United Kingdom. That is supported by research published by the charity Scope, which has shown that two thirds of disabled people feel they are treated differently because of their disability, and only 40% say the UK is a good place to be a disabled person. That is quite shocking.

Young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. The Equality and Humans Rights Commission found that 22% of young people with a disability between the ages of 10 and 15 had been the victim of a crime in the previous 12 months, compared with only 12% of their non-disabled counterparts. Similarly, 35% of those with social or behavioural impairments such as autism, attention deficit disorder or Asperger's syndrome had found themselves victims of a crime. Young people and those with behavioural impairments commonly fail to report hate crimes out of fear and a lack of confidence, which goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie).

We often forget the long-lasting damage and devastating effect these crimes can have on not only those subject to abuse but their families. In fact, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Alison Saunders, said in the media release accompanying the statistics I referred to:

"My message is that a hate crime is exactly that—a crime—and will not be ignored. Hate crime creates fear and has a devastating impact on individuals and communities. Nobody should have to go about their day to day life in fear of being attacked."

Many victims of hate crime suffer long-lasting fear and anxiety, which has a detrimental impact on their physical and mental health, leaving them cut off and in many cases afraid to leave their house or go to public places.

The Disability Hate Crime Network found through a survey of 100 disabled people that the most common place for disability hate crime to happen is on the high street, followed closely by public transport. Others mentioned the local shop, the pub and social media—social media crops up time and again. The research found that

[Peter Dowd]

the majority of perpetrators are white and that over half the attacks are conducted by groups of people, rather than just one individual, so there is ganging up. Furthermore, 75% of disability hate crime defendants are men. These hate crimes include verbal abuse and physical abuse, with instances of disabled people being pushed out of their wheelchairs, blocked from accessing disabled ramps and being denied a seat or space on public transport. What kind of people do those things? The research also found that a large amount of the underlying motivation for disability hate crimes is the view that disabled people are on benefits and are therefore lazy and “scroungers”. That is what the research found—it is not an opinion; the evidence is there.

It is telling that disability hate crime has gone up in the past five years, in parallel with the perceived, if not actual, robust approach of the Department of Work and Pensions to disabled people and changes to, for example, the work capability assessment scheme. There have also been regular television series with a morbid fixation, such as “Saints and Scroungers”, “On Benefits and Proud” or “Benefits Street”; the list goes on. I do not want to politicise the issue, but there may be—I will go no further than that—a link between the rhetoric from some, which appears to single out those on disability living allowance and insinuate that a large proportion of those on benefits are somehow cheating the system, and the rise in disability hate crime in the United Kingdom today. There is a danger of going back to the deserving and undeserving poor, but no one knows which is which because of the environment we are operating in. Whether we like it or not, this is a milieu in which hate crime flourishes. We need less rhetoric and a more concentrated effort to raise awareness of disability, as my hon. Friend the hon. Member for South Down indicated, and of other sorts of hate crime and to provide better support and guidance so that people can recognise and report hate crime without fear, concern, trepidation or worry. National Hate Crime Awareness Week, which is usually in mid-October, creates a good opportunity to do that.

We need to do more to raise awareness of disabilities that are not physical, focusing on those involving social or behavioural impairments that affect memory, learning, understanding or concentration because people with such disabilities also find themselves victims of crime far too often.

There is room for best practice to be shared, particularly that from areas that have piloted schemes to help disabled people to report hate crimes. Leonard Cheshire Disability piloted a particularly successful programme in Northern Ireland. The Be Safe, Stay Safe programme provides support and education for carers and disabled people on their rights and how best to report hate crimes. In 2014-15, the scheme, in partnership with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, provided support in 126 incidents of hate crime against disabled people.

The Be Safe, Stay Safe programme uses social media to reach out to disabled people who have been victims of disability hate crimes, including online hate crimes. It launched the Support to Report campaign to raise awareness of disability hate crime with allied professionals, clinicians, social care workers and others in the disability sector, as well as MPs and Members of the Legislative

Assembly, which I am sure my hon. Friends are aware of. I would like to know whether the Government would consider replicating such a scheme more widely. After all, the Government’s current action plan states:

“Despite good progress since the last Action Plan, hate crime against disabled people remains a particular challenge. We will look at current best practice examples in tackling disability hate crime and work with partner organisations and the police to promote safety for disabled people.”

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some disabled people need particular support in reporting hate crime and will he join me in paying tribute to Disability Equality North West, which serves both our constituencies and is based just across the river in Preston in my constituency?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. So many voluntary organisations, charities, local government and other agencies do really good work in this area and it would be helpful to have examples of good practice that we can feed into a national database.

I welcome the Crown Prosecution Service’s consultation on hate crime, which was launched in October at about the same time as its 30th birthday, so happy birthday CPS. At the end of the day, the responsibility lies largely with the Government to set the environment in which the Crown Prosecution Service can pursue people responsible for hate crimes against disabled people. It is a team effort for all of us.

In England, some crimes are aggravated by hostility towards disability and those convicted seem to have been given unduly lenient sentences. I recognise that the CPS often comes in for a good deal of criticism in one way or another: that it is either too robust or wishy-washy in its pursuit of alleged offenders. As with most things, I suspect that some criticism is fair and some is unfair, but in the context of the clear levels of disability hate crime out there, the CPS must show that it takes disability hate crime extremely seriously; that it is doing all it can to improve prosecution and conviction rates; and that it ensures consistency across the country.

I have some questions based on the CPS’s October 2014 disability hate crime action plan. It was going to set out a hate crime assurance regime by December 2014. Did it? Is it being monitored? Is it continuing? It said it would refresh the national minimum standards for area hate crime co-ordination. Has that happened? Where is it up to? It talked about detailed analysis, including case examples, of hate crime to monitor victims’ experiences and to follow them up. Has that been completed? Is it being repeated? Where is it at?

The CPS talked about enhancements to the case management system of monitoring and recording applications for sentence uplifts—the section 146 question. Has that been done? How many, if any, uplifts have been applied for and granted? Has there been an analysis of that landscape? It said it would reissue clear guidance to prosecutors and agents to ensure sentence uplift applications are made whenever possible. Has it been reassessed and reviewed? Where is that up to?

The CPS said there would be retraining in the full range of offending to ensure that prosecutors fully understand the different forms of disability. Has that happened? Has it been reviewed and will it be reviewed again?

Has the CPS's senior management conference had the session on disability hate crime that was promised in its action plan? If so, fab, but will it be repeated and will it be a regular event at conferences? Has the liaison with the judiciary that was promised to discuss recording and monitoring of sentence uplifts taken place, and is it regular event? A one-off event is fine, but we need regular contact with the judiciary. How is the CPS's hate crime sub-group of its community accountability forum proceeding? It would be helpful to know where that is up to. Is it being repeated? Is it up to date? Is it meeting as often as it should? What action is it taking?

I turn to Dimensions, which is a not-for-profit charity that supports 3,500 people throughout the country who have learning disabilities, autism and complex needs. It produced a blueprint for change, "I'm with Sam", which sets out a salutary and moving narrative, which hon. Members may wish to read. It is a fairly short and concise document and well worth reading. Among other things, it asks the CPS to improve investigation protocols in the criminal justice system when there is a learning disabilities victim. It would be helpful to have a view on whether that might happen. In addition, it seeks better training for police officers and others to help when receiving a report of a crime involving a person with a learning disability. Again, accessibility to the system is crucial, as is the ability for people to have a sympathetic ear from those who are trained or at least have some knowledge of their needs.

At a wider level, we need to engender a culture of disability awareness and give confidence to victims of hate crime that they can come forward and will be listened to. The Government need to encourage and take a lead in creating an atmosphere in which the tone of debate about policy issues, many of which they have initiated, is moderate and reasonable. The last thing this country needs is another round of finger-pointing at the latest collective *bête noire*. I agree with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government who said in the action plan:

"Tolerance is not something we can take for granted. It is a cornerstone of British values and one of the many reasons we are great."

If people are not prepared to be tolerant and feel able to abuse vulnerable people, perhaps they should not expect the police and the CPS to be too tolerant towards them. In that respect, there is an expectation from most, if not all, hon. Members that the CPS will redouble its efforts, along with other law enforcement agencies, to send the message to thugs, cowards and bullies—because that is what they are—that the abuse of any vulnerable people, and in this case disabled people, will not be tolerated.

Finally, it is often not sensible to talk of personal experience, but I will make an exception today. I was brought up by a woman, a single parent, a war widow, a Christian, of Irish descent, who in her later years was disabled by partial sightedness. Each of those characteristics, in different situations, in different circumstances, in a different age, could have led to her being the victim of intolerance or hatred, and I think that sometimes she was, so she taught me that toleration was not a gift that was given to someone, but a duty that was owed to them, whoever they were—even to me when I was egregiously problematic to her. Her patience was boundless in that regard, and she was incredibly tolerant.

9.50 am

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing the debate. It is timely because, as he will know, the CPS is currently consulting on its policy for prosecuting disability hate crime. I am sure that my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General will ensure that the *Hansard* record of this debate is forwarded to the CPS as input to the consultation, so that it can hear the views of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber and from all parts of the United Kingdom.

Most of what the hon. Member for Bootle said I can agree with. I might take him to task on just one little bit towards the end of his remarks, but generally he set out the case very well and there was a great deal of consensus. I certainly support him in his contention about the nature of the people who carry out disability hate crime. He is absolutely right: they are thugs, cowards and bullies. I want to see the strongest possible response not just from the police and those who support people with disabilities, but from the CPS, so that people know that if they bring those cases forward and the police collect the evidence, there will be a robust prosecution response.

The hon. Gentleman cited the figures. The heartening thing is that in the most recent data, from this July, the CPS demonstrated that it had prosecuted a record number of hate crimes. We can always be either depressed or optimistic about this sort of data. It is always depressing to see the number of hate crimes going up, or those being prosecuted going up, because it can be said that the problem is getting worse. However, on the basis that certainly in the area of disability hate crime, and hate crime generally, it is accepted that more of it occurs than is tackled, the right way to read the statistics is that we are seeing more of the problem, capturing more of the problem and tackling more of the problem. In a funny sort of way, a set of statistics that shows more referrals to the police, more referrals to the CPS, more prosecutions and more convictions is actually good news, because it shows an increase not in the hate crime but in the ability of the system to tackle it. However, I understand from those who know this field best that a big gap still exists between the problem and the ability of the system to tackle it.

The hon. Gentleman is right to mention a 41% increase in hate crime prosecutions, compared with the previous year, and the highest proportion of sentence uplifts, which is very welcome. Four in five hate crimes in general result in a conviction, so that should give victims confidence that if they report a hate crime, it will be properly looked at and properly prosecuted and there is a very good chance that the cowards, bullies and thugs that the hon. Gentleman referred to will be properly dealt with.

The hon. Gentleman quoted the Director of Public Prosecutions, who has sent a very clear message that hate crime will not be ignored but will be taken seriously by Crown prosecutors. That is worth repeating.

It is also worth saying that—to be fair to the hon. Gentleman, he did recognise this—the coalition Government had, and this Conservative Government have, a plan to tackle hate crime. The hon. Gentleman was not as enthusiastic as I will be, but he did welcome that plan. It will always be capable of improvement, and

[Mr Mark Harper]

I have some questions for the Solicitor General about areas that I and some organisations think could be improved, but having a plan is very good.

The action plan that was published this July deals with prevention, with how we respond to the problem, with reporting, with supporting victims and with understanding the problem by being better at collecting the data and setting out the issues.

Seema Kennedy: Does my right hon. Friend agree that awareness by a victim that they are actually the subject of a hate crime is very important, because in some of these cases the criminal is not a stranger? Does he also agree that campaigns—such as the one by the Lancashire police and crime commissioner, “Say No To Hate”—which raise awareness, are good for everyone because victims have more awareness that they have actually been subject to a hate crime?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I will say more later about disability hate crime, particularly against people with learning disabilities. In that respect, raising awareness of what is a hate crime, whether someone has been a victim of it and what they should do as a result is particularly important, and I join my hon. Friend in commending the efforts of her law enforcement bodies locally.

To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Bootle about prevention, the CPS has produced a resource pack for schools and teachers on hate crime. I do not know what reach that has had into schools and colleges. Perhaps the Solicitor General could say a little about the extent to which that resource pack has got into schools. Does the CPS have any data about the take-up—the extent to which teachers are using the resource pack in their classrooms? It is clearly very helpful, because if children can be educated about treating people with disabilities properly but also, importantly, looking out for other children with disabilities, that will help the younger people whom the hon. Gentleman talked about. It will help them as they grow up and will improve the ability of society to deal with these problems.

Could the Solicitor General also say something on this progress measure? The CPS has an action plan for dealing with disability hate crime specifically. As the hon. Member for Bootle said, it did a review of training and guidance. That package was delivered across the CPS between last September and this January. I accept, therefore, that it is fairly early days—we have had only nine or 10 months of that training package having been delivered—but I will echo the question asked by the hon. Gentleman about whether we have yet seen any behavioural change in the CPS and any improvement in the way the CPS deals with this sort of crime.

Importantly, the training looked at the victim’s perspective. It looked at increasing sentence uplifts and at prosecutors being more effective at dealing with that, which was particularly helpful. It looked at the guidelines for prosecuting disability hate crime and at the support that some disabled people might need. It looked at the special measures that might have to be incorporated into the courtroom to enable them to give evidence, such as an interpreter or the use of video interviewing methods. Again, it may be too early to have seen huge change there, but it would be helpful if the Solicitor General could say something about that.

The final point that the guidance dealt with is exactly the point that my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) just raised. It had some myth-busters, if I can put it like that, to dispel some of the erroneous assumptions that people have about prosecuting disability hate crimes. For example, it made it clear that even if the offender is a carer or family member, it is still a crime. It also made it clear that even if the victim did not have an easily identifiable impairment, which is exactly the point that the hon. Gentleman made, it is still a crime and should be prosecuted.

I wanted to raise a bit of a specialist point with the Solicitor General, who will know that I have recently taken over as chair of the all-party group on learning disability. The secretariat for the group is provided by Mencap, which supports the 1.4 million people with learning disabilities across the UK. Again, Mencap has welcomed what the Government have done on dealing with disability hate crime, but it has a number of questions. It supports the Dimensions campaign, “I’m with Sam”, which the hon. Member for Bootle mentioned, but I want to ask the Solicitor General about a number of issues in particular that it has raised.

How easy is it for people, particularly with a learning disability, to use the system? In my understanding, accessible information and support is not always available to guide them through it. I draw the Solicitor General’s attention to a resource that has been produced in Gloucestershire by students from the National Star College, working with Gloucestershire constabulary, to raise awareness of disability hate crime. That video sets out what disability hate crime is, how people can recognise it and how they can report it and have it dealt with. Much as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble said, that sort of local resource is being taken seriously by my county council, which provides excellent support for people with learning disabilities, and by the police and crime commissioner and Gloucestershire constabulary. All those bodies sending out that powerful message is very helpful. A little bit from the Solicitor General on accessible information would be welcome.

As the hon. Member for Bootle said, Mencap is also interested in looking at using the data better so we can see whether any types of disability hate crime are a particular problem—that might be learning disabilities or people with autism, for example—or whether it is a problem more generally.

The Dimensions campaign asked for a legal change so that online hate crime against people with disabilities is specifically made a crime. I am interested in the Solicitor General’s view on that because, in my understanding, if someone behaves in a certain way online, it is still a crime. It may be more or less difficult to get evidence, but if someone does something that is a crime, the fact that that behaviour happens in the online space does not mean it is not a crime, so I do not know whether it is necessary to change the law specifically to criminalise behaviour online, which is one of the asks in the campaign. It might be helpful if the Solicitor General is very clear in his response that some of the abuse and intolerance that we see online, which the hon. Member for Bootle referred to, is a crime and can be prosecuted. An advantage of online crime in one sense is that it provides a helpful audit trail for police and prosecutors,

but I understand that dealing with that is very resource-intensive. It might be helpful if the Solicitor General set out a bit about what is going on there.

I shall make a couple of other points before I finish. The Law Commission has carried out a review into sentencing in this area and has looked at whether the “stirring up offences”, if I may call them that—those that apply currently to race, for example—should be extended to disability. It has concluded that they should not be, but it has made two specific recommendations about sentencing. It said that there should be new guidance from the Sentencing Council about the sentence uplift provisions that are available in the Criminal Justice Act 2003. It has also said that when an offender is convicted of a disability hate crime and the sentence uplift is used, the offender’s record on the police national computer should be updated, so that there is a record of that. My understanding is that the Government have not yet responded to those recommendations. I know the Home Office has said that it is keeping them under review and I wonder whether the Solicitor General can provide the House with an update on that before he finishes.

I have a couple of final questions for the Solicitor General. When he was responding in the House of Commons to oral questions, he said that he attended a round table at the national College of Policing in September last year specifically on hate crime and disability hate crime, in particular. It was about sharing best practice across police forces and, of course, the national College of Policing does an excellent job in trying to spread best practice and raise policing standards generally. Will he update the House on any progress that has flowed from that round table, and does he have any further plans in that regard?

Finally, let me turn to the one area of disagreement I had with the hon. Member for Bootle. We agree on the way in which people with disabilities are sometimes reported by the media, but as we have an independent media, politicians are not responsible for what they do. We can suggest to them that they are not being very responsible, but it is not our job to tell them what to print. I do not agree with him, however, about the impact of the Government’s policies on supporting disabled people. I should declare an interest, Mr Bone: before the general election, between July 2014 and March 2015, I was the Minister for Disabled People. The Department’s entire focus—whether it was through our Disability Confident campaign or trying to deliver more help and support for disabled people—was on trying to get disabled people into work where they can. I had a recent debate in Westminster Hall about looking at more opportunities, post-Brexit, for disabled people to get into work. A huge number of people with learning disabilities, for example, could work if they are given the opportunity. They do not get that opportunity. We have seen 350,000 more people with disabilities being given the opportunity to work, so as far as the Government’s messages are concerned—that is what politicians are responsible for; I cannot be responsible for what the media print—they are very clear: they are about providing more opportunity and more help and support.

In the past couple of weeks, a Green Paper was published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the help and support that should be available for getting more disabled people

into work where they can work and about increasing the support for disabled people who are not able to work. The messages from the Government have actually been very supportive and I do not think any increase in disability hate crime could fairly be attributed to the policies of the Department for Work and Pensions. The points made by the hon. Member for Bootle may be more advisedly directed to the media, and I hope that they also listen to the debate and behave accordingly.

This has been a very valuable debate and it is an important subject to get on to the agenda. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it and I look forward to the Solicitor General’s response.

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say what a joy it is to follow the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper)? We recall his energies as the Minister for Disabled People and thank him for the good work he put in. It is good to see him here contributing to the debate in a different capacity. It was also a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) set the scene so well. This subject is close to my heart and to his, and to the hearts of all who are participating in today’s debate.

This issue has seen some traction recently. More people now understand that to discriminate or target someone due to disability is as bad as targeting someone due to race or religion. It is not acceptable. In this debate we are focusing on hate crimes targeted specifically at those who are disabled. It is just as despicable to pick on someone because of that as it is to pick on someone because of their race or religion. Section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 applies to sentencing when the court is considering the seriousness of an offence in which the offender, either at the time of committing the offence or immediately before or after doing so, demonstrated hostility towards the victim based on the victim’s physical or mental disability, or presumed disability; or the offence was motivated by hostility towards persons who have a physical or mental disability or a particular physical or mental disability.

How much those offences rile me personally and each every one of us in this House—those who have spoken before me and those who will speak after me. Such actions are horrible, despicable and clearly unacceptable. When we read about them in the press and in the media, or when we hear about them from constituents who tell us what happens to them, our response is to feel so angry. So again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for giving us all the opportunity to participate in it.

In cases such as I mentioned, the court must treat the fact that the offence was committed in any of those circumstances as an aggravating factor, and must state that in open court. The amount by which the sentence will be increased will depend on the circumstances of the case and the seriousness of the aggravation. There has been an impetus to prosecute more such crimes to send a message, very clearly, that they will not be tolerated in decent society. Can the Solicitor General tell us how many such crimes have been prosecuted in the United Kingdom?

To imagine that someone would be targeted because of their disability is beyond despicable. For that reason, I welcome the news that the CPS has prosecuted a

[*Jim Shannon*]

record number of hate crimes—15,442—in the past year, which is a 4.8% rise on the previous year of 2014-15.

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Gentleman, my friend from my neighbouring constituency, is making a compelling case. Does he agree that the Government could demonstrate their commitment to tackling hate crime by publishing a response to the Law Commission's 2014 consultation paper, which considered extending existing offences? We would like to hear from the Solicitor General on that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady, who is a friend as well, for her intervention. She has outlined the issue clearly, and I hope that the Minister responds to her point.

The number of prosecutions for the year 2014-15 marked a 4.7% increase on 2013-14, so there has been an increase in the number of prosecutions for the past three years, which indicates that there is a commitment from the Minister's Department and the CPS to make changes and prosecute these crimes. I will come to more figures later in my speech, but the number of crimes is enormous. The number of prosecutions is just the scrape of the scab, the tip of the iceberg or whatever other descriptive phrase we might use. The CPS's eighth hate crime report details a

"41% increase in disability hate crime prosecutions compared to 2014/15".

Even online hate crimes are being successfully prosecuted, and this message must be spread widely: people cannot hide their prejudice or hatred behind a keyboard and a laptop and think that it will protect them. It does not, it cannot and it never should. More than four in five prosecuted hate crimes result in a conviction, with more than 73% of those charged pleading guilty. In 2015-16, recorded sentence uplifts reached 33.8%, which shows a good use of the legislation for what it was designed to do.

I thank the Minister and his Department for what has been done, because it is positive, but I will outline something that I have said, that other Members have said and that those who speak after me today will say. In a written question some time ago, I asked the Attorney General

"what progress his Department has made on providing disability hate crime training for all prosecutors; and what improvements this training will bring to conviction rates."

It is important to have training in place so that we have people who know how to respond. The answer was:

"Mandatory training relating to disability hate crime was delivered, across the Crown Prosecution Service, between September 2015 and January 2016. Prosecutors will deploy the knowledge gained from the training in the course of prosecutions thereby improving performance. The CPS are enhancing the support provided to prosecutors in dealing with crimes committed against disabled people. They are reviewing their policy and legal guidance on disability hate crime, which will provide assurance to the public of how the CPS intends to deal with such crimes."

Following on from that, I ask the Minister to provide an update on whether that training has been a success or whether it needs improving. I would like him to update us on where we are and on what improvements could be made to make the training even better.

Other figures have not been so encouraging. The number of hate crime cases referred by the police to the CPS for decision in 2014 was 14,376—an increase of 2.2% on the previous year. However, in 2015-16, the number of referrals decreased by 9.6% to just under 13,000. I ask respectfully whether the Minister can give us some indication of why that happened. Is it because police resources are not focused on disability hate crime? If they are and there is a fall-down, I ask him to let us know so that changes can be made to address the issue. The optimist in us all would love to believe that the decrease in the number of referrals by the police to the CPS is due to more people recognising the boundaries of how they can treat others, but that is probably not the reason behind the drop.

The hon. Member for Bootle mentioned Northern Ireland's Be Safe, Stay Safe campaign. Just over a year ago, back in October last year, I made the House aware in a question—I think it was to the Solicitor General—that the Police Service of Northern Ireland had launched an online campaign after 44 disability hate crimes were recorded over a six-month period. The PSNI contacted the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability, which, as the Solicitor General will know, has set up an advocacy scheme to help disabled people access the criminal justice system. Will the Solicitor General consider similar action? He responded positively to that question, in which I underlined what we are doing in Northern Ireland.

As the hon. Member for Bootle said, if something good is happening in the United Kingdom—legislation or whatever it might be—whatever the debate is, we should all learn from it. We are doing something good in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Gentleman clearly, gently and supportively said. What we are doing in Northern Ireland is a response to the general public's request to put positive legislation in the hands of the police to make it happen and make a difference.

More must be done to ensure that disabled people are aware of the rights that are enshrined in law already and, more importantly, that they have the support they need to approach the police and to give evidence to further their case. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more than 60,000 incidents of disability hate crime are committed in England and Wales over a year, so I want to ask about prosecutions. I am thankful that the CPS has made more than 15,000 prosecutions, but if there are 60,000 incidents of disability hate crime, we are a long way from getting to where we need to be.

I know that the Minister is absolutely and totally committed to making the changes that are needed, as his demeanour and his response to the questions that he has raised will indicate. There is a chasm between 60,000 and 15,000, and I hope the Minister will respond to that point. More must be done to ensure that those two figures are more closely aligned. That is not to say that every off-the-cuff comment is worthy of prosecution, but I firmly believe that many crimes are being committed and not reported, which means that there is no help for the victims. The House must address that.

We must look at how the message can be made clearer that disability hate crimes exist and are not acceptable, that victims will be not further traumatised but helped and supported, and that justice can be served without it being at victims' expense. Could that be done in conjunction with the Department for Education?

Could part of the process involve co-operation with media channels to spread awareness? I am not one who watches the soaps on TV. I could tell hon. Members nothing about the storylines and little about who the characters are, but my wife loves those programmes and could tell hon. Members the details of every character's life. Some of those soaps could be used for good. One example is "Coronation Street". Although I am not an avid watcher of the programme—indeed, I do not watch it—I understand that it portrays the issue of Down's syndrome. There are ways of using the media and the TV for good. Perhaps the Minister could look into that possibility.

We must ask our ourselves whether we have done all we can to encourage the process of making people aware of protection, how serious disability hate crime is, and how seriously it will be treated. To our shame, I do not believe that we have. I implore the Minister to do more to take the matter further and bring about real change. Yes, we have done much good and made gigantic leaps forward, but we have not finished. More can be done.

I thank the House for the opportunity to speak. I very much look forward to the Minister's response, which I know will be positive, and I thank the hon. Member for Bootle for giving us all a chance to participate in the debate.

10.19 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing the debate. This is one of those special debates where it is easy to find broad consensus, which we should always cherish when we find it.

In the past year, the Crown Prosecution Service has prosecuted 15,442 hate crimes in England. That is a 4% rise on the previous year, which also saw a rise of 4.7%. Campaigners are convinced that those prosecutions are the tip of the iceberg and that the true scale of the problem is much greater. Many cases go unreported, as the hon. Members for Bootle and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have pointed out in some detail. Indeed, the Disability Hate Crime Network believes that there are 60,000 hate crimes against disabled people every year, and the hon. Member for Strangford set out that case in some detail.

The Disability Hate Crime Network fears that disabled people lack confidence that they will be listened to, and we must recognise that there is some real hostility towards disabled people. Figures published by *The Independent* last year suggest that that hostility is real and growing, and it is often facilitated by our online digital world, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) said.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, disabled people now have the same legal rights as everyone else following high-profile campaigning by disabled people themselves. It is shameful to think that, before that legislation was enacted, a disabled person could be legally turned away from a restaurant, prevented from using public transport, fired from their job for being ill or even isolated from society behind the walls of their own home. Changing the law to protect people was important to our society because it said that discrimination

against disabled people—indeed, against any people—is simply not acceptable but, as we have heard today, there is some evidence that attitudes towards disabled people are hardening. The hon. Member for Strangford gave us some examples of that.

More needs to be done to address the pervasive, low-level negativity towards disabled people that provides the perfect conditions for hostility and hate crime to thrive. Scope, the disability rights charity, says that 42% of non-disabled people do not know a disabled person so, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, education is important.

Police investigations of such cases have improved since the tragic death of Fiona Pilkington, who killed herself and her disabled daughter in 2013 following years of bullying and abuse—that bullying and abuse was ignored at the time by the police. Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate has indicated that the police still need to do more to address such abuse, which is suffered by too many disabled people on a regular basis.

The CPS completed 941 disabled hate crime prosecutions in 2015-16, compared with 666 in the previous year, and convictions increased by 40%. It has publicly said that it wants to push up the rates of prosecution and conviction for such crimes, sending out a message that those crimes will be treated extremely seriously, but an understanding of hate crime needs to be developed among prosecutors, as the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) said.

As the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, progress is being made—we are capturing more of these crimes—but we still have a long way to go. Hate crime is a crime committed against a person or property that is motivated by

"malice or ill-will towards an identifiable social group".

The Scottish Government have invested more than £100 million in promoting equality and addressing discrimination. A refreshed and strengthened disability action plan will be published later this year specifically to raise awareness of disability hate crime.

The environment in which we operate matters. Although we know that disability hate crime is underreported, we also know that more victims are finding the strength, the facilities and the support to come forward. That is enough to tell us that we have a duty to continue raising awareness about this issue so that even more victims feel able to come forward with confidence that they will be listened to, and that such crime is simply not acceptable in our society.

We must also build strong, supportive, cohesive communities where people can live in peace. Work has been undertaken in a practical sense, with Police Scotland visiting schools and communities to raise awareness and educate groups of all ages about disability hate crime. I mention those examples because we all could and should study good practice in one part of the UK to see how it can be deployed in other parts. I have said that in just about every single debate in which I have participated in this place, and today I find myself in the esteemed position of echoing the words of the hon. Member for Strangford.

Despite the hate crime action plan published by the UK Government, I feel compelled to point out that the ideologically driven austerity agenda, which is perceived as targeting disabled people, has helped to encourage

[*Patricia Gibson*]

toxic rhetoric about the most vulnerable in our society. That apparent targeting of disabled people is not necessarily deliberate, but it is enough that it is thoughtless and insensitive. When some social security powers are devolved to Scotland, we will base our system on dignity and respect—new employment support programmes for disabled people will begin to be delivered in Scotland from April 2017.

When our society is marred by prejudice and hatred towards those with disabilities, we all agree that we must react. We cannot and must not underestimate the impact of such crimes on individuals and their families. Such crimes leave disabled people and their families feeling isolated, intimidated and rejected. We must continue to reinforce a zero-tolerance attitude to such crimes and towards those who engage in them. That is why I am so proud that the Scottish Government are further promoting their Keep Safe initiative, which works with local businesses to create Keep Safe spaces for disabled and vulnerable people. I note with interest the comments of the hon. Member for Bootle, who spoke about how some disabled people feel that it is not even safe to leave their home.

I would like to hear the Solicitor General speak today about what further we can do to work together across the United Kingdom to ensure that all in our society are given the respect and dignity they need and deserve. As we have heard today, we clearly cannot take tolerance for granted.

10.27 am

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is also a great privilege to speak opposite the Solicitor General for the first time. As a fellow Welsh lawyer, I look forward to speaking opposite him and to our future debates.

I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this debate and on the nature of his contribution. He started his speech by defining disability hate crime very precisely. The only point I would add to that and to the debate is that we have been talking about disability hate crime in terms of open hostility, but there is also a very different type of crime: those who befriend disabled and vulnerable people, seek to take them into their confidence and take advantage of them. I hope that, in addition to hate crime, the Solicitor General will consider that strand of crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle set out the political context extremely well. Hate crime and disability hate crime have a detrimental impact on victims, their families and friends. This is a key issue that goes to the heart of what we are as a society. We in this place should judge the quality of our policies and those of our Government not by their effect on the strongest but by their effect on the most vulnerable in our society and by the protection those people are given.

This has been a constructive debate. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) made a good point about the sensitivity of the prosecutors of such crimes. Indeed, she asked about a response to the Law Commission report, which I will come to in a moment.

The hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) talked well about raising awareness and supporting disabled people in the reporting process. The hon. Member

for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has momentarily popped out, spoke powerfully about how crimes are committed online—the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) also made that point—and there has to be a strong and powerful message that the keyboard warriors who spread bile and hatred online have no hiding place behind their monitor and keyboard. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke powerfully about attitudes in our society and what we must tackle in that respect.

I agreed with the vast bulk of the speech made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, particularly what he said about awareness in schools. He made a number of constructive suggestions, including about support through the criminal justice system as more and more cases are, hopefully, brought. That will clearly be important. However, I want to take him up on one point. He is entirely right that it is not politicians' fault what the press choose to write, nor should we interfere in that choice, but politicians can create a permissive environment. I will give one specific example. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), said on the "Today" programme in October 2012:

"It is unfair that people listening to this programme going out to work see the neighbour next door with the blinds down because they are on benefits."

The problem with a statement like that is that, first, it divides people into workers and non-workers. Secondly, it implies that all those on benefits are the same. It also seems to imply an inherent sense of unfairness that people are on benefits. We must be careful with our rhetoric. The environment that it creates can lead to the demonisation of disabled people in our society.

Mr Harper: I tried hard not to be tempted, but the hon. Gentleman has pushed me too far. I take his point, but the former Chancellor made it clear which people he was talking about. The Government made it clear that people who can work should work. He was not attacking people who cannot work, and I do not think that anyone honestly thought that he was. The Government have been clear that we support people who cannot work, but that we expect those who can work to do so, and not to live off others. That is the point that the former Chancellor was making, and it is a reasonable view that I think would be shared by people across the country.

In my experience, the people who get most cross about people who could work but do not are those who live next door to them, who are struggling hard and who see others not doing their fair share. It is in no way an attack on people who cannot work. The Government spend £50 billion a year on supporting disabled people. It is right that we should do so. We will continue to support disabled people who are not able to work, as is right in a civilised society.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: All I can say is that it is a shame that the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not go on to make that distinction when he made those comments on the "Today" programme, which I was careful to quote precisely and not to paraphrase. I am afraid that such comments, in isolation, can have the effect that I mentioned.

I will turn to my remarks to the Solicitor General, because I want to make some constructive contributions. One good point made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean involved the provision of *Hansard* reports of debates on this subject to the ongoing Crown Prosecution Service consultation. In its 2014 consultation paper on hate crime and whether the current offences should be extended, the Law Commission said that

“we share the view expressed by most consultees that it is undesirable for the aggravated offences not to apply equally to hostility based on race, religion, transgender identity, sexual orientation and disability. It sends the wrong message about the seriousness with which such offending is taken and the severity of its impact, if offences attaching a specific aggravated label and a potentially higher sentence only exist in relation to two of the five statutorily protected hate crime characteristics.”

Can the Solicitor General comment on the possibility of reviewing the operation of aggravated offences to consider parity across all protected characteristics?

There is also a great issue involving data. Last month, a report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance found a number of areas of concern involving incidents of hate crime in the UK and apparent failure to prosecute such crimes, including specifically a lack of data on the use of extended sentencing powers. It made a couple of recommendations. One involved sections 145 and 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, with which the Solicitor General should be familiar. Where they are imposed, that should be recorded, including, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, on the criminal records of offenders. I suggest that we also need to collect data on where aggravated offences and enhanced sentencing have been invoked initially but then dropped through the process of accepting a guilty plea. The ECRI report also recommends, finally, that steps be taken to narrow the gap between hate crimes being recorded and subsequently referred for prosecution. I would be grateful if the Solicitor General commented on that in his remarks.

Such measures are extremely important when one looks at the statistics. The latest statistics that I could find, in “Hate crime, England and Wales, 2015 to 2016”, published only last month, show that 3,629 disability hate crimes were recorded by the police in 2015-16, a 42% rise from the previous year. That should be welcomed, of course, but concerns remain that levels of reporting are still extremely low. The 2014-15 national crime survey for England and Wales estimated that the annual figure might be closer to 70,000, which shows that there is much more for us to do.

The Crown Prosecution Service’s own 2016 “Hate Crime Report” showed that 941 of those 3,629 offences, or 26%, were prosecuted, and that 707 of those prosecutions were successful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle pointed out, that is a 75% conviction rate, which is still below the rate for hate crimes generally, which is 83%. Although we are, admittedly, discussing a low base and small figures, the conviction rate is pretty stubborn. We have managed to move from 503 convictions in 2014-15 to 707, but successful convictions are still around 75%. I also urge the Solicitor General to consider carefully the regional variations, why they exist and what can be done to make the policies comprehensive across this country and give them an impact as close to universal as possible.

Finally, I return to where the debate started. It is vital that we have strong measures, that the Solicitor General reviews and keeps under review the position on aggravated sentencing, that we have strong and robust data and, above all, that we seek with the laws of our land to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

10.37 am

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing the debate; I am profoundly grateful to him. He and others who have taken part will know that the issue of disability hate crime has been close to my heart not just as Solicitor General but as a Back-Bench Member of Parliament, and indeed as a parent, for a number of years.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) made particularly apposite remarks about the fact that many people in our society just do not know somebody with a disability. That lack of understanding and awareness lies at the heart of some of the attitudes that we see towards disability. It is too big a picture to be laid at the feet of any particular Government or of an alleged ideological approach to austerity, which I utterly reject. It is a long-term societal issue, and only in recent years have all of us, irrespective of party, started to wake up to it and put ourselves in the shoes of individuals with disabilities.

I reiterate the Government’s co-ordinated and cross-departmental approach to the issue. I am particularly delighted to welcome the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, whose presence at this Westminster Hall debate eloquently represents her commitment to the issue. We have met about it, and we will continue to meet and, more importantly, to take co-ordinated action to ensure that all relevant parts of Government do everything they can to tackle this scourge, because scourge it is.

I am equally grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who did so much as Minister for Disabled People to advance the cause, paying attention to the sort of detail that he has raised today. I hope to be able to answer his questions, and indeed those of the hon. Member for Bootle. I will seek to do so in the course of my remarks.

As I said, it is important to put ourselves in the shoes of a person with disability. That person faces three things. First, they sometimes lack the awareness that they have been or continue to be the victim of a crime, because for so many people with disabilities it has become normal and part of their way of life—it is just something that they accept. We know that is not good enough. Secondly, when that lack of awareness ends and a person starts to understand that they are a victim, what do they do? Who will listen to them and help them to report the crime? Thirdly, when that crime is reported, how do the authorities deal with it? Those are the three stages of the problem that need to be understood. It is clear that we need to do more to support people with disabilities at every stage.

I am grateful to the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie) for raising the Northern Ireland experience. We have discussed before the Leonard Cheshire initiative, which puts advocacy

[The Solicitor General]

at the heart of the project. Advocacy for people with disabilities will be the key to unlocking many of the issues that have come up, and we are seeing that approach taken widely in parts of England, Wales and Scotland. In my own area, Swindon, I am lucky to have the Swindon Advocacy Movement, an organisation that empowers people with disability to understand their rights and entitlements and helps them if they have been the victim of crime or abuse. It is all about a move away from doing things to or for people with disabilities and towards helping people with disabilities to help themselves and empowering them to become part of mainstream society.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran was right to remind us that only 20 years ago, before the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which was passed by a Conservative Government—I am proud of that—people with disabilities were facing a kind of Jim Crow situation. They were not able to access mainstream life and were being excluded—not only physically excluded from premises, but excluded, in a societal way, from mainstream life.

Therein lies one of the problems. One of the perceptions we need to challenge at all times relates to what disability means to people with a disability themselves. We sometimes use the word “vulnerable” a bit carelessly; there is an assumption that just because somebody has a disability then they are automatically vulnerable is not helpful to them. I think a person with a disability would say to us that there are times when they end up in situations that make them more vulnerable than others, but that does not mean that they are vulnerable at all times. Once one starts to make that sort of cosy assumption, the wrong sort of conclusions are reached. For example, people start to ask questions about why people with disabilities go out in public. Why do they go nightclubbing or shopping? Why do they do all these things that put them in danger? That is the wrong approach.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I agree entirely with the point that the Solicitor General is making. Nevertheless, does he accept that there can be situations in which vulnerable people are taken advantage of by confidence tricksters? We should focus on that as well.

The Solicitor General: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. I welcome him warmly to his position and congratulate him on attaining it. It is a pleasure to work with him. He is quite right to talk about “mate crime”. Perhaps such examples highlight one of the deficiencies and inadequacies of using a phrase such as “hate crime” to describe the full panoply of crimes committed against people with disabilities. Mate crime is an insidious way in which perpetrators gain the confidence of often isolated and sometimes rather lonely people, perhaps with a learning disability such as autism, or another disability, and, using the trust they have built up, proceed to abuse it, very often in the form of financial crime, such as fraud, or worse—violence and sexual crime are also covered by the definition of mate crime. That is worse than confidence tricksters; it is an abuse of trust. In my mind, that makes the crime even more serious.

I am grateful to my right hon. and hon. Friends and Opposition Members for having raised some of the important figures and statistics relating to the increase in the number of reported disability hate crimes and, indeed, prosecutions for those offences. There has also been an increase in the use of the sentence uplifts that are available to judges under section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, from just over 5% of cases in 2014-15 to 11% of cases in 2015-16. We are coming from a low base, but that is going in the right direction.

The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) asked about the recording of applications in which there has not been an uplift. I hear what he says, but the difficulty is that the Crown Prosecution Service is currently recording a vast number of indices through the flagging system, and it is difficult for every area of the CPS to record information with precision and then translate it in a way that makes it readily available to people like me. I hear what he says and will certainly ask whether it would be feasible, but I have to put that caveat on his request. It is clear to me that having more data is always useful, but it is then a question of how they are to be used and understood. We need to step back from that to a more fundamental position on training and awareness.

Jim Shannon: I indicated in my contribution that the figure for prosecutions was down in the past year, and asked whether that was because the police were not giving the issue the focus and priority that they should. If the Minister can answer that now, that would be good, but if not I am happy to wait for a response. Is disability hate crime a priority for the police?

The Solicitor General: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance he seeks. On as many of the questions he asked as possible, I shall outline the measures that are being taken. The mandated package of training—to which I think he referred in a question to me in the main Chamber some months ago—has been delivered through a classroom-based approach, as opposed to using the internet. That is very important. It was a mandated package, so it had to be delivered to all prosecutors, and it was delivered between September last year and January this year. In particular, it incorporated the victim’s perspective and provided support on identifying evidence of hostility in order to obtain those important recorded sentencing uplifts.

I parenthesise a moment by reminding Members that section 146 is not the end of the story when it comes to how judges should sentence for offences with a disability element. There are guidelines that allow judges to look at the situation or vulnerability of the victim and their characteristics and take that into account when assessing the overall length of sentence. That message, too, has gone out loudly and clearly to all those involved in the prosecution of crime.

Members should reflect on where we hit a difficulty—perhaps we can debate this in future—which is on how to approach sentencing when it comes to people with invisible, not hidden, disability. I think in particular of learning disability and autism. Far too often, the perpetrator is able to say, “Well, I didn’t know he was autistic.” That puts the judge in a very difficult position, because they then do not have evidence of either hostility or some sort of motivational offence, or that the perpetrator even knew about the victim’s characteristics. We are getting into the debate about the eggshell skull theory,

with which the hon. Member for Torfaen will be familiar, but it is a debate we need to have when it comes to how adequately we protect and support people with invisible disabilities.

I turn to the other questions that Members asked. I am glad to say that the hate crime assurance scheme is happening, and that live files are being tracked as a result. That is helping to support the quality of casework, with real-time scrutiny as cases progress.

As we have seen, that scheme is having results with an increased number of sentencing uplifts being applied. It also checks all finalised hate crime cases, so that we can identify best practice and any lessons that can be learned. In other words, and to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Torfaen, the failed applications are being looked at and that is a vital part of how we can improve our approach.

Members are aware, of course, of the 13-week consultation published by the Crown Prosecution Service in October, which sets out the approach taken by the CPS to such crimes. A plain English version of that consultation is available too, which is particularly important for people with disabilities themselves, so that they can have their voice heard. Also, the legal guidance for prosecutors will be updated and published at the same time as the consultation response, so work is ongoing.

The statement that has been provided by the CPS has been developed with the involvement of interested groups and community representatives, who have highlighted the social model of disability. That model suggests that the prejudice, discrimination and social exclusion experienced by many disabled people is not the inevitable result of their condition but instead stems from the various barriers that they experience daily and that hon. Members have talked about in this debate. That social model is the basis on which the CPS understands, dismantles and reduces the effects of those barriers, as far as we are able to, leading to improved safety and security, access to mainstream life and indeed work, where appropriate, for people with disabilities.

Last month, the CPS also published two guides on the recognition and reporting of hate crimes for individuals and agencies who might be the first to hear about a hate incident. Those guides are intended to increase public confidence and in turn improve reporting levels, so that they more accurately reflect the experience that we know people have in their communities.

We have already discussed such third-party reporting, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) gave an example of it. I was delighted to meet the organisation she referred to when I visited CPS Manchester earlier this year. Indeed, I pay tribute to such organisations, including the one in my constituency that I mentioned earlier, and to campaigners such as Stephen Brookes MBE, who is from Blackpool and who has long championed the issue of third-party reporting, showing that where it is done well it really makes a difference for people with disabilities. My message to hon. Members, therefore, is that if, for whatever reason, they do not have third-party reporting in their community, they should ask why and see whether such provision can be improved.

The hon. Member for Bootle also asked about senior management. I am happy to tell him that I will be in Liverpool next week, at the CPS senior management conference, and he can bet his bottom dollar that I will

raise the issue of disability hate crime in his home town. It is important that that is not a one-off but another example of how law officers, the Director of Public Prosecutions and senior leaders can set a good example.

On judicial meetings and the links that we have with the judiciary and the DPP, the issues that we are discussing are raised on a regular and systematic basis. Although sentencing is, of course, an independent function, we can ensure that the policy context is fully understood by those responsible for sentencing.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean mentioned education, and the Government have allocated—as part of our hate crime action plan—important funding to help to equip teachers to have what can sometimes be difficult but important conversations with young people, by funding programmes through organisations such as the Anne Frank Trust UK and Streetwise. Again, the training that teachers receive through those programmes will be classroom-based and of real use.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned social media. The Government are clear: whether online or offline, crime is crime and the CPS and the police will follow the evidence wherever it leads and however difficult it is to follow it. An unfortunate perception has arisen that, somehow, something online is more difficult to trace. I just do not accept that; there is a clear evidence chain there. All of us know that removing things from the internet is not as easy as it might seem—thank goodness, in the context of such offending—and the message must go out loud and clear that online abusers will be detected and prosecuted, wherever it is appropriate to do so.

I will deal with the points that have been made about the Law Commission. Its report is an important one, which I have read and considered myself. I am happy to say that, although the Government have not come to a fixed conclusion about the extension of the aggravated offences to cover all five protected characteristics, that matter is still very much under review. As a prosecutor myself in my former life, and having used such offences since they were introduced in the late 1990s, I know that they had a transformational effect and therefore I understand their power. In the meantime, however, it is very much a question of the police, the CPS and all agencies using the powers that they have more effectively.

Hon. Members mentioned the cross-Government hate crime action plan, which includes a proper emphasis on increasing awareness of and support for victims. It is clear that if a person with a disability feels that they will be taken seriously and listened to, they are more likely to come forward.

I go back to the point I made at the beginning of my speech about the importance of perception from the viewpoint of another person. We want to increase the reporting of hate crime by improving the reporting process itself, for disabled people and for people with other protected characteristics.

The CPS has played an important part in contributing to that hate crime action plan. It has made a number of commitments, which will be delivered by 2020, and I will continue—as a law officer—to work with the CPS, to ensure that perpetrators are punished and to publicise successful prosecutions, because that will create confidence among the members of a community that when hate crime is reported, action will be taken.

New guidance will be produced by the CPS—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Solicitor General's 20-minute speech, but Members will be aware that it is now a courtesy to allow the mover of the motion to wind up the debate.

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to you, Mr Bone, for that clarification. I will conclude by saying that for far too long people with disabilities have accepted being treated as second-class citizens. That is why I commend the work of the CPS in tackling the scourge of hate crime and I again thank the hon. Member for Bootle for raising this important issue.

10.57 am

Peter Dowd: I appreciate the comments of everyone who has participated today; it is an important debate to get out into the open. It is crucial that we push on with this matter and ensure that once an action plan is down on paper—however good or bad those proposals might be—it is put into action; hence my comments to the Minister in relation to some of the points that I raised.

Regarding the comments made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), my point was—I was careful to say it—that I did not want to politicise this issue. I was trying to make the point that an environment can develop in which people feel they are having the finger pointed at them. Maybe it is and maybe it is not, but it establishes an environment that is of concern in the round. We have to be very careful that we do not go down the path of having collective *bêtes noires*—be that immigrants or, as in the past, Irish people or Jews—and so we have an environment in which people can point the finger at others. That takes attention away from the real matter.

I am really pleased that we have had this debate today and I look forward to monitoring the development of these matters in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Crown Prosecution Service's approach to prosecuting disability hate crime.

Cardiff Central Station

10.59 am

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered enhancing Cardiff Central Station.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am delighted to highlight in this debate a key issue for the Welsh capital: the enhancement of Cardiff Central station. I am delighted also to see here the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), in whose constituency half of the station resides, and the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and I look forward to their contributions.

Anyone who has been to Cardiff by train will have marvelled at the wonderful listed station building, which shows the significance of this railway hub. Trains from the valleys converge there, providing easy access for passengers to mainline trains heading to Swansea, Newport, Bristol, Swindon, Reading and, of course, London Paddington. No doubt the 13 million-plus passengers who use the station appreciate how its design and structure emphasise the importance of Cardiff as both an economic centre and a key tourist destination. Put simply, Cardiff Central station is the gateway to our capital city and to our nation, Wales, and its significance cannot be underestimated.

However, Cardiff Central needs to move with the times. The bus station opposite was demolished, to be replaced with a new BBC flagship development and top-quality offices. I welcome that development, but I just wish that the cart had not been put before the horse and that a new bus station had been built at the same time, if not before. Nevertheless, not since St David's 2 has Cardiff seen the scale of redevelopment that will be involved in Central Square and the new transport interchange hub that will be relocated on the edge of it. For someone running a business or catching a bus or a train, Cardiff Central Square will be incredibly impressive, and its success needs to be reflected in our Cardiff Central station.

Network Rail, in its March 2016 "Welsh Route Study", forecast that the number of passenger journeys through Cardiff Central would be upwards of 23 million by 2023 and 32 million by 2043. I know that the Minister will be aware of those growth projections and of what they mean for a Cardiff Central station that is at capacity now, will be at capacity tomorrow and will certainly be at capacity by 2045. The Welsh capital is a key tourist destination for the United Kingdom; people want to come to Cardiff, more so because of the actions of the UK Government both in the city and across the world. Our Prime Minister is in India right now selling Cardiff as a place to visit and do business, and we need our Cardiff Central station to reflect those ambitions.

Many present here today will know the delights of Cardiff castle and Cardiff bay, and the destination shopping offered by St David's and St David's 2. Cardiff has hosted many memorable sporting events. I have mentioned them in the Chamber and in previous Westminster Hall debates, but that does not mean I will be shy in mentioning them again. There have been Football Association cup finals, Ashes cricket and speedway, to name just a few, and there is the excitement about the UEFA champions league final coming in June.

Cardiff Central station is, however, at capacity today, and it will be at capacity tomorrow. Something needs to be done.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman has secured an important debate and I agree with what he has said about the pressures. Cardiff and Vale College and the new businesses that are being built on my side of the station—in my constituency—also put pressure on the station. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating Cardiff's Labour council, which has been raising the issue with Network Rail, the Treasury and the Department for Transport for some time? Does he share my concern that we have not had clarity about the important funding that is needed for the governance for railway investment projects—GRIP—studies, which would enable us to go forward with the investment needed to expand the station?

Craig Williams: I will touch shortly on GRIP 2, which is where we are at, and GRIP 1, to which there was a significant private sector contribution, and also a contribution from Network Rail. I want to work with everyone. I will work with Cardiff's current Labour council—I was a member of the council for eight years—and I want to work with the Labour Welsh Government. However, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government have been given significant powers and moneys, in the form of £1.2 billion for infrastructure and the city deal. The money is not a great amount in the context of transforming the station now, in phase 1, but bigger ventures are being looked at. If I and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth agree on something we are bound to be right. I welcome us all working together.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As a former member of Cardiff City Council, I completely agree that it is very important that all parties work together positively to achieve this objective for our wonderful city. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the city deal from which, as he knows, the redevelopment of Cardiff Central station was specifically excluded by the Government. Does he agree, therefore, that it is really important that progress is now made? I think that is what he is calling for today.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is a Treasury Parliamentary Private Secretary, and I, as a former Treasury Whip, hope that this debate has been informed by a little nod and a wink from his boss that we might make some progress in the autumn statement. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can tell the House whether that is true.

Craig Williams: The hon. Gentleman is trying to get me into terrible trouble, so I will happily skirt that matter. As well as the huge infrastructure fund, I have mentioned the city deal and the Welsh Government having access to borrowing powers. It is not always a case of looking up the M4 and waiting for important investment from the UK Government; it is about, quite rightly, working together, across parties, and also with the private sector. I will touch on the developments and on how transforming Central Square enables us to access moneys; it does not always have to be the public sector stepping in.

I want to touch on the situation on match days. The autumn internationals are happening at fast pace—the latest Wales game had a sad outcome, but I am sure we are going onwards and upwards. The struggle at Cardiff Central station was evident during the 2015 rugby world cup, when we hosted more than half a million fans at the eight matches at the then Millennium stadium—now the Principality stadium—in addition to the 160,000 watching in the Cardiff Arms Park fanzone. Considering that only a quarter of the tickets were sold to Welsh postcodes, the stress on the system is evident. I feel for the train operators—for Great Western—because only three of the platforms at Cardiff Central can accommodate trains heading to England. Match days therefore cause capacity problems. A further constraint is that one of those three platforms—platform 0—is too short to accommodate long trains on the services to the east.

The geography of Cardiff city centre is, in my opinion, world leading and brilliant for any sports fan or tourist. The station is certainly world-class for the 20th century—not quite for the 21st, which is why we are here. When someone walks out of the station, they see the Principality stadium—the finest rugby stadium in the world. There is also the SWALEC stadium, where Ashes test cricket takes place, and there are football, athletics and many other stadiums in the city centre. That is a great experience, but it puts more pressure on a station that is already struggling.

The Welsh National Assembly's former Enterprise and Business Committee produced a very good report, entitled "Rugby World Cup Transport Planning", which picked up many of the issues, and reiterated the need for substantial investment in the station to meet the expectations of today's travellers. The agencies involved learned lessons and made substantial changes for the few final rugby world cup games.

The report also highlighted some of the issues with the current arrangements, which I want to dig out. Compared with many newer redeveloped stations, the platforms at Cardiff are narrow and people cram to the edges waiting for trains. That is not what we expect of a modern station. Leading from the platforms are staircases that are no longer fit for purpose at peak times and the subway forces nearly all travellers into a confined area below the platforms, before they spill out into extremely cramped ticket areas. The experience is very similar to that at a crammed London underground station. I can see the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth and for Cardiff West nodding—we have our own experiences up and down that railway.

If we factor in Cardiff's projected increase in passenger demand, which I have touched on, it is clear that the station, although magnificent, was fit for the 20th century but not the 21st. Waiting outside in the car park to go up old staircases onto narrow platforms is not what a modern rail network wants, or what passengers expect. According to satisfaction surveys, there is a risk that if that issue is not addressed future events might decide to go elsewhere. A busy station that cannot accommodate its current passengers is a disincentive to organisers who could bring prestigious events to our Welsh capital city. Those events are the bread and butter of not just our local but our national economy, and I am incredibly proud of that as a Welshman and as a Welsh MP. I

[Craig Williams]

question whether Cardiff would be successful in securing the champions league final in 10 years' time, for example, if no enhancements were made. I regret deeply the fact that we are not bidding for the Commonwealth games in 2026. If we were, as part of that bid, investment in Cardiff Central station would have been one of the key things scrutinised in looking at how public transport is organised in and around that region.

Any redevelopment must respect the existing structure, and it is good to see that the initial artist's proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the building's existing frontage and protecting its listing. The frontage is far more than bricks and mortar. I reiterate that for decades it has been the first part of Cardiff that people see. Investors come out and they see "Great Western Railway". It is something to protect and cherish. I pay tribute to WalesOnline, which helped in the run-up to the debate and invited businesses and constituents to contribute. It was clear from the reaction in my inbox and on my Facebook group that people want that heritage protected. They do not just want a brand new, 21st-century station with all its modern attributes; they want our heritage protected, too, but that does come with a price.

The graphics suggest new access above the platforms, an increase in retail space and a canopy across to the new bus station, which we are shortly to hear a lot more about, I hope. Those are much-needed and overdue improvements that will address issues with travellers' experiences. Additionally, a number of constituents have been in touch with suggestions of improvements around Cardiff Central, including not only the link with the bus interchange and some kind of canopy, but also things to the south of the station, such as the redevelopment of the Brains site and potential drop-off points. I am incredibly interested to watch what happens in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, which is so important to my constituents in the north of the city. Constituents have suggested that the redevelopment must respect the heritage, but they do not want one of those "plastic shopping malls" that increasingly happen in so many major developments. We want something that protects the arcades of our city and nods to our heritage, although that all comes with a price tag.

I will now focus on the pressing issue behind the redevelopment of Cardiff Central: funding. The hon. Members for Cardiff West and for Cardiff South and Penarth have alluded to that. The Government are investing in our railways, particularly on the London to Wales route. I would welcome a comment from the Minister on how this morning's announcement on electrification will affect progress up the line to Cardiff. The Great Western main line is being electrified, reducing the journey time from Cardiff Central to Paddington, and I welcome that. Talking yesterday to our terrific team in Wales operating the Wales and Borders network, it is the largest investment since Victorian times. It is hugely complicated and hugely expensive, but hugely welcome. I know that the team have got the ambition and the plan to deliver, and they are getting more commercially minded in looking at alternative funding methods for some of the projects I am talking about. I pay tribute to them.

We have seen the money spent in Reading on widening platforms and increasing capacity. It is clear that as capacity is increased up the line, it adds pressure to where we have not done that. Newport station was wisely invested in for the 2010 Ryder cup. I do not for a second bash Newport for that, but it is the third busiest railway station in Wales and it has been redeveloped. We should look at the busiest railway station in Wales, which is, unabashedly, Cardiff Central. Without funding from the Department for Transport, the Welsh Government and a contribution from Cardiff Council, the scheme could falter. Network Rail advises that it has done as much as possible within the existing funds. It has completed its initial vision, but it now anticipates it needs something in the region of £4 million to £5 million to move forward with GRIP 2 and the affordability study. Network Rail can then put forward its business case. To my mind it will be easily made, because of the growth projections and the capacity bottlenecks.

We all agree that Cardiff Central needs enhancing, but there is concern over where the money comes from. I do not pretend that it is unlimited—the hon. Member for Cardiff West alluded to our experiences in the Treasury—and I get the concerns that the Department for Transport has expressed about investing everywhere in the UK all at once. The redevelopment represents value for money, but it needs innovative funding solutions. Network Rail is keen to work with partners and current developers around Cardiff Central. A flagship BBC building and new office blocks are going up, and a big Government building is happening somewhere in the city centre, and they need to liaise. We also have the south Wales metro, which will happen mainly on the back of the Cardiff city deal. Once the Welsh Government let us know what they want—whether it is light rail or heavy rail or something else—that will free some contributions to the network so that it becomes a fully functioning transport interchange hub.

The crucial issue for the station's enhancement is timescale, especially as the Central Square redevelopment is under way at pace. Designs have been published, but they must be completed before Network Rail's control period 6 starts in 2019 if we are to get there in a timely fashion. Only through that can the Cardiff Central station redevelopment be delivered quickly and completed before the end of CP6.

The station can also match some of its competitors in other ways. I want to dwell on this point. I know that the Arriva Trains Wales franchise is being transferred to the Welsh Government and is coming up for tender in 2018. There is massive potential there. Cardiff Central station is organised and run by Arriva Trains Wales. I am not going to bash it, but I will say that most major stations are run by Network Rail. I get that the Minister will have to be careful, given the cross-devolution issues here, but Network Rail needs control of that station. It can then be innovative and work with private sector partners. Cardiff is going to grow and grow, and its residents want to travel using Cardiff Central station. Network Rail told me that we need a Reading-style station at Cardiff Central, but with a nod to our Welsh heritage. Great Western Railway cites examples such as Edinburgh's Haymarket station, which was rebuilt in 2013. To dwell on the point, Arriva Trains Wales's customer satisfaction is heavily affected by Cardiff Central and its capacity issues. Whatever new station we base it on, Cardiff Central desperately needs enhancing.

While I am delighted to talk about that major vision, I conclude on a shorter-term, phased approach. I have spoken more broadly about the big vision that we all support to get the station there by the time we have the huge projected growth, but speaking to interested parties and developers in the run-up to the debate, it has become clear that there is an easy, deliverable, quick solution. In fact, a leading developer and other stakeholders have plans for an early delivery phase to coincide with larger phases going forward, although that would take time and money to get into a future control period.

In closing, I dwell on that point for a moment. The plan is for a quick phase. With all Brunel's foresight, the station as it is currently constituted goes under the platforms quite well. There is currently a WH Smiths, but there is a way of reconfiguring the station, in my opinion and in the opinion of experts. The staircases could be reversed and things could be opened up. I am led to believe, although I am not an expert, that a similar sum to the £4 million to £5 million for a GRIP study could—we do not want that money redeployed, because we need it for the study—in an early phase transform the experience of people walking out into Cardiff Central. I implore the Minister to enlighten us about his plans and vision for our great station. I implore him, or someone in his Department, to come down to Cardiff to have a roundtable with Network Rail, stakeholders and the four Members of Parliament for Cardiff and to talk to developers to see what can be done in the short term with the Welsh Government and the council. Through that, we can ensure that we tackle the capacity problem now while looking to the longer term for the 2030s and 2040s. With that I will conclude. I hope that we can phase the Cardiff Central enhancements.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Bone. It is my first time speaking as a Minister in Westminster Hall. I find it hard to believe that it has taken until now for rail issues to be brought to this Chamber since I was appointed, but here we are, and I will do my best.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) on securing the debate. He set out his ideas and a compelling vision for Wales's capital city, Cardiff, including the future role it can play and the part its station will have in the city's development. I fully appreciate the importance of Cardiff and the station to the vision for Wales. The UK Government have already shown their commitment to the station by funding an additional platform and more capacity at the station in recent years. Network Rail is investing more than £300 million through the Cardiff area signalling renewal project. The majority of that investment is focused in and around the Cardiff Central station area and between Queen Street and the Canton depot. We have also provided additional enhancement funding of £27 million to support capacity, including the development of a new platform at Cardiff Central, which will be brought into use this Christmas.

I noted my hon. Friend's comments regarding the lessons learned from the rugby world cup. I too looked at the Enterprise and Business Committee's report published by the Welsh Assembly, and I noted the problems with the first three matches and the ensuing queueing that

then occurred. I gather that lessons were learned promptly and urgently and improvements were made for subsequent games. A larger gate line has been installed to enable improved passenger flows, for example, along with the new ticket office and a passenger waiting room on platform 8. That has been achieved by moving the old crew accommodation out of the station into a new modular building off platform 8. The new platform will be commissioned over the Christmas and new year period, and I hope that it will make a positive improvement.

We recognise that there will be a significant uplift in passenger capacity, but demand will still increase, as was pointed out, until 2043. We are currently undergoing testing and validating with colleagues from Network Rail on what the pace of the growth will be, when it will occur and what demand will be placed on Cardiff Central station. We hope to provide better and more reliable journeys into and out of the station, allowing it to accommodate the forecast growth for some time to come.

Stephen Doughty: I note what the Minister has said about growth, but it is not only growth in the city centre that is crucial to the project. I have long argued for the reopening of stations throughout the east of the city in places such as Rumney, Splott and St Mellons. Expanding capacity in Cardiff Central is crucial to that. Will the Minister look at that with Network Rail as part of a wider strategy for enhancing transport in that area?

Paul Maynard: I very much welcome what the hon. Gentleman says. Plans are ongoing to improve the service on the Valley Metro lines and to increase devolution to the Welsh Government over how they configure plans for the future. We are currently waiting for the initial industry advice as to what the priorities are for both the Welsh Government and Network Rail in the Wales area. Once we have that industry advice and the key asks with regard to Wales, we can then start to work out what our priorities are for control period 6. The hon. Gentleman has made his point and I am sure my officials have heard it, as will Network Rail, and we will be in touch.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North mentioned, we are investing heavily in new trains across the network. We will be replacing the ageing high speed trains on the Great Western and south Wales main lines with a new fleet of bi-mode intercity express trains. These will offer more seats and up to 40% more capacity during peak times into Paddington, and will be reducing journey times from south Wales to London by about 15 minutes as electrification progresses. Bi-mode trains are capable of meeting the existing line speeds in south Wales, but will also provide more leg and luggage space to enable a better ride for passengers. They will enable us to markedly increase capacity to meet forecast growth on this inter-city route, with improved service reliability and reduced environmental impact. The electrification of the Great Western mainline will bring direct benefits for Wales, as will our provision of £125 million towards the cost of the valley lines electrification.

Kevin Brennan: I have looked at the Minister's written statement. Can he confirm that it will have no impact whatever or cause any delay to the electrification that he has just mentioned?

Paul Maynard: I noted the hon. Gentleman's great efforts to try to find the written statement on his mobile phone, and I congratulate him on doing that so adroitly. I am happy to confirm that my focus is on making sure that we deliver electrification to Cardiff on time, and we will make sure that passengers in south Wales benefit to the fullest degree possible. We are also investing in schemes such as the western rail link to Heathrow, which will also benefit passengers in Wales. Such improvements should all make south Wales a more attractive place for businesses to locate and for tourism to thrive.

However, we know that Cardiff Central is the busiest station in Wales. That is borne out in the recently published Network Rail Welsh route study, which forecasts that the number of passengers using Cardiff Central station could grow from 13 million in 2013 to as many as 32 million by 2043. Meeting such growth will bring further challenges. That is why the rail industry introduced a long-term planning process designed to plan the long-term capability of the network up to 30 years into the future. The Welsh route study looked at demand and capability for the period up to 2043, with particular emphasis on the next rail funding period from 2019. It made it clear that by 2024, passengers at Cardiff Central will experience higher levels of congestion around the platform, subway and stairs at peak times and that queues could form when trains are delayed. It identified a case for further platform and capacity improvements and concluded that the need for wider regeneration in the city supports the redevelopment of Cardiff Central station as a choice for funders in the next funding period from 2019. We will look closely at that initial industry advice when it comes shortly. The rail industry will present its advice to help us understand how to meet forecast demand, and it will of course include options that affect Wales.

We will continue to engage with the Welsh Government to understand their priorities for the future, and Network Rail has started to identify schemes that it thinks should be considered for development. I am pleased to note that Network Rail is working closely with City of Cardiff Council and developers to align its plans with the already committed investment plans for the enterprise zone, including those for Central Square at the front of the station. Although there are clearly issues that need to be addressed at the station, the redevelopment scheme suggested in the route study is designed as a stimulus to wider local economic growth, rather than to facilitate forecast rail passenger growth, so we would expect other beneficiaries to contribute towards achieving those goals.

In addition, stations are designed to meet a specific rail need, not those arising from special events. I hope that all those involved in event planning in the city will consider the specific arrangements they need to make to handle their customers as they travel to and from the venue. It is imperative that City of Cardiff Council, the Welsh Government, local authorities and local developers work with Network Rail and through the framework set out in the capital region city deal to identify further sources of funding for the wider plans to redevelop

the station and the adjacent area, in a similar fashion to the joint contribution made by Birmingham City Council and the west midlands authorities towards the redevelopment of Birmingham New Street station. I am told that those who attended our party conference last month saw that it was a great success and an attractive and pleasant station to be in.

The capital region city deal, signed in March this year, will provide £1.2 billion in infrastructure investment, of which the UK Government have contributed £500 million. It sets out delivery of the south Wales metro, including the valley lines electrification programme, as a key priority. Specifically, it has provided local partners with the powers and resources needed to unlock significant economic growth across the Cardiff capital region.

Transport for Wales has been established by the Welsh Government to help deliver the new franchise and the next phase of the metro project. We welcome the shortlist of companies that have successfully pre-qualified to bid in the competition. It is positive news both for Welsh passengers and for those in the English borders region. We will continue to work constructively with the Welsh Government and with Transport for Wales to make sure that the franchise delivers for passengers. We are pleased that we have reached agreement in principle on arrangements to ensure that suitable cross-border links are maintained and developed in co-operation between the Secretary of State for Transport and Welsh Ministers.

We are obviously seeing growth through the first phase of the metro. It has led to improvements including Ebbw Vale Town station, which has already seen some 800,000 journeys annually. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North mentioned the development at Newport, including the new station at Pye Corner, which demonstrates that there is a demand for new stations, and we have schemes in place that can enable them. Phase 2 will follow. The Department for Transport will continue to support the Welsh Government in their procurement for the franchise, as well as the infrastructure proposals that Transport for Wales is still evolving, but we know that some of their plans for a mix of light and heavy rail on the metro lines will have an impact on both Cardiff Central and Queen Street stations and will have to be taken into account.

In conclusion, I hope my hon. Friend will be reassured that the Government remain committed to improving rail services not only in Wales in general, but in Cardiff in particular. We still look to the Welsh Government and City of Cardiff Council to continue to play their co-operative role in developing the plans, and I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in looking forward to the first of the changes over Christmas and new year when platform 8 is opened. I am sure he will have an opportunity to make use of it sooner than I will. I thank him for his time today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

West Anglia Taskforce Report

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the West Anglia Taskforce report.

It is a pleasure and a unique honour for me to address you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I hope that I will not give you cause for intervening on me any more than I did on you when our roles were reversed.

I am conscious that on this particular subject I could be done for repetition. Already in his relatively short time as rail Minister, the Minister has had to hear me on this subject and similar points on several occasions. The message that is coming forth, which has been put by individual Members over the years and is now reinforced by the report, needs to be heard. If repetition is necessary, repetition will occur.

The West Anglia Taskforce was launched by the former Chancellor and the former Transport Secretary in 2015, but with the intervention of the general election, it did not get down to work until halfway through last year. The terms of reference were to look at opportunities to improve connections to Stansted and Cambridge from Liverpool Street station and to encourage opportunities for economic growth along the route, including the expansion of services in the Lea valley. I was asked to chair the taskforce and was supported by a very distinguished group of people, who freely gave of their time and brought their great experience to bear on the subject. We quickly found that, both geographically and politically, we were as one on what needed to be done.

We concentrated particularly on the need for four-tracking the railway between Coppermill junction, just south of Tottenham Hale station, to Broxbourne junction, just north of Broxbourne mainline station. We resisted all the various embellishments and extras that were pressed upon us, such as the four-tracking going further north, extensions of lines or new stations in various places. We took a very limited view, because they would simply add on to the cost.

South of Tottenham Hale remains a problem on the railway because from there it is a two-track railway through Clapton station and three other inner London stations, to Bethnal Green. Services to those two stations frequently hold up other trains seeking to move as fast as journeys allow to the more northerly outer London stations. By recommending the four-tracking of the railway, we believe that nothing would be spoiled. Other things could be done later, but four-tracking the railway impedes no other embellishment.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this excellent report, which has cross-party support, as I hope the Minister knows. My right hon. Friend is right to focus on four-tracking. In his view, are the short-term improvements the report recommends supportive of the long-term goal? That is what many of my constituents will want to know.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: Yes. I do not think there is any inconsistency. I will refer to those other improvements that can be made in the short term, but ultimately it is as plain as a pikestaff that if one wants to have fast services on this railway to stations such as Bishop's Stortford, Audley End, Whittlesford Parkway and Cambridge, let alone to the airport, they have to be able to overtake the trains that are stopping at Ponders End, Brimsdown and so on. Anything that can be done to improve the service in the meantime we shall certainly be commending.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that too many of our commuters are paying a premium rate for a second-rate service, due to the way that the franchises are structured and the fees are taken by Government from those franchisees? What we need is the Government to invest in providing a premium service.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I agree and I shall add to my hon. Friend's comments later. It is asking a lot to expect people to pay more money each year for a service that has actually been getting worse, not better. That needs addressing.

There is a challenge and an opportunity, and we tried to deal with them succinctly and powerfully in the taskforce report. The Minister probably knows it backwards by now; he was good enough to attend the launch and we were delighted by that. Today he has probably had to quickly refocus on this part of the railway network after dealing with the issue of Cardiff Central station.

Demand has increased on this railway over the years. More houses and more businesses will add to the number of people travelling on the railway. With all the houses that we know are due to be built over the next 15 years, not only in the district of Uttlesford, but in east Hertfordshire, Braintree, south Cambridgeshire and so on, commuters need a railway that offers reliability, comfort and speed. None of that can be guaranteed at present with the state of the railway. Journeys have got longer and more expensive, in older trains on rickety infrastructure. I commend the fact that, having won the new franchise, Abellio Greater Anglia is putting money aside to refurbish—I think the term used is “refresh”—some of the railway carriages with which it has been saddled, but as ageing actresses are inclined to say, there is only so much that make-up can do.

It goes without saying that what commuters from our increased population want is also required by the world-class businesses that we have along the Lea valley and north all the way to Cambridge. World-class businesses need a first-class railway. We also have to consider the travel needs of those in inner London. Transport for London has great ambition for a metro service with frequent trains and, clearly, population build-up in north-east London, through which this line runs, will add pressure.

The other point to address is that the jobs being created further out of London will not be filled by people already living in those areas. The unemployment rate in the Saffron Walden constituency is 0.7%. Stansted Airport alone is scheduled to create 10,000 jobs over the next 15 years, never mind other businesses large and small. They will have to find workers from elsewhere and the railway is the key. People could travel from east and north London. If their railway line were reliable

[*Sir Alan Haselhurst*]

and swift, they could travel that way to work, which would ease the pressures on the social communities in which the businesses exist.

There is also the matter of freight. It is generally accepted that getting freight off the road and on to the rail as far as possible is a good thing. We should think of accommodating extra train paths that would enable more freight trains to run without interfering with the passenger traffic during the day.

Then, of course, there is Stansted airport, which is designated London's third airport. It is there; it is a fact. Many of my constituents and people in neighbouring constituencies did not want a third London airport at an inland site, but it is there. It has got the legal right to increase its capacity from 24 million to 35 million passengers per annum, and there is no doubt that, as Gatwick has shown, more than that can be done on a single runway. A decision has only now been taken about building another runway in London—the Government have chosen Heathrow—but the most optimistic date for it to be operational is 2025. Many of us think that even that is optimistic. Given that Gatwick and Heathrow are virtually full, where in the meantime is extra traffic to London going to go? It seems that the only realistic spare capacity that could be employed is at Stansted, so how many more people will want to use that railway line? They will press it to breaking point if we are not careful.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend's point is correct. Even if there is no further growth in the next 10 years, the service our constituents currently receive is inadequate. Our line is not fit for purpose. There is no more capacity on it that can be utilised comfortably.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: That is right, and I thank my hon. Friend for underlining that point. If we consider the airport alone—and leave aside business growth and the houses that will yield more future commuters—it is hard to see how the railway can bear the strain unless we take action along the lines of the taskforce's recommendations.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The concern among my constituents is that their service is already poor, so the four-tracking is definitely needed, but they will lose out further if the four-tracking does not happen because Stansted and the further services will be the priority, and the service on the locally stopping trains will become even poorer than it currently is.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I very much take the right hon. Lady's point. The history of the past few years shows that, in the end, everybody suffers. The Stansted Express started as a service that was non-stop, apart from Tottenham Hale, and did the journey in 41 minutes. It now takes 47 minutes, and some of the trains take longer than that, because everybody has had to compromise and the misery has been shared. It is an utterly ridiculous situation.

It is possible that we could get earlier and later trains for the airport service. That seems sensible. Improved connectivity is needed with Stratford, which is, of course, a major centre of activity in our capital city. Four-tracking would pave the way for the Crossrail 2 project, which

will be of enormous benefit to Greater London and will bring a lot of investment into a sector that has been relatively starved, compared with other parts of the city. That vital new railway, which was originally based on the idea of the Chelsea-Hackney underground line, will be an important link between the gateway to east Anglia and south-west London. I do not want to get into an argument about which stations will be served if the project goes ahead. The way Crossrail 2 is conceived at the moment, it cannot go ahead unless there is four-tracking along the west Anglia line.

I have used the word "need" a great deal, because it has to be stressed. Right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken pointed to their constituents' needs. The growing pressures simply cannot be met on a two-track railway. The fact that we can think of extra track capacity being installed only by 2026 is a cause of deep worry, because the pressures are going to get much bigger before that. In every year in which nothing is done, the problems get worse for all our constituents. Last Wednesday, a train failed, and there was an 87-minute delay on a journey that was supposed to take 47 minutes from the airport. If the situation gets worse, I would advise Abellio Greater Anglia to adjust its order to Bombardier for new trains to include sleeping cars.

We do not have the luxury of an easy alternative to four-tracking. Incremental improvements will help but, in the view of the taskforce, they alone will not get us to Cambridge in 60 minutes and Stansted in 40, which is our aim. If the Government are minded to see this problem as one that has to be resolved, committing to an early start will fuel, not frustrate, the economic growth on which we vitally depend. I am conscious of the fact that the Minister and the Government are beset by other claims for further improvements to our railway network. I do not want to detract from the big strides that have been made over recent years, but there is still a lot to be done. A document seeking a comprehensive metro service for our capital city has been published, and it is right and proper that that is accommodated. There is also the report of the Great Eastern Main Line Taskforce, which is headed by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). I declare an interest in those recommendations, too, because a number of my constituents use Chelmsford station, in particular. The metro aims, the great eastern main line and the west Anglia main line are all jostling, trying to get the Minister's attention and perhaps that of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. One has to be realistic: I do not think that all those ambitions can be met at exactly the same time, but it is not possible to do 12 trains an hour on a two-track system while maintaining fast services to the outer London destinations. There will have to be some give and take as improvements begin. Understandably, I am today concentrating on the west Anglia component.

The Government have accepted a bid from Abellio Greater Anglia to run the greater Anglia franchise with—astonishingly—new trains across the piece. Every single carriage is going to be replaced. They understand that Stansted airport will expand its passenger throughput and create more jobs in the next few years, and they have given a benevolent nod in the direction of the Crossrail 2 project. I say to the Government: therefore join the dots. Why have new trains with improved acceleration capacity if they do not have the track on which to use it? All those things logically point to the fact that the infrastructure has got to be improved.

I turn again to the challenge. I defy any train operator possessing a collaborative workforce and equipped with new trains to provide an acceptable, let alone an enhanced, level of service on a railway that has defective points, signals and overhead wires, too many crossings, and a gross lack of track capacity. That sentence is a summary of the taskforce's assessment, in respect of which it has offered a staged remedy.

Apart from the challenge, there is the opportunity. There is some hope. In the taskforce report, we refer to the fact that new, better performing trains for inner London services are on order and will be delivered in 2018-19. The STAR project, with a third track between Stratford and Angel Road, will be delivered in 2018. Network Rail is reviewing the crossings, of which there are 82 between London Liverpool Street and Cambridge, to see what potential there is to contribute to line speed and reliability improvements.

The train operator, confirmed as Abellio Greater Anglia, will examine the scope for timetable adjustments within existing constraints, including the introduction of earlier trains to serve the airport. There is a commitment, to which I have referred, to introduce a complete set of new trains by 2020. Four-tracking the railway, therefore, between Coppermill junction and Broxbourne junction by 2026—if that is the earliest it can be done—will be a major contribution towards the development of Crossrail 2, which will be an enormous bonus for passengers, benefiting people travelling to and from outer London destinations as well as supporting metro services and housing growth.

Four-tracking, which is the principal, and admittedly most expensive, recommendation of the taskforce, is the essential precursor to Crossrail 2. It will supercharge connectivity between Surrey, London and Hertfordshire, and provide an important gateway to the Anglian region.

Mr Charles Walker: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Before he concludes his speech, will he cover the support he has received, as we all have, from the local authorities along the track? Their contribution has also been important.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. Perhaps I had rather glossed over that in reference to the composition of the taskforce, but we have had full representation from local authority people from different points along the line as part of the taskforce. They have bought into this plan completely, and we have also had the support of the local enterprise partnerships. What has been stressed is that local authorities and business can assist in bringing forward as early as possible the infrastructure improvements, if they can be prioritised, and therefore ensure that any money going, to which they can contribute, will help the project to come to the top of the pile.

We ended up by believing that the goal should be Cambridge in 60 and Stansted in 40. I say to the Minister: let us get on with it.

2.53 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) on securing the debate and on the report that we are debating. As chair of the West Anglia Taskforce, he has helped to make the strongest possible

case for investment in rail to support growth. I pay tribute all members of the taskforce, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), for their hard work. They have produced a comprehensive and timely report that I have no problem wholeheartedly endorsing. I would like to give a special mention to my friend and fellow Enfieldian, Doug Taylor, the leader of Enfield Council and one of the taskforce's 16 members. I was pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden pay tribute to the council leaders and councils who are supportive of the taskforce's work.

Mr Charles Walker: May I pay tribute to Mark Mills-Bishop? He is the leader of Broxbourne Council, which has also been entirely engaged in the process.

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. The taskforce is a fine example of Members of Parliament and their local authorities working closely together on something that is so important to their local areas' development and economic development.

In championing the development of the west Anglia main line corridor, our council leader, Doug Taylor, has played an important role in making Enfield's case for why the upgrade of the line is so vital for local residents and the economic development of our borough. I am sure the same is true for Broxbourne.

The primary focus of my speech will be on the potential benefits to be unlocked in Enfield, from transport to growth and productivity, employment and housing, by four-tracking the west Anglia main line in advance of Crossrail 2. Many of my constituents will agree with the taskforce's analysis that rail services along the west Anglia main line are "relatively slow" and "infrequent" and that "the line lacks resilience." In fact, I would be willing to bet that a fair few would say that is putting it mildly. I receive many emails from constituents frustrated with the service who do not put it quite so mildly, and understandably so.

Mr Walker: I am sure that, like me, the right hon. Lady also gets many representations from constituents about the appalling performance of the Hertford loop line and Great Northern. We have twin problems that we need to deal with.

Joan Ryan: Indeed I do. In fact, I travel on Govia's service on the Hertford loop almost every day, as I know the hon. Gentleman does, so I can give testimony to that. I also have experience of turning up at Liverpool Street to get the Stansted Express only to find a huge number of very frustrated passengers—they would be passengers if they could get on a train—many of whom are frantic that they will miss their flight. That cannot be good for Stansted or any of the development in business that we wish to see up the Lea valley corridor and in the Cambridge-Stansted corridor. It is most serious. In Enfield we are trapped between these two train lines, and it seems we have been talking about four-tracking for a long time.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I have bulging case files in my constituency office from local commuters who have contacted me time and time again to complain about last-minute cancellations on the line. The only thing that surprises me—I am pleased that it is the case—is that they will not give up. They are not going to get used to this. It has to be addressed.

[Joan Ryan]

As the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden said in the foreword to the taskforce's report, "people travelling to work require reliability".

Their jobs and livelihoods depend on that. I met with the managing director of Abellio Greater Anglia, Jamie Burles, recently and raised the concerns of passengers facing cancellations, delays and poor service every day on the west Anglia main line. With a new franchise agreement secured, Abellio has ambitious plans to improve the customer experience.

While we need urgent improvements in the short term, Abellio's promise to replace its current rolling stock with faster, more reliable trains by September 2020 is welcome. I fear that many of my constituents will stand back with horror at the idea of another four years of where we are now, but I also recognise what the right hon. Gentleman said about the refresh of the trains. No matter what improvements Abellio may make, services for my constituents will continue to be severely hampered unless we are able to upgrade the current twin-tracking of the line from Coppermill junction through Enfield and towards Broxbourne junction.

The limited space on the tracks affects journey times, reliability and capacity, as we have heard. I was not surprised to learn that a Network Rail assessment indicated that four-tracking this section of the line could reduce delays by half. Greater capacity, however, would not only mean greater reliability; it would also mean faster and more frequent trains, with 12 more trains per hour in each direction from Crossrail 2. Frankly, that would transform the lives of commuters and rail users in Enfield, and the improvements might also result in another huge benefit for residents—a better quality of life.

The borough of Enfield is bounded to the north by the M25 and to the south by the North circular, the A406. Other major arterial roads cut through Enfield, such as the Great Cambridge Road or A10, the Hertford Road, Bullsmoor Lane and Mollison Avenue. They are all heavily congested. My constituents living on or around those roads have had their lives blighted for too many years by pollution and poor air quality. Furthermore, now we know what we know about NOx—oxides of nitrogen—and what a poisonous form of pollution they are, that is even more worrying.

I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden about freight, because that is a major issue for us. Bullsmoor Lane, for example, is pretty much an extension of the M25, with huge lorries coming down it all day long, on to Mollison, to come down into London, or going back the other way. All that freight should be on the railways, but how can we persuade people of that, given the state of the service? The lorries are pumping out NOx just at the level of pushchairs with children in, or little ones going to school, and they are sucking everything in. We know they will be affected for the rest of their lives. The situation is very serious.

Investment in transport infrastructure is so important to help tackle such problems. As the report states:

"Rail improvements can encourage more people to travel by train instead of car, helping to reduce the number of cars on the road and reducing harmful CO2 and particulate emissions."

That is exactly what Enfield residents need, what they want to hear and what they want to see.

On growth and productivity, Enfield Council, through initiatives such as the north-east Enfield area action plan, is seeking to bring more inward investment, development and regeneration opportunities to that part of the borough. The north-east Enfield area stretches from the M25 southwards to Ponders End and includes the communities of Enfield Lock, Enfield Highway, Turkey Street and Southbury in my constituency, as well as Ponders End in Edmonton. The area sits at the heart of the Lea valley corridor, along the route of the west Anglia main line. It is home to the second largest industrial estate in the capital, at Brimsdown.

We are fortunate to have some world-leading technology companies with factories or depots in the area, such as Siemens, Johnson Matthey and the defence contractors Kelvin Hughes and ChartCo. Also, over the past few years, in that part of the borough and elsewhere we have seen a growth in scientific and technical microbusinesses. Enfield has a well-deserved reputation for innovation and enterprise.

Securing further investment, however, is crucial to maximising Enfield's potential. The upgrading of the west Anglia main line, with its more reliable and frequent rail service, will widen the labour catchment areas for business; it will help to attract new businesses to north-east Enfield; and it will ensure that businesses that are already there will want to stay and grow. Russell Gould from Kelvin Hughes says on page 19 of the report:

"It is critically important that Kelvin Hughes and ChartCo have efficient, fast and reliable commuting connections in and out of London. Kelvin Hughes supports any initiative that enables us to maintain and expand our competitiveness."

Anyone who wants to see Enfield's incredible potential only has to look at the Meridian Water development—the 85 hectare, £3.5 billion investment that will provide 10,000 new homes, new leisure facilities, schools, jobs and a new train station over the next 20 years. Given that the borough of Enfield is already the fifth most populous in the capital and is, according to the latest Greater London Authority figures, due to become the fourth most populous by 2026, those new homes are very important to the future development of the borough, as well as to the quality of life I mentioned.

Ensuring the success of new housing developments, however, is contingent upon significant improvements first being made to Enfield's transport infrastructure. Enfield Council has already made good progress in co-ordinating the essential infrastructure to ensure that the Meridian Water scheme is a success, securing an investment of £122 million for essential rail infrastructure and station improvements. In addition, the advent of four-tracking, as a precursor to Crossrail 2, will help spur much-needed redevelopment in north-east Enfield and beyond. As Doug Taylor, the leader of Enfield Council, said:

"The council fully supports the transformational potential of Crossrail 2. We are confident the scheme will unlock tens of thousands of homes and jobs along the wider Upper Lee Valley."

Should all that come to pass, Enfield certainly has a bright future. The compelling case for investment made in the taskforce's report would, if implemented, play a crucial role in enabling my borough to succeed. I join my colleagues from across the House, in particular those with constituencies running up the west Anglia main line, in calling on the Government to give the green light to this vital investment as soon as possible. I

look forward to the Minister's response and to learning more about how the Government will deliver the taskforce's recommendations. I also assure the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden that I have written to the Secretary of State for Transport and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to commend the report and the four-tracking project as an early phase of Crossrail 2.

3.7 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) on securing the debate and on the hard graft he has put in over many years on this issue. I suspect that we are all present today not only because he secured the debate but because he has put sustained and long-term pressure on the Government. It is also probably down to him that the West Anglia Taskforce was established in the first place.

Several of us in the Chamber today joined others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), at the recent launch event in Bishop's Stortford, where the Minister gave us considerable cause for optimism. I remember him describing the pile of glossy brochures on his office floor in Blackpool. He assured us that this particular glossy brochure, the report, is one that is well worth reading closely.

I also pay tribute to the work of the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium and the associated all-party parliamentary group on the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor, especially my right hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham and for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and Lord Harris of Haringey. The consortium has made a compelling case generally for investment in the corridor, and specifically in the west Anglia rail route which serves the corridor. The onus is now on the Government to act accordingly.

Mr Charles Walker: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the idea of four-tracking is not new. I have been campaigning for it, along with my right hon. and hon. Friends for the past 11 years, since I entered Parliament. The right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan), who first entered Parliament in 1997, has been campaigning for it since then, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) who moved the motion today has been campaigning for it for at least 25 years. The time has come to end the campaign and to ask the Government to start the building.

Daniel Zeichner: I could not agree more. We will await the Minister's comments with interest.

I strongly endorse the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North about the composition of the West Anglia Taskforce and the very good work done by a range of representatives from local authorities, including some from Cambridgeshire and Essex, of course, and beyond the local authorities—Transport for London, the Department for Transport and the airport at Stansted. It is a really good example of people coming together and making a very strong case. I also commend my right hon. Friend's comments about the need to improve our air quality not only in her constituency, but in many places. Such issues are pressing.

The West Anglia Taskforce report sets out the case for investment in the west Anglia main line, and that case builds on the excellent foundations laid down by the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium. The need for change is clear, as we have heard. Demand on the west Anglia railway is forecast by Network Rail to increase by 39% by 2043. There is limited space on the tracks and limited space at the terminus stations. This combination hampers journey times and service frequency and reduces the railway's reliability and resilience. As we have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North and the hon. Member for Broxbourne, the problems that passengers face on a daily basis are very real and urgent.

We also know that the corridor the west Anglia main line serves is economically significant. It is described in the report as a "vital region" for the UK's economy, and by the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium as a strongly entrepreneurial hub of national innovation and knowledge,

"driving UK growth and economic dynamism."

While pointing to the significant development and regeneration potential of both London and Cambridge, the consortium also suggests there are major development sites along the corridor in Broxbourne, Harlow, Peterborough, South Cambridgeshire and Stevenage. But, put simply, the region's potential is significantly undermined by its poor transport links. As the consortium summarises in its report on the strategic case for investment in the west Anglia rail route,

"The risk is that if transport investment fails to keep pace with the phenomenal growth potential of the Corridor, then it will become a brake on that growth. Transport constraints will fragment labour markets, restrict integration of business clusters, and thereby reduce productivity growth and inward investment."

Mr Walker: Broxbourne Council is running an initiative called Ambition Broxbourne to bring higher value jobs to the borough. What will limit the council's ability to do that is a rail service that does not match its ambition.

Daniel Zeichner: Indeed, that is absolutely the case. I am sure the Minister is listening closely to the strong case that is being built.

I want to turn to my own constituency of Cambridge, if I may. Although I am here as a Front-Bench spokesman in this debate, Cambridge is a key feature of the corridor. It is the top city for innovation in the UK. We out-perform the next seven best performing cities put together, and Cambridge is a magnet for leading technology and life science companies. Yet, as the West Anglia Taskforce report finds, the city's transport links are restricted by problems related to the west Anglia main line. Irregular, unreliable links between Cambridge and London are described in the report as,

"the greatest potential obstacle to future growth."

Cambridge Ahead, an important business-led local organisation that speaks for a wide range of businesses and stakeholders, has stated that although Cambridge is poised for the next wave of growth, it is held back by a need for infrastructure investment. I commend its report, "The Case for Cambridge", to the Minister. Within it he will find a clear ask for a new rail station south of the city on the Biomedical Campus, serving Addenbrooke's Hospital and close to where AstraZeneca has relocated. The report is clear that without such transport

[Daniel Zeichner]

improvements, future relocations of major companies risk being made not to the UK but to elsewhere in the world. Both reports urge that this new station be progressed rapidly, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on likely timeframes.

Returning to the West Anglia Taskforce, the report argues that investing in the west Anglia main line and consequently improving the public transport network would unlock a larger labour market and relieve congestion. It would also spur the development of thousands of homes, tackling Cambridge's chronic housing shortage and supporting high-skilled employees in the area.

Joan Ryan: The majority of my advice surgery at the moment is on housing—I do not know whether it is the same for my hon. Friend—which is a major issue for London, of course. I understand from the report that the development of 25,000 homes could be brought forward into the 2020s if four-tracking is delivered early as a precursor to Crossrail 2. Does my hon. Friend agree that that must be a priority for the Government?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. We understand that the Government are looking for innovative ways to boost housing, so where better than to look to the recommendations here where we can offer clear guidance as to how to do it?

The taskforce's recommendations would benefit not only Cambridge, but the entire corridor. As we have heard, four-tracking the rail line between Coppermill Junction and Broxbourne in advance of Crossrail 2 by 2026 would improve journey times and unlock the housing development we have just talked about. In fact, four-tracking the line, followed by Crossrail 2, would unlock up to 100,000 new homes and up to 45,000 new jobs.

Four-tracking would also improve journey times to Stansted and create extra line capacity. I have spoken before in this Chamber in support of improving surface access to Stansted in order to effectively utilise unused capacity. As the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden stated earlier, we know the constraints we face at the moment in terms of airport capacity, with any new runway in the south-east unlikely to be up and running for at least 10 years. Investing in the west Anglia main line could help. It would achieve Stansted in 40 minutes and Cambridge in 60.

So the case is clear, but what of the response? In a written answer from 20 September, we are told that the Government are still,

“carefully considering the recommendations of the draft report”.

I hope we will hear something stronger from the Minister today.

As I have said, I commend the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden for securing today's debate in the hope of persuading the Government to commit to further investment in our railways, but if we are to believe the reports that Network Rail is facing a shortfall in its budget for control period 5, ending in 2019, then the deliverability of already scheduled renewals and enhancement works must inevitably be brought into question. We should remember that in 2015 the planned electrification works on the midland main line and

TransPennine route, beset by delays and rising costs owing to appalling mismanagement, were, to use a delicate phrase, paused—a decision the Government planned from before the 2015 general election, but covered up until afterwards—before being unpaused, but with a delayed timetable.

The Times has reported that Ministers had been told about a likely black hole in Network Rail's budget by the end of control period 5, in part due to the ballooning cost estimates of upgrades, including the great western main line where costs shot up from £548 million in 2011 to a current estimate of £2.8 billion. This morning it was announced in a written statement that the electrification of the great western main line, already delayed once, has now been shelved indefinitely, breaking a pledge in the 2015 Conservative party manifesto of upgrading the great western main line as one of its regional priorities.

It is unacceptable that promises on upgrades are broken time and again. The Government cannot continue to repeatedly make promises to the electorate and then renege on them. The Secretary of State should reverse today's announcement and commit to delivering the promised electrification upgrades in full under the agreed timescale.

I invite the Minister to take this opportunity to dispel the rumours that the midland main line electrification project or other works will be delayed or cancelled. In last night's Adjournment debate, the Minister refused to confirm that the planned electrification would be completed by 2023, despite the former rail Minister having given the assurance after the Hendy re-plan that the works were both deliverable and affordable. In the light of today's announcement on the great western main line, the Minister's refusal to give a confirmation is ominous for the midlands. MPs were given a clear promise, which the Minister seemed to row back from last night, so will he take this opportunity to confirm that the full works will be completed on schedule and that the midlands will not miss out again?

Will the Minister provide clarity on whether Network Rail is indeed facing the rumoured shortfall? Will he provide a reassurance that if such a shortfall occurs, Network Rail will not be forced to pursue further asset and property sales, which jeopardise the long-term integrity of our rail network as an integrated national asset and which represent poor value for money to the taxpayer? Will he also explain how his Department has managed to preside over a situation where the projected cost and timetabling for the improvement and maintenance of the network is repeatedly so wildly off the mark, often by millions of pounds?

In conclusion, we know that infrastructure spending, including building better transport links, has been shown to increase productivity and attract investment, helping to grow our economy. Indeed, evidence also suggests investment in infrastructure can have a stronger positive effect on GDP per capita than other forms of investment. In the light of the vote to leave the European Union, strengthening our economy and maintaining the global competitiveness of our assets is essential; the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor vies with world cities such as New York, Tokyo and Paris and competes with major international technology regions such as Silicon Valley. Now more than ever it is the time to reinforce our strengths through targeted investment. Improving connectivity along the corridor by improving the west Anglia main line would be a fine start.

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to be here in Westminster Hall for the second time today discussing rail issues. I had not been here since my appointment, and now I am spending all day here, which can only be a good thing. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who spoke in his usual courteous style. I am impressed by the ingenuity with which he sought to broaden his topic to many areas beyond the West Anglia Taskforce; I may well deal with them later.

First, it is important to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) not only on securing the debate but on the taskforce's report. He expressed concern that there was repetition; but I view repetition as valuable when it is for emphasis, and my right hon. Friend once more emphasised many of the report's key themes. That is only to the good. As he pointed out, I was in Bishop's Stortford only a fortnight ago to join him at the launch of the report. I was impressed to see the support that he had gathered from across the political spectrum from local government, national Government in the form of the Department for Transport, London government, and many companies and private individuals who had come together to support the report's findings. They all recognised how improvements to the train service would help them to do better business, and to grow locally and together on a much larger scale, along the route. I will say to the House what I said to them: I am grateful for the work of the taskforce in the past few years, and the report is one of the most helpful and constructive of the many I am sent and which, as has been pointed out, all too often litter my office floor. Sadly, many of them never come back to London because I have read them and that is where their use ends. In the present case, the report is a constant companion in my red folder everywhere I go, because I use it as an example to show other people looking at their local railway areas what a real, proper value-adding taskforce looks like, and what they should aim to achieve. I fear that my right hon. Friend has probably encountered too many colleagues asking him for advice on how to run a taskforce, and I thank him for his patience in steering them all in the right direction.

Critically, the report is based on solid evidence and the authors are united in agreement. Such taskforces are a useful mechanism for reconciling competing interests and ambitions to ensure that consensus is reached, as in this case. The report recognises the many challenges that the network faces, and the limitations, where they exist. Yet it also focuses on the opportunities, with a range of realistic and specific recommendations, minus the many extraneous embellishments, as my right hon. Friend put it, that people sometimes seek to add, rather like baubles on a Christmas tree. He is to be congratulated on avoiding a temptation that others may fail to avoid.

The report also makes a clear and compelling case for action, so it is just the sort I want. I should pay tribute not only to my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden but to the many taskforce members, to local authority leaders, to the former Chancellor and the former Mayor of London, and Val Shawcross and the present Mayor of London, for all the support that they have offered. There is a risk that such thanks

become rather like an Oscars speech and that someone gets missed out; my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) pointed out earlier the danger of missing out one or two key figures. I hope that anyone not mentioned will feel that they were included, because it was very much a team effort.

Today I want to express my hope that the taskforce will continue. It is important to continue to monitor the implementation of the report, and to assess changes in circumstances and priorities. There may be a need to update and refresh it. Clearly that will not happen for a while yet, but I see that as the taskforce's role going forward. It has made a strong case for investment in the west Anglia main line. As the hon. Member for Cambridge pointed out, its corridor is one of the most productive, creative and innovative parts of the UK economy. The west Anglia main line does a vital job of linking Cambridge, with its world-leading university, science parks and track record of innovation, with one of Europe's fastest growing airports, Stansted, and the global capital city of London. Indeed, as the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) pointed out, it is a fundamental driver of productivity in the local economy. Yet the line is still fundamentally the one that the Victorians laid down in the 1840s—one of the very first railways into London from the north and east. Its capabilities may have grown and shrunk as demand for rail changed over the past 170 years, but it is clear that the railway line now operates at near capacity for much of the day. The report made the reasons for that clear. In the 10 years to 2011, the number of working adults travelling to work on the line increased by more than 100,000. In the same period, the overall local population increased by about 250,000. As the report made clear, that means that demand on the railway can only grow.

Demand is not just about space for the people who use the trains. It is also about space on the tracks—the creation of paths for trains to operate on. At the moment, the fast trains catch up with the slow trains. Unable to get past, they trundle along behind. New, faster trains will help to change that, but only so far. What happens next, when we have used every bit of track capacity? That is the key question posed by the report. I am therefore pleased to see its sensible recommendations. They are ambitious, yes—but rightly so. They do not necessarily need to be either expensive or hard to achieve. Suggestions include improving pedestrian and cycle access at Northumberland Park and Whittlesford Parkway, new platforms at Stratford and a new station at Addenbrooke's, supporting growth in Cambridge's biomedical sector. The hon. Member for Cambridge asked for an update, and I am happy to confirm that we are working closely with Cambridge County Council to deliver that as soon as we can. I do not have any precise timings yet, but the detailed study of the viability of the new station is being undertaken with the county council and I hope to have more news soon. The hon. Gentleman has raised that with me, and I shall keep a careful eye on it. In his role as shadow Transport Minister he can, I am sure, ask about it again each time we face each other at the Dispatch Box. The report also provides further evidence that the Government are right to continue to develop Crossrail 2, and shows how the region can capitalise on that project.

Of course, the recommendations deserve careful consideration. We need to assess them against the case for investment across the network as a whole. The

[Paul Maynard]

Government will now give the report the consideration it deserves, which will be a thorough and careful assessment, so that we can respond formally next year. In the meantime we should not forget about the investment already taking place to deliver the premium service that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne spoke of when he was still in his place. The improvements that Abellio is making are part of the new nine-year franchise agreement that started three weeks ago, under which, as many hon. Members have pointed out, the entire fleet of trains on the Greater Anglia franchise will be replaced: 1,043 new carriages will be in service by the end of 2020. I should point out to the right hon. Member for Enfield North that delivery is intended to start in 2019, so passengers will see them before 2020, which is the date for the entire fleet to be delivered.

Hon. Members have also pointed out that there is a commitment to the refurbishment of trains in the meantime. Accessibility will be key, given the changes in legislation. On my return from Bishop's Stortford I encountered some of the refurbished carriages. Although I am only just the wrong side of 40, my knees did not quite enable me to stand up from the seat, as I was so low to the ground, because it was such an oddly-configured carriage. I recognise there is much work to do to enable everyone to feel that they have access to the carriages and can travel comfortably on them.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Minister talked about the Abellio upgrade, which I welcome, as the MP for South East Cambridgeshire. Does he agree that the route Abellio works on would also benefit from an increased station capacity—for example, a station in Soham, which is on that route?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for my hon. and learned Friend's intervention. She and I have discussed this matter, and I have already laid out the various options. We are certainly seeing a growing economy in Cambridgeshire, which is changing the demographics rapidly in that part of the world. We need to be agile and flexible not only in this Department but across Government to ensure that we support Cambridgeshire in its wider aspirations for economic growth. I hear what she says.

Joan Ryan: I am grateful for the Minister's clarification about when the new rolling stock will arrive. It is very important to be accurate about that. I have had a number of conversations with Abellio. It regularly told me that the stock would arrive in 2018, until I discovered that that was December 2018. To say 2019 is probably a fairer indication to our constituents of when they can expect to see this rolling stock coming on-stream—or on-track, should I say?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's intervention. Clearly where we get mixed messages it is important to be correct. I will ensure that I write to her with an official confirmation of what we believe the delivery schedule to be for the carriages. It can be frustrating if a train operating company is saying one thing, Network Rail is saying another and a Minister is saying another. It is important we know what we are talking about and get it accurate, so I shall write to her.

As I was saying, these improvements will have benefits not only in east Anglia or Cambridgeshire but across the country. We are seeing benefits in the east midlands, with engineering jobs being secured in Derby through the rolling stock order. Once the new trains are in place, it will enable a complete rewrite of the timetable to take advantage of the enhanced performance and acceleration that the new trains offer.

Two years ago, the great eastern main line campaign published a similarly well-evidenced and well-supported report to that of the West Anglia Taskforce. The great eastern campaigners highlighted the opportunities that faster and more frequent services on the companion main line into London Liverpool Street would deliver for Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. We listened and were convinced. We asked for improvements when we sought bids for the new franchise. It will take the new trains to achieve it, but Norwich in 90 will be a reality in a few years' time. Abellio will continue to work with Network Rail and my Department to ensure that further improvements occur through targeted investment on the track—supported, I am sure, by the thousands of passengers and businesses who backed the campaign.

The West Anglia Taskforce has a similar request: Cambridge in 60 and Stansted in 40. Abellio has committed to work with the taskforce to see what the new trains might achieve in terms of performance and therefore time savings, and what else can be done to achieve those ambitious targets. I recognise that those targets need to be ambitious and that journey times matter, particularly in areas of economic growth, but ultimately there are limitations. As we have heard today, the west Anglia line is more constrained than the great eastern, for it is a two-track railway almost its entire length. The great eastern, on the other hand, benefits from four tracks for some 20 miles to Shenfield and has several further stations where trains can overtake.

We know from the West Anglia Taskforce's work that it too wants a four-track railway for the first 18 miles from Coppermill junction to Broxbourne junction, to provide the extra capacity to deliver all the service improvements sought. Even though much of that is putting back tracks that once existed, the work is costly, so part of the Government's work is to ensure that we fully cost those proposals and ensure they are both deliverable and affordable. It is a medium to long-term improvement, but work on the part of the Department must start now to assess it fully and properly. That is why the measured and sensible way in which my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden has approached the issue in his report is to be welcomed and commended.

Furthermore, the report recommends that local authorities and local enterprise partnerships work together with businesses to identify and develop ways in which they can assist with funding this work. It keeps at the forefront the principle that the beneficiaries of any enhancement on the rail network should make a contribution towards the costs. I believe that to be a responsible approach that benefits all who see an opportunity for rail improvements where they stimulate economic growth. I hope that the taskforce will continue its work and spread that message around the region. I welcome the opportunity to continue working together to look at how we can increase the funding pot.

I would like to mention two areas that my right hon. Friend briefly touched on. The first is Stansted. As he rightly pointed out, it is a growing airport. Now that we

have a decision on Heathrow, we have much greater clarity about the future of not only aviation in this country but what the needs will be in terms of service access to our airports. I share the wider ambition that I am sure there is in the room today to ensure greater rail access to Stansted, which would reduce incentives to travel there by coach or car on the M11. I look forward to working with the taskforce further to ensure that we can develop and meet the ambitions of Stansted.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned freight, which is all too often overlooked in debates on rail. Opposition Members mentioned air pollution, which encourages us to look at freight as an option. This is where we need real innovation in the rail sector. Often we think that a freight train has to be wagons, trucks and no passengers at all. I have been encouraged by some of the meetings I have had with those in the rail freight sector where we looked at how we could utilise spare capacity on the passenger network for small packages and small pieces of freight. That could help reduce air pollution in city centres. If the final mile of distribution in central London could be done by an electric car picking up the package from a London terminus, that would potentially make an immense difference to air quality here in London. I hope those who are listening from the rail freight sector are thinking innovatively about how routes into London termini can best be used in that regard.

There will be improvements for west Anglia main line users in the short term, even before the new trains arrive and new timetables become more achievable. All today's trains will be refreshed, with 27 being modified to become fully accessible for disabled users. Next year, more than 70 additional carriages will be introduced to provide more capacity and more seats on both the west Anglia and great eastern main lines. All the trains that operate out of London Liverpool Street will be fitted with wi-fi, and those currently fitted with wi-fi will have their systems upgraded.

The railway infrastructure is also being upgraded. We have opened Lea Bridge station. Next year we will open Cambridge North station, to which I am sure the hon. Member for Cambridge is looking forward. Network Rail continues to consult on a programme of level crossing closures along the line to increase safety and speed up trains. As has just been said, we are looking at the new station for Addenbrooke's.

The west Anglia main line is already starting to get the upgrade it deserves. With the taskforce remaining on the case and holding me to account, I fully expect that to continue. Once again, I thank everyone for their good work in delivering this report and showing how much we can continue to do for the people of west Anglia and the Lea valley.

3.38 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I would like to thank my colleagues for being here today, to make either speeches or interventions. It is illustrative of the fact that we are an ecumenical crowd and that nothing divides us on the arguments put forward in the taskforce report, which have been amplified today. I appreciate the generous comments that have been made about the taskforce's work. I should, in fairness, have mentioned the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). Through his work on the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor APPG and on the taskforce, he has been a very solid, determined and resourceful supporter of this work. I thank also the Minister for his kind remarks, generous response and the attention he gives to these things. He is obviously a great enthusiast for the railways and needs to satisfy many different calls from around the country.

I hope it is recognised that there are many voices now along the London-Cambridge corridor insisting on improvement. They come from businesses of all kinds—some for which we have enormous regard in terms of their potential to improve our economy—the airport and the many commuters who rely on that line, in whichever direction they travel, to get to work. The voices are getting louder. The Minister tolerantly said that he was unconcerned about repetition, so I am tempted to say in conclusion, “Same time next week.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the West Anglia Taskforce report.

3.40 pm

Sitting suspended.

Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to an important half-hour debate on the independent adviser on Ministers' interests. I call Mr Paul Flynn.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship for, I believe, the first time, Mr Hollobone. The office of independent adviser is now 10 years old. The story is one either of Ministers all behaving as saintly paragons of perfection or of the system not working, and I fear it is the latter. Since the office was set up, it has achieved virtually nothing and I would like to point out the way things have gone.

When the office was set up, the case of Shahid Malik was referred to it. He resigned from ministerial office when there were complaints about his behaviour. He was then found to be free of blame and restored to ministerial office. Since then we have had only one case, involving Baroness Warsi. She had already confessed to a venial sin: she had gone on an official trip to India and had taken with her a relative and a work partner. She agreed that there was a perception of impropriety in that, as did the adviser on Ministers' interests. There was a mild reprimand but no action was taken. However, that was a tiny offence compared with other cases that have passed by without being referred to the adviser.

Possibly the least defensible one was in 2011 involving the then Secretary of State for Defence, who was accused of misconduct. There were well-publicised accusations of relationships with a Mr Werritty, and an extraordinary thing happened: in this case the then chief civil servant, on the advice of the then Prime Minister, decided to investigate the matter himself. That was against the ministerial code and the civil service code—the investigation was expressly forbidden by them—but it was the Prime Minister's decision. The then holder of the office of independent adviser, Sir Philip Mawer, gave evidence to a Select Committee and said he should have been investigating the Member concerned, who promptly resigned from his post.

This was an extraordinary situation. We know that whatever that Member did was serious, because that is what the head of the civil service said. They said that it was so serious that he should resign. However, no information was given to the public about what he had done, how serious the offence was and whether he was fit for future office. He gained absolution by resignation and the public are in the dark. That is more serious now, given that that Member has been returned to office as one of three Brexiteers. We have no idea whether he is fit for office or if his past conduct suggests he is not fit for office. The first thing one would ask anybody seeking a new job is, "Why did you leave your last job?" We do not know. This case involves the sin of omission. The then Prime Minister should certainly have referred that matter to the adviser and he did not.

There have been further cases since. One involved the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), who was accused of not being impartial in a BSkyB takeover. That case had a great deal of attention and certainly caused a considerable amount of public concern, yet it was not referred by the Prime Minister to the adviser.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—the present Prime Minister—was alleged to have leaked ministerial correspondence on Islamic extremism in Birmingham schools. Again, that is a matter of great concern, yet the case was not referred to the adviser.

There were minor cases, too. A Minister had a meal—not a cheap one—at the Savoy, allegedly provided partly by a group that was seeking favours from his Department. Again, that is a matter of some seriousness and if it was true, it would have been a breach of the ministerial code. That Minister explained that he was there eating as a private person, not as a Minister—so his private stomach, not his ministerial stomach was digesting that day. That was accepted by the then Prime Minister and there was no investigation.

The most recent case is possibly the most telling. Two Ministers in the Cabinet Office—the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock)—decided to give £3 million to Kids Company, which was run by Ms Batmanghelidjh. The brave civil servants in the Department put out a letter saying that that was a mistake and that it should not have been done. That was a courageous thing for the civil servants to do. Civil servants give their advice, and that is it, but they went public and said, "This is the wrong thing to do," putting in peril their future careers, because they would be regarded as troublemakers. They did the right thing but the Government did not. What happened to the £3 million? It was given to Ms Batmanghelidjh at Kids Company and the company collapsed four days later.

There is a possible explanation. The charge against the Government is that Ms Batmanghelidjh was the poster girl of the big society. She attended a meeting in the Cabinet Office to launch the big society. A huge amount of political credibility was given to her company when the Prime Minister was promoting the big society—he was the first and probably the last fan, now he has left office, of that concept. Why were those two Ministers not reported to the adviser for losing £3 million of public money? The temptation is to believe that the Prime Minister was acting for party-political advantage to protect the reputation of the big society. However, the public lost £3 million.

There is no redress in this situation. Nobody holds the Prime Minister to account on this. I have raised these matters many times in the past few years, and it is said that we have a chance to raise these matters at Prime Minister's questions, but we do not have a hope of raising them in any detail there. The Liaison Committee could raise them but they never have, because whether they do so depends on the disposition of the members of that Committee.

This reform was intended to restore confidence in public life, because we went through the great screaming nightmare of the expenses scandal and our reputation was at rock bottom. I believe that now it is even worse than that—it is subterranean. We have not improved our standing with the public. It has probably gone

down and we know what happens: if politics falls into disrepute, we end up with an obscenity like Trump, or something even worse; people look for alternatives.

Let me turn to another matter of considerable interest. An application was made to serve on the Committee for Standards in Public Life by Tony Wright. One could hardly imagine a better candidate for that than the man who gave his name to the Wright reforms. He was interviewed by the Chair of the Committee and found to be a splendid candidate. A decision then had to be taken about whether Tony Wright should be on that Committee, but he was turned down by the right hon. Member for West Suffolk. Why on earth should a matter like that be a ministerial decision? That was very interesting. The decision should certainly be taken by people who are independent and outside this place. It just so happens, of course, that that Member might be seen to have had a vested interest as someone likely to be accused by the person responsible—the adviser himself. It is rather like a defendant in a court case being able to choose his own judge. The last person who should have been allowed to blackball Tony Wright was the right hon. Member for West Suffolk. That is the highly unsatisfactory situation we have now.

For all these years, the adviser has been there doing his job, getting paid a considerable salary, but with virtually nothing to do. On any basis, it is a waste of public money to continue to keep him in office. When the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs had a pre-appointment hearing, we were unanimous in saying that the present holder of the office was not the right one to take on the job because he has had a lifetime of public service, saying, “Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir” as a civil servant. Was he the right man to provide that independence of thought and decision making? As a cross-party Committee with a Conservative majority, we decided that he was not, but that recommendation was ignored and overruled by the then Prime Minister. The whole idea of reform, which was a good one—that there must be some kind of surveillance of ministerial behaviour—was a waste and a failure. We are in a position to drive the public’s knowledge of politics, but their appreciation, and their trust in this place and in politics generally is gravely damaged.

There are problems in other areas, too, including with the completely futile group, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which has absolutely no power. Abuses take place through the revolving door, whereby people who leave Parliament are prepared to hawk around, and to prostitute their insider knowledge and contacts to the highest bidder. There is no way that can be stopped, as we have no mechanism for interfering with it. When people breach the few rules that do exist, there is no way of bringing them to book. We are in a position, in public life, that is extremely dangerous, and I would like the Minister to explain why the cases I have mentioned were not referred to the independent adviser. What plans do the Government have to ensure that the neglect of the office by a Prime Minister over the past five years is not allowed to continue?

In March 2010, David Cameron made a rousing speech about how he was going to clean up politics and get rid of lobbying, but he came into office and things now are worse than they were then. The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union

Administration Act 2014 ignored the corporate lobbyists but made life a bit uncomfortable for charities and trade unions. He was dabbling with the minnows in the shallows while the great fat salmon swam by unhindered.

We look with some trepidation to our future and the future of politics. The great debate going on at the moment is very much along the lines of the political class having been brought into disrepute. The Government should look seriously at our own reputations, and ensure that we have mechanisms here that work and are not subject to the bias and political interests of Prime Ministers.

4.14 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The reason why the two Ministers responsible for this matter are not standing here is that one is on paternity leave after the birth of his second son, Aubrey Valentine Hamilton, and the other is on a ministerial visit outside London. I spoke to the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) last week to express their sorrow that they could not be here to respond to the debate. I hope that he finds me a suitable stand-in who does not say the word “transparency” too many times.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I congratulate him on securing this debate and on speaking so fluently. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, of which he is a member, has been looking into the matter for some time, so the debate is timely. As always, I have listened to him and considered, as carefully as I can, what he said. I will try my best to respond to as many of his points as possible.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the office of the independent adviser was set up by a Labour Government. It has a purpose that everybody knows about, and it is important to start by reiterating the lines of ministerial accountability. The very first section of the ministerial code makes it clear that:

“Ministers must...comply at all times with the requirements which Parliament itself has laid down in relation to the accountability and responsibility of Ministers.”

That is incorporated into a resolution of Parliament, as he well knows.

The code states what to all of us in politics is the blindingly obvious, which is that

“Ministers only remain in office for so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister.”

It also sets out that it is the Prime Minister who “is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister”.

It is also he—I should say she; I must get that right now, in the new regime—who decides

“the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards.”

She makes the decisions, and is accountable to Parliament and the public for those decisions. The independent adviser is someone outside Government who can provide the Prime Minister with independent advice. There has been no change to that approach, which has existed under every Government since the role was established under Labour in 2006.

There are two key aspects to the role, both of which are important and one of which the hon. Gentleman almost completely ignores. First, the independent adviser provides Ministers and their departmental private secretaries

[*Chris Heaton-Harris*]

with advice on handling Ministers' private interests in order to avoid any conflict between those interests and their ministerial responsibilities. That is set out in section 7 of the ministerial code and prevents any problems from occurring in the first place, helping to explain why fewer investigations are carried out by the independent adviser than perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like.

The second element of the job is to investigate when the Prime Minister, advised by the Cabinet Secretary, decides that allegations that an individual Minister may have breached the ministerial code of conduct are appropriate for investigation. Section 7 of the code sets out the adviser's role with respect to ministerial interests, making it clear that:

"It is the personal responsibility of each Minister to decide whether and what action is needed to avoid a conflict or the perception of a conflict, taking account of advice received from their Permanent Secretary and the independent adviser".

Again, that is a check to prevent problems from occurring in the first place, which helps to explain why so few investigations are carried out by the independent adviser.

Ministers are required on appointment to each new office to provide their permanent secretary and the independent adviser with a full list, in writing, of their interests that might be thought to give rise to conflict. Where appropriate, the independent adviser will advise Ministers and permanent secretaries on any action necessary to avoid a conflict or potential conflict of interest, removing future problems at the earliest stage. Ministers must then record in writing what action has been taken and provide the independent adviser with a copy of that record. The work is all behind the scenes, but it is crucial.

Paul Flynn: I did not use all the time available to me, so that I could give the Minister a chance to reply. Although I appreciate that he has difficulty in filling a quarter of an hour, it is not good enough just to repeat the situation and the rules of the code. He should answer the specific points I raised. Will he, for instance, tell us why the case of the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the then Secretary of State for Defence, was not referred to the independent adviser, as Sir Philip Mawer said it should have been?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I happily took the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but he has intervened on me with 10 minutes to go in my prepared speech, and I have plenty to tell him about all that if he will please wait for that particular passage.

I emphasise that this is behind-the-scenes work because it is so crucial, and by doing it we address a lot of problems before the issues might arise. The hon. Gentleman can hardly complain about the independent adviser being impotent when the independent adviser is doing so much work to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Most importantly, the Government are as transparent as possible about the process. The Cabinet Office publishes a list of Ministers' relevant interests twice a year, which enables external scrutiny of any potential conflicts. It is an ongoing process, not a one-off. The most recent list was published in July 2016, and the updated list will be published in a few weeks, when the hon. Gentleman will be able to enjoy the slim pickings in my first ever entry.

The pickings are slim because every Minister I know takes the ministerial code seriously from the first time they look at it. I wanted to continue being a trustee of a local charity in my constituency, but I took advice that I was not allowed to do so because it would be in conflict with the ministerial code. I could have continued with the trusteeship but, being in conflict, I would no doubt have been referred—happily, in the hon. Gentleman's eyes—to the independent adviser for investigation. That is the process. The independent adviser's job is to try to prevent problems from happening by giving sensible advice at key points in time.

The independent adviser, at the request of the Prime Minister and having consulted the Cabinet Secretary, investigates alleged breaches of the ministerial code. The decision on whether an individual Minister will remain in office is ultimately for the Prime Minister, who will take into account the facts established by the independent adviser. The results of any investigation by the independent adviser are made public.

As the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister, it is rightly for the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Cabinet Secretary, to decide whether an alleged breach of the ministerial code merits investigation by the independent adviser. In some cases, the Prime Minister may conclude that there is no need for such advice—the facts will already be clear. In other cases, she may decide that there is a need for further investigation before she can make a decision. In those instances, she may refer the case to the independent adviser. It is not the role of the independent adviser to initiate his own investigations. He is there to advise the Prime Minister on allegations of breaches of the ministerial code. He gives the advice; the Prime Minister makes the decision.

Let us also be clear that Ministers are personally responsible for deciding how to act and conduct themselves in light of the ministerial code, and they are responsible for justifying their actions and conduct to Parliament and the public. We also have an independent and robust free press in this country, which plays an important role in holding individual Ministers and the Government as a whole to account.

There have been suggestions in the past that the ministerial code should be ratified by Parliament. The Government's view is that that would blur the lines between the Executive and Parliament. The ministerial code is the Prime Minister's guidance to her Ministers on how they should conduct themselves in public office. Parliament already has a powerful range of mechanisms to hold the Government to account, some of which I enjoyed as a Back Bencher. The Government see no reason to change that well established approach and believe that the current model works well.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister explain how the system worked well in the case of Kids Company? The accusation was of largesse, with huge amounts of money being given to the then Prime Minister's project. The person who stopped the investigation of the obvious waste of £3 million was the then Prime Minister. How can a system be fair and reasonable, and how can it work, when the Prime Minister acts as judge and jury when he himself is accused?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There has been absolutely no suggestion of any breach of the ministerial code in that particular case. There have been a number of investigations,

including one by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member, and one by the Public Accounts Committee. The latter recommended a number of outcomes and lessons to be learned, and obviously those lessons will be learned, but there has been absolutely no suggestion of any breach of the ministerial code in that case.

The Government are confident that the role of the independent adviser, along with the broader commitment to transparency, will create a framework that is more robust and significantly stronger than the one that applies to the public sector. Publishing the list of Ministers' interests is just one part of the Government's commitment to transparency. The list, alongside the Register of Members' Financial Interests, ensures that information about Ministers' interests that are relevant to their Government role is in the public domain. Measures have been put in place, where necessary, to avoid any conflict of interest. The Government are proud to be one of the most transparent in the world, and we have taken steps to publish more information than ever before, including details of ministerial gifts over £140, overseas travel and any hospitality received.

The hon. Gentleman raised specific questions today about the role of the independent adviser, and he has raised questions about the independence of the role on numerous occasions. I have already made it clear that this is a personal appointment by the Prime Minister of the day. The post holder must be outside party politics and must provide his own independent views on the issues that are referred to him. The Prime Minister makes the appointment on the basis of an assessment of the post holder's ability to provide such an independent perspective. It is our judgment that the current post holder, Sir Alex Allan, has the experience and necessary skills and judgment to make him ideally suited for the role. He has expertise, experience and ability to provide confidential and trusted advice to Ministers and their permanent secretaries from an independent, non-party political point of view.

I re-emphasise the process. If there is an allegation about a breach of the code and the Prime Minister, having consulted the Cabinet Secretary, feels that it warrants further investigation, she will refer the matter

to the independent adviser on Ministers' interests. Ministers are responsible for deciding how to conduct themselves in light of the code and for justifying their actions to Parliament and the people. The code makes it clear that Ministers only remain in office as long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister, and the appropriate consequences come from her if there is a breach of those standards.

I know that the hon. Gentleman will be slightly disappointed by my reply. He comes across as slightly—I don't know—Trumpist in looking for conspiracy everywhere, where perhaps none exists. Proper investigations have taken place. It is important for us to realise that the Government take transparency very seriously, and we will not blur the lines between the Executive and Parliament. Parliament already has mechanisms to hold the Government to account.

Today's debate has demonstrated remarkably strongly held views on this subject. My remarks will not have pleased the hon. Gentleman.

Paul Flynn: I recall the words of Chaucer:

"That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?"

He spoke of:

"A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep".

What we have here is an accusation that if the head is behaving in a partial way, and if the Head of Government is rotten, the whole flock will be rotten.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman has gone on a bit about how the standing of politics and how this place is viewed by the public has gone down. Those who look at his Twitter feed will see that he does not particularly like his voters and how they voted on Brexit. Maybe that is a disparity that he would like to examine slightly more closely than this issue.

I hope my remarks today have made it clear how the Government take issues of ministerial conduct very seriously, but we remain of the view that the appointment and dismissal of Ministers is a matter for the Prime Minister. We are satisfied with how the current model works.

Question put and agreed to.

Animal Cruelty: Sentencing

4.30 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sentencing for animal cruelty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank all colleagues who have come to discuss this important issue, and I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Justice for his time. I hope that he and his officials will listen carefully to this debate and realise that there is an animal abuse crisis in this country, and that it is in their power to do something about it. I hope that on the back of this debate, they will work with me before my private Member's Bill to increase sentencing for animal cruelty is debated on 24 February next year.

The origins of my interest in the issue of animal cruelty go back to March this year, when a horrific case of abuse emerged in my constituency. Andrew Frankish, aged 22, and his brother Daniel Frankish, aged 19, from Redcar were convicted of causing unnecessary suffering to a protected animal. On several mobile phone clips filmed by the younger man, Andrew is shown picking up a bulldog at the top of some wooden stairs before repeatedly throwing her down them. On one occasion, he lifts her high over his head. Inspectors from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals said that the footage was the most distressing that they had ever seen. The video is widely available on the internet.

I hope, Mr Hollobone, that you will allow me to quote at some length the RSPCA inspector who dealt with the case, because it is important to get the full picture. RSPCA inspector Gemma Lynch said that Baby the bulldog, who was put down three months later after losing the use of her back legs, was

“totally submissive throughout, not even making a noise when she lands on the stairs, bouncing to the foot of them where there is a baby gate which she crashes into before hitting the ground. Frankish is saying things like ‘one, two, three’ before hurling her down them. He is clearly enjoying himself. He’s laughing and smiling. The whole horrible ordeal seems to be for his and the younger man’s entertainment, for fun. One clip shows him stamping on her neck repeatedly at the bottom of the stairs, then picking her up and throwing her to the ground with force over and over again. He’s laughing hysterically.

Another clip shows him standing on Baby’s chest with his full body weight at the top of the stairs, before jumping up and down on her. This is the only time you hear her make a noise, and she is crying throughout. The younger man says, ‘See if we can make it scream any more. We should throw it down the stairs by its ears’, before Frankish picks her up against the wall and head-butts her twice, then throws her down the stairs again. Everyone who has seen the video says it’s the most distressing thing they’ve ever seen. These are people who have seen a lot of horrible things.”

The two men pleaded guilty to causing unnecessary suffering to Baby the bulldog by subjecting her to unnecessary physical violence, an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. What sentence did those two brothers receive for such unspeakable and horrific acts? A suspended sentence, six months’ tagged curfew between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am and £300 in costs. No one can feel that the justice system did its job that day.

What makes the situation even more concerning is that the case only came to light, two years after the abuse took place, because the mobile phone footage was

on a memory card found on a supermarket floor by a member of the public. It makes me wonder how much abuse is taking place behind closed doors across the country, against defenceless animals who cannot speak up and who depend on their owners for food, comfort and a life of love and care, free from abuse or neglect.

Robert Ffello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this crucial debate. Everyone is sickened to hear what she just described. All too often, such individuals are abusing not just animals but vulnerable adults and children; there is a huge amount of evidence showing that link. While considering sentencing, should we not also be considering putting these—words fail me to describe the disgust I feel for them—individuals on a register for potential abuse of humans as well?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is right. In my discussions with the RSPCA and others, one issue that has come to light is that people can be banned for life from keeping an animal, but we have no way to enforce it at the moment. A register is potentially an important idea, and one that I hope the Government will consider as part of the discussion and debate on my Bill.

On researching how the two brothers could have received such an impossibly lenient sentence for a vicious, premeditated assault, I was astonished to find that the maximum sentence for any form of animal abuse is just six months’ custody. Incredibly, it has not changed since the Protection of Animals Act 1911. In 1911, one could see animals at circuses and monkeys on the shoulders of organ grinders on street corners; the Act was introduced essentially to make it an offence to override or overload animals pulling loads on the street.

Under the last Labour Government, the issue was meant to be dealt with by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which made provision to increase sentencing for a person found guilty of such offences to be liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 51 weeks, or a fine not exceeding £20,000. Incredibly, however, the provision to increase prison sentences was never enacted, so people who inflict cruelty on animals or make them fight for money can currently receive a maximum of only six months’ imprisonment should the magistrate deem a custodial sentence suitable. The public rightly find that hard to understand or accept as appropriate.

Since the incident of the Frankish brothers came to my attention, I decided to try to amend the law to ensure that sentences fit the crime. Just days after I applied for this debate, another two incidents in my constituency brought the issue back to the news agenda. A small dog was found buried alive in woods near Redcar on 19 October, with a nail hammered into its head. I am unable to discuss the case in more detail due to an ongoing criminal investigation, but on the same day, two sheep were found battered with a blunt instrument.

The people of my constituency have been horrified by all these cases, and it is important to pay tribute to their response. After hearing of the Frankish brothers incident and that of Scamp, the dog who was found with a nail in his head, they held vigils for the animals, with hundreds of people coming to lay flowers and candles and send two messages loudly and defiantly. First, the perpetrators do not represent our community. People in Redcar are decent and kind. I know many passionate animal lovers, and I meet some wonderful

dog owners as I walk my own dog on Redcar beach or the Eston hills. Secondly, they are angry. They feel that the criminal justice system is letting them down. The police were called to the defence of one of the Frankish brothers after they were threatened. I do not condone such violence, but I fear greatly that that is what happens when the criminal justice system fails and people do not believe that a sentence fits a crime.

On researching my Bill, I was shocked by the number of horrific cases I came across. I read of a dismembered cat left on a war memorial, strangled cats, a deer with a tree branch forced up its backside and a McDonald's bag over its head, a flock of 20 ducks strangled with cable around their necks and boiling liquid poured on a puppy. Just last week, a Shetland pony was found dead near Sunderland, its body slashed and its bottom lip, mane and genitals cut off. The list of horrific attacks goes on and on.

The RSPCA receives and investigates thousands of complaints about cruelty to animals each year. For example, it received 143,004 complaints in 2015, and 1,781 people were successfully prosecuted. Of the convictions in 2015, 50% were for cruelty offences under section 4 of the 2006 Act and 1.8% were for fighting offences under section 8. The latter acts of cruelty are some of the most extreme. For all cases, current punishments do not appear to fit the crime. During the last five years, the maximum fine imposed on anyone prosecuted by the RSPCA under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 was just £15,000, representing £2,500 for each of six offences. The courts often take the position that unless someone can repay a fine and costs incurred within a reasonable period, there is no point imposing large fines. That suggests to me that the focus should be on prison sentences.

I urge those who think that the crime of abusing defenceless animals is worth less serious attention than abusing people to look at the evidence, predominantly from the United States but also more recently from Europe, showing connections between the two. A 2001 to 2004 study by the Chicago police department

“revealed a startling propensity for offenders charged with crimes against animals to commit other violent offences toward human victims.”

Of those arrested for animal crimes, 65% had been arrested for battery against another person. Of the 36 convicted multiple murderers questioned in one study, 46% admitted committing acts of animal torture as adolescents. Of seven school shootings that took place across the United States between 1997 and 2001, all involved boys who had previously committed acts of animal cruelty.

Because abusers target the powerless, crimes against animals, spouses, children, and the elderly often go hand in hand. Children who abuse animals may be repeating a lesson learned at home. Like their parents, they are reacting to anger or frustration with violence. Their violence is directed at the only individual in the family who is more vulnerable than they are—an animal. Professor Frank Ascione of the University of Denver graduate school of social work says:

“The research is pretty clear that there are connections between animal abuse and domestic violence and child abuse.”

According to a six-year gold-standard study conducted in 11 metropolitan cities in the US, pet abuse is one of four predictors of domestic partner violence. In both

domestic violence and child abuse situations, abusers may manipulate and control their human victims through threatened or actual violence against family pets. Researchers have found that between 71% and 83% of women entering domestic violence shelters reported that their partners also abused or killed the family pet. Another study found that in families under supervision for the physical abuse of their children, pet abuse was concurrent in 88% of the families.

In the UK, a new academic study—the first of its kind in Europe—by researchers at Teesside University has also identified a link between animal abuse and domestic violence. The study of young people in eastern Europe found that violence breeds violence. Adolescent males who had experienced domestic violence either showed displaced aggression against animals or progressed to committing violence against family members. The findings point towards a worrying cycle of abuse in society if violence is not addressed or properly challenged.

I return to sentencing, and some comparisons with our devolved colleagues. In its recent review of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, the Northern Ireland Assembly increased the maximum penalty on summary conviction for the offences of causing unnecessary suffering and animal fighting to 12 months' imprisonment, a fine not exceeding £20,000, or both. The maximum prison sentence for those found guilty on indictment was increased from two years to five years. It should be noted that Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the UK that provides for more serious animal welfare offences to be tried in a Crown court. Up in Scotland, the Scottish Government have recently committed to reviewing penalties under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. If we look around the world, we can see that the maximum penalty for animal cruelty in Australia is five years and in Germany it is three years; six months here in the UK seems comparatively paltry, especially when we call ourselves a nation of animal lovers.

In addition to the examples from our colleagues in the devolved nations, there is a precedent for tougher sentencing in other UK legislation on the treatment of animals. Under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, a person can go to prison for three years if their dog injures a guide dog. In 2015, the Law Commission's review of wildlife law recommended two years' imprisonment for cruelty towards wildlife.

It should of course be noted that in 2015, all fines for animal welfare offences that were previously set at level 5 on the standard scale—including those at or above the equivalent level—were increased to unlimited fines. Nevertheless, fines are clearly not working. The fact still stands that under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, the sentence for an offence under section 4 on unnecessary suffering, section 8 on animal fighting, and section 9 on the duty of the person responsible for the animal to ensure welfare, is imprisonment for up to just six months. The lack of sentencing available to the courts severely blunts the Act as the existing jail terms are far too low to deter offenders, especially if we consider the fact that reductions can be given for early guilty pleas and the possibility of suspended rather than custodial sentences.

Such woefully inadequate sentences must be addressed if they are to be punishments that fit the cruelty inflicted on animals. My private Member's Bill, which will have its Second Reading in February, will seek to increase the

[Anna Turley]

custodial sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years, in line with the recent changes in Northern Ireland. If we are to continue declaring ourselves a nation of animal lovers, it is about time we showed it by sending out the message that we take animal cruelty seriously.

I thank the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs Home and the League Against Cruel Sports for their support for my Bill. I place on record my particular thanks to the staff at the RSPCA, who do a fantastic job dealing with some horrific cases and some situations that require real bravery. I commend them for the cases that they bring to conviction, such as that of the Frankish brothers. It is vital that we have their unique expertise to bring such cases to justice, and they deserve to see the sentencing process support their efforts.

Finally, I want to say a word about Baby the bulldog and the dog named Scamp. We will probably never know the full level of cruelty and torture these silent and defenceless animals endured. We can only begin to imagine the pain they experienced and the fear they felt. We cannot undo the suffering that man has done to them, but we can show each other that that kind of cruelty has no place in our communities, and that such depraved behaviour will face the punishment that it deserves. I am grateful for having been able to introduce this debate. I urge the Minister to put right the injustice by supporting my Bill in February.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. This is an hour-long debate that finishes at 5.30 pm. The guideline limits for the Front-Bench contributions are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. There should also be three minutes for Anna Turley to wind up the debate at the end. I therefore need to call the first of the Front-Bench speakers just after five past 5 pm. There are four people standing and 20 minutes left, so I am going to impose a five-minute time limit. That way, every Back Bencher will get to make his or her contribution. They will be led by Neil Parish.

4.45 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Thank you very much for dividing up the time; I shall try to ensure that I keep my speech below five minutes.

I thank the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) not only for introducing her Bill but for securing this debate. Whatever political party one comes from, what is going on is just abhorrent. The major issue, on which I hope we will hear more from the Minister, is the fact that however horrendous the crime, the maximum sentence that can be awarded is six months' imprisonment. If the perpetrator pleads guilty, they automatically get two months knocked off that sentence, so they often serve around four months for the most horrendous crimes.

I agree entirely with the hon. Lady that if someone can string up a dog, cat or any other animal and beat it to death or kick it downstairs, or whatever the other horrendous things that have been happening are, it will not be too long before they can do that to a human. The Americans and others are linking things up and creating

a register of those who have committed animal welfare crimes, and that would be a good way forward for this country.

Robert Ffello: Does the hon. Gentleman think that as well as going on a register, those individuals should be reported to local social services, which should look carefully at their family environments?

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and yes, they should. Some individuals will be just completely and utterly cruel and base; perhaps others will be challenged in some way and so not necessarily able to understand all they are doing. It is a combination of all those things. There needs to be a link with social services, but we also need to send a message not only to those who are blatantly cruel but to those taking part in dog fights and keeping dogs for that purpose. There is a criminal element out there. Sometimes, making money from inflicting animal cruelty can be an easy way of making some sort of a horrible living.

We are talking about sentient beings. Animals feel pain. Many of us present will have animals of our own. At home we have both a dog and a cat, and I have had many other animals in my time as a farmer. When someone has an animal, they are its protector. Animals cannot protect themselves, so they are very much in our care. They give us much love, and then what do we do? Individuals treat them so dreadfully and they cannot protect themselves. It is just absolutely horrendous. We need to ensure that we send the right message to everyone out there that if they are going to abuse an animal and beat it to death, they will get a sentence of at least five years, if not longer. That would ensure that we at least send out the message that animal abuse is absolutely wrong and that perpetrators will go to prison, and it would prevent others from going down the same route.

I do not wish to say anything further because there are others who wish to speak, but I ask the Minister to please deal with this problem seriously, as they have done in Northern Ireland. Let us be clear and put up the sentences massively.

I pay tribute to the RSPCA, Battersea dogs home, the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross and many other charities that do some marvellous work in trying to make sure that our animals are protected and looked after properly.

4.49 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Nine hundred years before Christ, the prophet Solomon wrote the instructive and very apt words:

"A righteous man regards the life of his beast."

Unfortunately, today we have a situation where we see that regard for a beast has been replaced by brutal and depraved wickedness against animals. Indeed, the startling report that the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) has brought before us by stops us in our tracks, by showing us how wicked some people can be.

In Northern Ireland, since 2012 4,000 cases of animal cruelty have been reported and investigated by the authorities every year. Think of that—since 2012, there have been 16,000 incidences of cruelty against animals in Northern Ireland. However, less than 120 cases are brought before the courts annually. In a week when it is fashionable to criticise the judiciary, and I will criticise the judiciary in this regard, we see that we have a record

of lenient sentencing, even in the trailblazing Northern Ireland; I am glad that the hon. Member talked about Northern Ireland in that way.

In fact, between 2012 and 2014, there were 114 convictions for animal cruelty in Northern Ireland, but only 15 of them resulted in custodial sentences. They were for pretty horrible cases. I do not want to go into the details, but in one instance a judge said in his summing up that he had seen

“one of the vilest examples of premeditated abuse”

of animals ever produced in Northern Ireland, when a cat was torn to pieces by fighting dogs. What sentence did that judge decide to hand down in that case in Northern Ireland? Wait for it—it was a sentence of six months, suspended. That was utterly pathetic. In my constituency, a 46-year-old man allowed his dog to starve to death and he received a non-custodial sentence and a stunning fine of £274.

Unfortunately, a message has been sent out by the judiciary that people can get away with perverse wickedness against animals, and that has got to stop. So what have we got to do? I hope that the Minister looks at the example of Northern Ireland and introduces four or five key measures. I agree that a register must be put in place. We have the perverse situation where I could be convicted today of abusing or hurting an animal and so long as it is not widely reported, the very next day I can go to a pet shop or a dog dealer and procure another animal to torture and to be inhumane towards. That is wrong; only a register will start to resolve that particular issue.

Secondly, we need to ensure that the punishment fits the crime. I welcome the fact that in Northern Ireland we have increased the fines and sentences that can be imposed, but those matters have not yet been tested and I wait eagerly for the first test in a court of law.

We have the perverse situation whereby if I am careless with my animal and it fouls on a pavement I can be given an £80 fine, but there are examples of £200 fines for people who have starved their animals to death. That is wrong; it must change, and change dramatically. We need a minimum fines system, whereby any act of animal cruelty will receive a minimum fine of £1,000. That system should be introduced, as well as a register.

We also need the ability to review sentences. The hon. Member for Redcar made it clear that the case she referred to had gone to a magistrates court. If she had wanted that sentence to be reviewed, of course she would have been told by the Director of Public Prosecution and the Attorney General that their hands were tied. We need to have a system whereby such cases can be reviewed. Actually, a call for that system to be introduced in Northern Ireland was made just yesterday. The Agriculture Minister has recommended that that change in the law should be made and I eagerly anticipate its being made; I hope that it is made quickly.

Maximum sentences in England should also be increased, in line with Northern Ireland. It is very unusual for me to say that; it is normally the other way round. It is important that the sentencing issue is addressed.

There are some good examples of work being done, but there are many other openings for people to abuse animals. For example, if someone can go on to Gumtree and buy a pet, that is wrong. That opens the way for cruelty and such gaps in the law must be addressed.

I know that the Minister is eager to do something about this issue; I know that he is willing to do it; and I hope that he will pick up on some of the examples that have been given today. I also hope that we can see a better, fairer place, where we have a righteous regard for our beasts.

4.54 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this very important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing it.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government continue to legislate to improve animal welfare, and a consultation on the offences and penalties under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 will be held in due course. Of course, under devolution animal welfare is the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament and the laws that govern it in Scotland are different from those in England and Wales. Today, however—unusually—we have a consensus on an issue, because we all agree that it is completely unacceptable to cause an animal unnecessary suffering.

The Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is unique among animal welfare charities in the United Kingdom, because it is a reporting agency to the Crown Office, which means that its investigators are authorised to enforce the 2006 Act. In 2015, the SSPCA helpline received 241,403 calls, and its inspectors and animal rescue officers attended a record 80,944 incidents.

We all know that the popularity of programmes such as “Animal SOS”, “The Dog Rescuers”, “Pet Rescue”, “Animal 999” and “Animal Frontline” has raised public awareness of the animal cruelty and neglect that is taking place right in the heart of our own communities. However, we must continue to be mindful of the crime of animal cruelty. It is a crime—a very serious crime—that takes place right in our neighbourhoods.

Where we see neglect, we must continue to ensure that laws protect animals from such treatment and that those laws are fit for purpose. Sadly, there are too many cases, as reported by the SSPCA, of people who simply do not know how to look after their pet properly. It seems that there are large numbers of well intentioned people who welcome pets into their homes but are simply unequal to the task of giving them the care that they need. That tells us that a job of public information and education needs to be undertaken, so that potential pet owners are well acquainted with the full responsibility that having a pet would place on their shoulders.

However, where we find wilful cruelty—and unfortunately we do find it—we must take it extremely seriously. As we have heard today, we know that there is a connection between the wilful mistreatment of animals and violence against and mistreatment of fellow citizens, including domestic violence. That connection, as well as the need to protect animals, should give us pause for thought.

I was ashamed and disturbed to learn that the SSPCA has reported cases of “unimaginable cruelty”, and I honestly do not believe that a life ban from owning a pet is sufficient censure for such behaviour towards a helpless animal. We have plenty of evidence that such cruelty is a precursor to, and has a clear link with, violence against other people. Fines and community service orders do not provide enough of a punishment or a sufficient deterrent against such behaviour. Cases such as deliberately

[Patricia Gibson]

starving an animal to death, or knowingly locking an animal in the boot of a car in soaring temperatures in the full knowledge and understanding that it will not survive such treatment, must surely be eligible for some custodial sentence.

When it comes to preventing cruelty to animals, we must all be vigilant. We are the ears and eyes of the agencies that seek to prevent cruelty to animals, and to challenge it where it takes place. We all have a responsibility to report cruelty or neglect wherever we find it. Courts across the United Kingdom must send out a clear signal that wilful cruelty to animals will not be tolerated and will be taken extremely seriously. There should be harsher custodial sentences, and greater penalties should be imposed on those who are found guilty of wilful cruelty than currently seems to be the case.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and our courts need to reflect that. I am interested to hear what Minister will have to say about harsher penalties being set for some of the worst examples of wilful cruelty to pets.

4.59 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I apologise for my ever so slightly late arrival, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing it. She is otherwise known nowadays as Detective Turley—but that is another matter.

I pay tribute to the animal welfare charities that have worked tirelessly to raise the profile of the seriousness of animal cruelty in this country: Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, Cats Protection—not often mentioned in this context—and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I think that every Member who has spoken has outlined articulately that it is cruel and unacceptable in a civilised society that people should be able to get away with behaviour such as we are discussing. The briefing prepared by Battersea Dogs and Cats Home for the debate points out that a 2005 report observed that

“between 71% and 83% of women entering domestic violence shelters reported that their partners also abused or killed the family pet.”

I do not think that will surprise anyone in the room, and it further illustrates some of the points that have been made.

The change in the law demanded by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar is long overdue. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 made a provision for increased sentencing, but it has never been implemented. We need to see it implemented now, and at the level recommended by hon. Members today—with a five-year maximum sentence for animal cruelty of the severest kind. That would send out a message that animal cruelty will not be tolerated in our society.

We like to think of ourselves as a country that is at the forefront of best practice when it comes to animal welfare—that we love our animals—but I am ashamed to say that we are way behind. Let us get in line with practice in Northern Ireland. The powerful contribution made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) was really helpful because it illustrated another point: not only must we increase sentencing to the

maximum available in Northern Ireland, but we need to remember that cultural change is required in our courts. The courts need to understand that implementation of the harsher sentencing guidelines will be required to make the change effective.

Robert Flello: Does my hon. Friend also think that it is important to send out a message about police animals? Police dogs are often attacked and sentencing is not appropriate, nor even is the definition of the offence. That needs to be looked at as well.

Angela Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and with others who have pointed out that a register of abusers would be an effective way forward. All those things are important.

I want to finish with a comment about the RSPCA. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar described brilliantly the work that the charity does, pointing to the statistics relating to its investigative work and its work to bring abusers to court and secure convictions. The RSPCA is the oldest animal welfare charity in the country, and no other charity does what it does. It is rooted in our history of tackling animal welfare abuse. It has a very good reputation and it has the expertise and experience not just to deliver the investigative work that we need to enforce the Animal Welfare Act effectively but the carry out the prosecuting aspects of its work. We need to think carefully, therefore, about the RSPCA's role. In general, we need to support the charity and its continued work in bringing animal abusers to justice. Those who would attack the RSPCA's role need to think carefully about the impact of what they are arguing for.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the speeches by the Front-Bench spokespersons. The guidelines are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on bringing the debate before the House. I recognise her strong interest in the matter: I understand that she queued for many hours to table her Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill. I thank all hon. Members for their powerful contributions so far.

This subject should be revisited on a regular basis, not least, as hon. Members have said, because of the strong public interest it attracts. We have heard described today some absolutely abhorrent crimes. As the hon. Member for Redcar explained, the principal legislation in England and Wales is the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The equivalent legislation in Scotland is the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, which contains similar offences and provides for sentences of up to 12 months' imprisonment or a £20,000 fine.

I essentially want to say two things. First, I remain sympathetic to the case for stronger sentences. It is a strong case, particularly for the worst of the incidents we have heard about, and I certainly do not see any reason why the provision for 12-month sentences has not yet been implemented in England and Wales. Secondly,

it is important to remember that sentencing is only one small part of the action required to reduce the number of animal cruelty crimes across the UK.

I shall take those points in turn. As regards maximum sentencing, we have heard a lot of horrendous detail about some crimes that have committed in recent months, but we also need to keep in mind, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, that many of the animal cruelty cases that make it to the courts and into the newspapers seem to arise out of lack of awareness, transient personal problems, ignorance and even mental health issues. Without in any way playing down the suffering caused to the animals involved, it is important to keep that type of case in mind when considering sentencing options.

I would be slow to say that an increased maximum penalty across the board is the correct way forward, but one alternative worth considering is to separate out offences of deliberate cruelty from those that are, in essence, acts of negligence. The legislation in England and Wales, and in Scotland, seems to incorporate both kinds of act into the same offence, with the same maximum sentence. If deliberate infliction of suffering was made a separate offence, I do not see how anyone could oppose an increased maximum sentence, so that those engaged in torturing animals or in organised fighting, for example, could face a more severe punishment that reflected the public's disapproval. They could receive a sentence that matched the crime. So in short, some increase in sentencing powers is a good idea.

My second point is that we should not see maximum sentencing as any sort of silver bullet, because there are other things we need to look at. For a start, there is not much point in increasing maximum sentences if courts are not using the full range of their current powers. That is why it is certainly welcome that the Sentencing Council for England and Wales has proposed new guidelines with the intention of ensuring that the most serious cases attract custodial sentences of an appropriate length. Equally, I welcomed the evidence given recently by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee here at Westminster. The witness said:

"The Scottish court system in the last four or five years has improved for intentional acts against animals. We are getting far more bans now. We are finally seeing some people being jailed".

But moving away from sentencing altogether, the same witness said that

"for a lot of the people we deal with, it is neglect and ignorance, so that is why we keep banging the education drum. We have the biggest outreach programme for children in Scotland: 340,000 children spoken to last year. They are the owners next year and in the next 10 years, so we can prevent some of them coming into it".

So let us also keep in mind the role that education can play in preventing acts of animal cruelty. The SSPCA programme involves education officers, animal rescue officers and inspectors speaking to primary school children between the ages of eight and 11. Recent research by the University of Edinburgh has highlighted the hugely beneficial impact that such programmes can have, including increasing knowledge, creating positive attitudes and decreasing children's tolerance of animal cruelty. Since the scheme was first implemented in 2010, the SSPCA has seen a 382% increase in the number of calls from children alerting the charity to cases of animals in need of help or cases of neglect.

That reminds us also of the importance of increasing public awareness, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned, and ensuring that everyone knows what to do if they suspect an offence and that those who no longer feel up to the task of looking after an animal know where to seek appropriate assistance. I also agree that buying a pet on Gumtree is utterly unacceptable.

There is a case for tougher sentences in the worst cases, but I would be reluctant to look at the whole range of offences on the same terms. We must always remember the other things we need to get on with, so that rather than dealing with offences after they have occurred we do what we can to prevent them from happening in the first place.

5.9 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to respond to today's very important debate, and I am profoundly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing it. I commend the work she is doing on animal welfare, particularly with the private Member's Bill she is sponsoring.

Alongside other Members on this side of the House, I fully support the campaign. Given the cases of animal cruelty in the Minister's East Surrey constituency, I hope he will be equally supportive. As my hon. Friends know, I am a big softie when it comes to animals. I cried when I watched "Bambi". When the television adverts about animal cruelty come on, I swap channels. I am the proud granny and sitter of our baby, Reg the Staffie, who is my daughter Angharad's dog. He is 11 and has fought off cancer four times. He is a gentle soul who is brighter than some people I know. He is completely loyal. One day I took him to the sand dunes for a walk and a woman came along with four Rottweilers off their leads, and they attacked Reg. He was being savaged by four of the biggest dogs I had ever seen. Not thinking about my own safety, I dived in, because that is what we do when we love our dogs. The woman seemed quite unconcerned when she tried to call them off, and therein lies the problem—responsible ownership. The problem is with people, not animals. Pets give us unconditional love, and owners should return that love and not treat animals in the way that some have, as Members have told us today. Reg, I am pleased to say, is okay.

People who are cruel to animals are cowards, bullies and thugs and include those who have made money from dog farming or puppy farms. Some own a dangerous dog to enhance their hard image. The majority of people treat animals well, but we are here today to talk about those who do not. It is not a new problem—it is a long-term societal issue.

The stories that have been mentioned today have been devastating—please forgive me, but in the short time I have, I will not mention Members individually—but it is not the first time these stories have been told and it is not the first time the issue has been debated in this House. In 2013, the House debated RSPCA prosecutions. In October 2013, there was a debate on sentencing tariffs. In July 2015, we debated sentencing for cruelty to domestic pets. In March this year, we debated sentencing for dog theft. In June this year, we debated dog fighting. Today, we debate animal cruelty sentencing.

[Christina Rees]

In a report published on 21 September 2016 by the Justice Committee, it stated:

“Specifically the intention is to ensure that the most serious cases do attract custodial sentences and that the length of such sentences is appropriate, while also providing more nuanced factors for judging the seriousness of an offence.”

That report goes on to conclude:

“We agree with the Sentencing Council’s proposals regarding animal cruelty offences and welcome the seriousness attached to the gravest of cases for such offences.”

Despite that, the Government are yet to make any significant changes. The Minister and his colleagues have simply sat on their hands and provided empty excuses for their complacency. Will the Minister please commit to changing the law for the vulnerable animals that have been exploited and abused, so that their attackers will face justice that reflects the true gravity of their actions?

I look forward to the Minister answering the questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar and other Members. Will he also consider unduly lenient sentencing and uplifting sentences? Will he monitor, reassess and review sentences? Does he think that prosecutors should undergo special training for cruelty against animal cases? Will he consider making offences triable either way or making it so that the most serious go to the Crown court? I am sure all hon. Members will agree that this debate will send out a strong and powerful message that animal cruelty must stop and that sentences must represent the seriousness of these crimes.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your efficient chairing of proceedings today. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing today’s debate on animal cruelty and the skilful way in which she is handling her private Member’s Bill. She is airing the issues here in advance of the Bill being brought before the House. As the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), rightly put it, this issue should go beyond party politics. I understand the strength of feeling about offences against animals and why people feel anger towards those who commit such crimes.

So far as the Government are concerned, this matter sits between the Ministry of Justice and DEFRA. I assure the hon. Member for Redcar that the Government take animal welfare seriously. I know that the topic is of widespread concern to many. I also appreciate the concerns about those who carry out appalling acts of cruelty on defenceless animals and the wider implications of the links between animal and human abuse. The research carried out by Teesside University has been mentioned, and I assure Members that we will look at it closely.

Northern Ireland and Scotland have also been mentioned in the debate. The question was asked why, if Northern Ireland can increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty to five years, England and Wales cannot. Penalties are devolved to Northern Ireland. Each jurisdiction decides the appropriate maximum sentence for each offence, but we will look at the experience of Northern

Ireland and Scotland and the impact the changes have specifically on offending behaviour. That is what we want to look at. We want to ensure that increasing the maximum sentence has an impact on offending behaviour.

Neil Parish: While it may be DEFRA that deals with animal welfare, it is the justice system that deals with sentencing. It is up to our courts to decide the length of sentence, but a maximum sentence of only six months gives the court very little flexibility. If we increased that maximum sentence dramatically, the courts would have much more flexibility in dealing with cases.

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will come on to the six-month point in a second, but on the five-year point, a maximum five-year sentence would be the equivalent of a sentence for gross bodily harm of a human being. Those are serious offences, and we do not have to stand back. The penalties need to work across the board. In other words, if we increase the penalty to five years in line with GBH, we will have to look at sentencing across the board. That is something the Government need to do to ensure consistency in the criminal law, which is important. As far as Scotland is concerned, again this is a devolved matter.

As is often said, however, prevention is better than cure. To that end, some animal welfare organisations help educate youngsters in animal welfare. I should mention the role of the RSPCA, as other Members have. It does great work in schools. Blue Cross, too, works in schools with children to help them become informed, responsible and active citizens. It is interesting to note from my research for the debate that the RSPCA has been campaigning for and enforcing animal welfare legislation for nearly 200 years. In that time the organisation has built huge expertise in animal welfare. It of course not only prosecutes people, but provides advice to owners about how to look after their animals properly. The Government recognise that tremendous effort, and it is to the credit of the RSPCA that it has improved the lives of many animals.

I am, however, aware of horrible cases, some of which have been mentioned today, specifically the one involving the Frankish brothers and their pet bulldog. I hope that Members appreciate that I am unable to respond specifically on the details of that case, but many people consider the penalty to have been too lenient. On that point, I would pick up on another issue that was raised: how we deal with unduly lenient sentencing. The Attorney General refers some sentences he considers unduly lenient to the Court of Appeal to reconsider. Those are summary-only offences and so animal cruelty is not currently within that scheme. That includes assault on humans and common assault, which are also not within the scheme. The Government are considering the scope of the scheme and how to implement our 2015 Conservative manifesto commitment to expand it.

On sentencing, we should remember that it is a matter for our independent courts. The court is best placed to decide on the appropriate penalty for an offence because it is in possession of the full facts of the case, many of which might not be reported in the newspapers. When deciding what sentence to impose within the maximum limits available, the courts are required to take account of all the circumstances of an offender, as well as mitigating and aggravating factors.

On maximum penalties, it is worth stressing that while sentencing is a matter for the courts, setting the framework that the courts work within is a matter for Parliament, as we all know as legislators. The maximum sentence of six months' imprisonment for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal was set by Parliament to cover the most serious imaginable behaviours for that specific offence. It was only last year that the maximum fine for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal was raised from £20,000 to an unlimited fine, although I note the point made by the hon. Member for Redcar that in imposing that fine, the courts often means-test it to make sure that it is payable. I am aware of that nuance.

Ian Paisley: Is the Minister saying that as a rule of thumb a sentence against animal cruelty must be lower than a sentence imposed for human cruelty?

Mr Gyimah: Not at all. On the contrary, what I was saying is that any change in sentencing in one part of the law has to be made consistent across the entire criminal justice system. If there were a sentence of five years, we would need to look at other offences of a similar nature that have a five-year sentence to make sure that there is consistency. My point is about consistency in criminal law rather than about distinguishing between one form of cruelty and another.

The Government recognise that maximum penalties should be set to allow the courts to respond appropriately to the full range of cases that they are likely to face—my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton made that point. It is worth looking at some data. In 2015, 614 people were sentenced for the offence of causing, permitting or failing to prevent unnecessary suffering to an animal. The average custodial sentence was nearly three and a half months. If judges are not going up to the maximum six months, there is a question whether the issue is with the maximum sentence length or the courts are finding the current sentencing powers inadequate or restrictive in dealing with those cases. We have to look at that.

The maximum penalty for animal cruelty offences is under review. I assure the hon. Member for Redcar that we are also looking at that very closely in the context of broader criminal law. We do not want to create anomalies with other criminal offences. It is worth bearing in mind that the offence of common assault also has a maximum penalty of six months. In other words, if we were going to make a change here, we would have to look at the area of common assault as well.

It would be contrary to our system of justice simply to impose the maximum penalty, regardless of the circumstances, for any offence. Making all sentences the same would remove the courts' ability to single out and highlight the more serious cases with more serious sentences. In short, prescribing sentences in that way could lead to injustices that we would want to avoid.

The sentencing guidelines for animal cruelty offences are issued by the independent Sentencing Council, as the House is aware. The council has recently consulted on revised guidelines for sentencing in the magistrates courts, which includes animal cruelty offences. The revised guidelines are designed to highlight the aggravating factors that are particular to those offences. That will assist magistrates in identifying the most serious cases

that will in turn deserve longer sentences. Throughout the development of the guidelines, the council worked closely with the RSPCA and is now reviewing consultation responses and developing definitive new guidelines, which it intends to implement in May next year.

A point was made about a register for animal abusers, to prevent them from obtaining animals in the first place. DEFRA has no plans to introduce an animal abusers register. I do not consider it appropriate or necessarily proportionate, because we would then expect pet vendors and animal rehoming centres to check the details of all prospective animal owners. That would be quite an onerous approach.

Angela Smith: I think that issue is worthy of further investigation. The Minister may find that animal welfare charities and rehoming centres would welcome such an initiative and would not find it an unnecessary burden.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. I have tried to stress that the Government are in listening mode on a number of proposals, but that is why there is not a register—we see that it is actually quite difficult in practice to check everyone who wants to rehome an animal. The point that was made about going on Gumtree and buying a pet is relevant here, and we will look at that as well.

Robert Flello: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I want to allow Anna Turley time to sum up the debate. The Minister can take the intervention if he wants, but we are running out of time.

Mr Gyimah: I will bring my comments to a swift conclusion. I welcome this important debate and appreciate that there are concerns about those who carry out appalling acts of cruelty on defenceless animals. The Ministry of Justice is working with DEFRA with respect to animal cruelty offences, including animal fighting. As I have said, we will keep the maximum penalties for those offences under review. That includes monitoring sentencing trends, looking at the impact on offending behaviour in Northern Ireland and Scotland and identifying whether any evidence emerges that the courts may be finding their sentencing powers inadequate.

Finally, although I have focused on the justice issues, I understand that the hon. Member for Redcar will be meeting Lord Gardiner, the DEFRA Minister responsible for animal welfare. I hope that reinforces the fact that both the Ministry of Justice and DEFRA are addressing the issue of animal cruelty with the seriousness it deserves.

5.27 pm

Anna Turley: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for that response, which was thoughtful and considered. We appreciate the tone and the openness with which he is engaging with us, and the fact that he is keen to look forward. I hope that as we build towards the Bill we can continue to have that conversation, both with the Minister and with DEFRA. I appreciate that.

I was glad that the Minister referred to the Teesside University research, which is groundbreaking and symbolic in making the link between animal cruelty and abuse of human beings. It should be considered in the context of

[Anna Turley]

the Minister's point about relevance and severity within sentencing more broadly. Although I take his point about consistency and parity, it is important to acknowledge that there are already many inconsistencies in sentencing in the criminal justice system. There is already no parity, so, for me, that cannot be a reason to strike out the idea of raising a sentence.

I appreciated the Minister's point about looking at whether animal cruelty sentences can be referred to the Court of Appeal, if we feel that they are not sufficiently strong. That is really important and deserves more exploration.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate today. We have seen a real strength of feeling and a sense of support around sentencing. The issue of a register of offenders, raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello), is important and warrants more investigation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone

and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, not least because of the link to social services. We are talking not just about people who might be put on a register, but people who have undertaken serious offences. I do not think it is considerably onerous for organisations to undertake a quick online check, as they might already do for a criminal record or something of that nature.

A number of hon. Members raised points about education and awareness. They were absolutely right. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), in a very moving speech, talked about culture change within the judiciary and society, and about taking offences seriously so that if we do raise the sentencing limit, they are dealt with with due diligence. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) is absolutely right about broader awareness, and I pay tribute again to charities that do that work.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 8 November 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service Compensation Scheme

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): Today I have laid an amended civil service compensation scheme before Parliament along with a report setting out the process by which we have sought to try to reach agreement with relevant trade unions.

The terms outlined in the civil service compensation scheme 2016 will come into effect from tomorrow, 9 November.

This amended scheme is in line with the Government's response to the consultation on the civil service compensation scheme that was published on 26 September and the offer made to trade unions on the same day.

The Government have reformed the civil service compensation scheme to align with wider compensation reforms planned across the public sector, giving the civil service an effective, cost-efficient system to help civil servants leave when exits are needed. Our overarching aim will always be to provide the best possible service for the public and to create a civil service that treats our workforce with fairness and respect.

I believe that these reforms represent a strong negotiated settlement. It has been reached with trade unions that have engaged constructively in discussions. As a consequence we have an agreement that provides a firm foundation for the management of the civil service and its people for a generation. This administration will not seek to deviate from this agreement.

With this reform concluded, I want to work with trade unions on the aspirations we both have to make the civil service an even better place to work.

[HCWS240]

TREASURY

ECOFIN: November 2016

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 8 November 2016. EU Finance Ministers are due to discuss the following items:

Ministerial dialogue with the European Free Trade Association

ECOFIN will be preceded by a meeting of EU and EFTA Finance Ministers at which they will discuss issues of investment and economic growth.

Early morning briefing

Ministers will be briefed on outcomes of the 7 November meeting of the Eurogroup and the Commission will present an update on the current economic situation.

Commissioner Margrethe Vestager has been invited to the session to discuss state aid and taxation. Vestager has responsibility for enforcing competition rules in the areas of antitrust, cartels, mergers and state aid.

Building a fair, competitive and stable corporate tax system for the EU

Proposals on: a common corporate tax base; a common consolidated corporate tax base; double taxation dispute resolution mechanisms in the EU; and hybrid mismatches with third countries were published on 25 October 2016. The Commission will give a presentation on its proposals which will be followed by an exchange of views.

Anti-money laundering directive

The presidency will present on the current state of play on the fourth anti-money laundering directive. That will be followed by a ministerial discussion on this topic.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Statistics

Ministers will be briefed on EU statistics including the 2016 statistical package, the progress made on strengthening co-operation with Eurostat, and the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board report on the implementation of the European statistics code of practice.

Council conclusions will be presented for endorsement by Ministers.

European Court of Auditors' annual report on the implementation of the 2015 budget

The European Court of Auditors will give a presentation on their annual report on the implementation of the 2015 budget.

Implementation of the banking union

Ministers are to discuss the current state of play on the implementation of the banking union.

Packaged retail and insurance-based investment products (PRIIPs) regulation

The Commission will provide an update on the current state of play in relation to the entry into force of the PRIIPs regulation.

Criteria and process leading to the establishment of the EU list of non-cooperative jurisdictions for tax purposes

Ministers will discuss draft Council conclusions on the criteria and process leading to the establishment of the EU list of non-co-operative jurisdictions for tax purposes.

[HCWS243]

Panama Papers Taskforce

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In his statement to the House on 11 April 2016, the former Prime Minister David Cameron announced the creation of a cross-agency taskforce to analyse all the information that had been made available from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)'s Panama papers data leak. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I now wish to update the House on the work of the taskforce.

In its short existence, the taskforce has added greatly to the UK's understanding of the evermore complex and contrived structures that are being developed to

mask offshore tax evasion and economic crime. This intelligence will ensure that the UK remains uniquely placed to contribute to the international effort to uncover, and take action, on wrongdoing, regardless of how deeply hidden the arrangements are, as well as identify those jurisdictions where regulatory oversight requires improvement.

We can today report that the taskforce has:

opened civil and criminal investigations into 22 individuals for suspected tax evasion

led the international acquisition of high-quality, significant and credible data on offshore activity in Panama—ensuring the important work of the taskforce was not delayed by the ICIJ's refusal to release all of the information that it holds to any tax authority or law enforcement agency

identified a number of leads relevant to a major insider-trading operation led by the Financial Conduct Authority and supported by the National Crime Agency

identified nine potential professional enablers of economic crime—all of whom have links with known criminals

placed 43 high net worth individuals under special review while their links to Panama are further investigated

identified two new UK properties and a number of companies relevant to a National Crime Agency financial sanctions enquiry

established links to eight active Serious Fraud Office investigations

identified 26 offshore companies whose beneficial ownership of UK property was previously concealed, and whose financial activity has been identified to the National Crime Agency as potentially suspicious

contacted 64 firms to determine their links with Mossack Fonseca to establish potential further avenues for investigation by the taskforce

seen individuals coming forward to settle their affairs in advance of taskforce partners taking action.

The taskforce's respective partners will engage the relevant prosecuting authorities to bring any identified wrongdoing before the courts.

The Government have also invested to develop their expertise in data and intelligence exploitation. This has ensured that Departments and agencies are well placed to forensically analyse massive-scale data of this kind, which are becoming ever-more frequently available.

The taskforce has established a Joint Financial Analysis Centre (JFAC). Using the data and intelligence gathered from across the taskforce, the JFAC has developed cutting-edge software tools and techniques, ensuring the taskforce has access to the very best information from which to work.

The proactive acquisition of data, alongside the establishment of the JFAC, has enabled the taskforce to identify a number of areas for further investigation across the full range of tax and economic crime, as well as links to organised crime, which will be the focus of its work over the coming months.

Taskforce members are present in Panama, using established relationships with the Panamanian authorities, and working with diplomatic colleagues, to offer support to analyse all the available data. Taskforce members have also worked with international partners as part of the Joint International Tax Shelter Information Centre to exchange information and intelligence as part of the wider international effort.

More generally, the Government have introduced tough new powers, increased penalties and game-changing measures to tackle offshore and onshore tax evasion. In the summer 2015 Budget, the Government gave HMRC

an additional £800 million to invest in compliance and tax evasion work. This is expected to recover £7.2 billion in tax by the end of 2020-21. This includes tripling the number of criminal investigations that it undertakes into serious and complex tax crime, focusing particularly on wealthy individuals and companies. The aim is to increase prosecutions in this area to 100 a year, by the end of this Parliament.

The Government have also been pivotal in increasing global financial transparency in more than 100 countries, including British overseas territories and crown dependencies, by automatically sharing offshore account data. This additional data will help identify and pursue the tiny minority of tax evaders still hiding their money offshore.

The Government aim to make the UK a more hostile place for those seeking to move, hide or use the proceeds of crime or corruption. In October 2015, the Government published the national risk assessment for money laundering and terrorist financing to better understand the risks and vulnerabilities for the UK. The action plan, published in April 2016, and the Criminal Finances Bill, introduced to Parliament in September, will significantly improve our capabilities to tackle money laundering and recover the proceeds of crime, including proceeds of corruption.

The London anti-corruption summit earlier this year brought more than 40 countries together and resulted in a commitment to more than 600 actions. Since then, the UK has made real progress on its own commitments—our public register of beneficial ownership information is now live, the first G20 country to do so; and the National Crime Agency is working to get the new international anti-corruption co-ordination centre operational by next April.

[HCWS247]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pension Scheme: Contingencies

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The armed forces pension and compensation schemes will be requesting a supplementary estimate in due course to address a shortfall in the net cash requirement amount, which originally appeared in the HM Treasury's central Government main supply estimates 2016-17, published in July 2016 (HC 967).

This shortfall in the net cash requirement has arisen due to an inadvertent publishing error by HMT in the central Government main supply estimates 2016-17.

This will be corrected at the supplementary estimate stage; however, a Contingencies Fund advance has been sought in the interim, which will be repaid once the supplementary estimate is approved by Parliament and Royal Assent of the accompanying Supply and Appropriation Bill has been obtained.

Parliamentary approval for additional cash of £438,193,000 will be sought in the supplementary estimate for the armed forces pension and compensation schemes. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £438,193,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS249]

Future Reserves 2020: Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): On 29 June 2016 I informed Parliament (HCWS49) that, following the strategic and defence security review 2015, which set out the need to strengthen the armed forces' contribution to UK resilience, the Army would in future plan to use Regular and Reserve phase 1 trained personnel in response to crises within the UK. This will increase the productivity, utility and size of force available in the event of a national emergency. To reflect this, the term "Trained Strength" will now include all personnel trained to undertake the core functions of the Army.

The public consultation on the presentation of revised Trained Strength figures for the Army Reserve has now been completed and we will commence publication of the new statistics from 1 October. I have agreed the following revised growth profile for the for the Army Reserve with the Chief of the General Staff; unchanged growth targets for the Maritime Reserve and Royal Auxiliary Air Force are included for completeness:

<i>Trained Strength</i>	<i>31 Mar 17</i>	<i>31 Mar 18</i>	<i>31 Mar 19</i>
Maritime Reserve	2,320	2,790	3,100
Army Reserve	26,700	28,600	30,100
Royal Auxiliary Air Force	1,860	1,860	1,860
Total	30,880	33,250	35,060

These targets now replace all those announced on 19 December 2013 (*Official Report*, column 124WS).

[HCWS248]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment Council: October 2016

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I attended the EU Environment Council in Luxembourg on 17 October along with the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd).

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed. *Effort share and land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF)*

Ministers undertook a full round table debate of the Commission's legislative proposals on the "non-ETS" package—the effort share regulation (ESR) and the land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) regulation, published in July 2016. The Commission strongly welcomed the EU's ratification of the Paris agreement and supported a focus on implementation via agreement to both the ESR and EU emissions trading system (ETS) directive. Ministers exchanged comments on a number of the technical aspects of the proposals. The UK noted the importance of swift agreement to the proposals in the context of implementation of the Paris agreement and, along with several other member states, supported taking the effort share negotiations in parallel with discussion on the EU ETS.

Any other business—39th International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) assembly: information from the Commission.

The presidency congratulated the role of the EU and member states in brokering the recent agreement for aviation at the ICAO general assembly in Montreal. It noted the further work to be done on implementation and underlined the relevance of the deal for the EU's aviation emissions trading system (ETS).

The Commission hailed the landmark aviation deal and underscored the global and non-discriminatory nature of the deal. On aviation ETS, the Commission said it would present a proposal in early 2017 following an analysis of the ICAO deal.

Sustainable water management—Council conclusions

Ministers supported the adoption of the Council conclusions on sustainable water management. The Commission welcomed the conclusions and explained that it would come forward with a proposal to revise the water framework directive (WFD) in 2019 which would include options for member states to maintain ambitious objectives. The UK and other member states all welcomed the call in the conclusions for the Commission to work with member states to develop options well before the 2019 WFD review to allow continued high ambition post-2027.

Convention on biological diversity (CBD)—Council conclusions

The presidency circulated a compromise text to its draft Council conclusions in order to prepare the EU position for the conferences of the parties to the convention on biological diversity, the Cartagena protocol and the Nagoya protocol, which is to be held on 4 to 17 December 2016 in Cancun, Mexico. The Council adopted these conclusions following the agreement of a revised compromise text.

AOB—CITES conference of the parties 17: information from the presidency and Commission

The Council was updated on the outcome of the 17th convention on international trade in endangered species conference of the parties in Johannesburg last month. The Commission and the UK welcomed the outcome, with the UK praising the science-based approach which was taken, such as maintaining ivory market closure through retaining annotations to the four southern African populations of elephants on appendix II.

AOB—lessons learnt from the national emissions ceiling (NEC): information from Poland, Romania and Hungary

Some member states raised concerns as to how negotiations were conducted in reaching provisional agreement on this directive. The Commission appreciated that there had been compromises to get to an agreement but welcomed the overall achievement in getting to this stage.

AOB—identification of endocrine disrupting substances: information from the Danish, Swedish and Dutch delegations

The Council took note of this AOB item. The Commission noted that a communication on this issue had been presented at June Environment Council and that the Commission was reflecting on comments before putting forward a revised text to member states.

Other AOBs:

The Council noted information from the Commission and the presidency on the 28th meeting of the parties (MOP28) to the Montreal protocol on substances that deplete the ozone layer.

The Council noted information from the presidency on the 2016 world conservation congress of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The Council noted information from the Commission on a communication from the Commission on a European strategy for low-emission mobility.

The Council noted information from member state delegations on natural resources management on the example of the Bialowieza Forest (information from Poland); and unspent funds from the new entrants reserve (NER300) funding programme (information from Cyprus).

[HCWS241]

Environment Council: November 2016

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 14-15 November in Brussels. I will represent the UK.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be a political agreement on fishing opportunities for EU vessels for certain deep-sea fish stocks, and an exchange of views on establishing a multi-annual plan for demersal stocks in the North sea.

On agriculture there will be an exchange of views on: a report from the agricultural markets taskforce; EU agricultural research and innovation; and a study on the impact of concessions in free trade agreements on agricultural products.

There are currently nine confirmed Any Other Business items tabled for this Council:

Implementation of the landing obligation, including the potential issue of fisheries choke (tabled by the United Kingdom)

Completion of action plans for EMFF specific ex-ante conditionalities (tabled by the Commission)

Outcomes from the informal EU forest directors general meeting (tabled by the presidency)

Animal welfare during transport (tabled by Sweden)

Animal welfare platform (tabled by the Netherlands)

Endocrine disruptors (tabled by the Netherlands)

Ministerial conference on lumpy skin disease (tabled by Bulgaria and Austria)

Anti-microbial resistance (tabled by Denmark)

Use of geographical indications on foods which imply customary name (tabled by Greece).

[HCWS242]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Councils: November 2016

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 November. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 15 November. The Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign

Affairs Council (Defence) will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include the Eastern Partnership and the security and defence implementation plan (SDIP). The meeting will potentially also cover a range of countries from the southern neighbourhood including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran and Yemen. It is expected that Libya will also be covered.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers are expected to exchange views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Syria

Ministers will discuss Syria. The EU has already imposed sanctions against the Assad regime to restrict their capacity to wage war on the Syrian civilian population. The October Foreign Affairs Council agreed to impose further restrictive measures and 10 new sanctions listings have since been agreed. The October European Council Conclusions declared the EU to be

“considering all available options, should the current atrocities continue.”

The EEAS has proposed a revised EU Syria strategy and the UK will press for this to recognise that a political transition in Syria is vital to our shared interests on counter-terrorism and migration, and make recovery/reconstruction project funding conditional on a political transition. It is important that any EU strategy for Syria does not delay an EU response to the current situation inside Syria. We will encourage an EU approach that focuses on supporting the UN-led process, seeking a lasting political solution to the conflict and pursuing robust action against those who stand in the way of peace.

Libya

Discussions are expected to cover the latest developments in the Libyan political process. On 31 October the UK and US co-hosted a ministerial meeting which discussed Libya's economic challenges and how to support the implementation of the Libyan political agreement. We will encourage the EU to consider how it can best continue to support the Presidency Council and Government of National Accord.

Security and Defence Implementation Plan

EU Foreign and Defence Ministers will discuss the security and defence implementation plan—part of the follow up to the European global strategy. We anticipate Council conclusions welcoming the SDIP and agreeing to take forward its proposals.

Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

The FAC(D) will discuss the European Defence Agency, including the budget for next year; the Commission's European defence action plan, where the Commission will update member states on progress; EU/NATO co-operation, where we will welcome progress so far and call for greater momentum; and ongoing CSDP operations and missions.

[HCWS246]

Ministerial Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): During the Westminster Hall debate on Iran-UK relations on 12 October my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) asked a question regarding a planned meeting with the US and Iranians on banking issues. In response to that question I answered,

“In fact, we discussed that matter in some of the forums we had with leaders who have come over from Iran. I am very much focused on going back to that committee. Unfortunately, the very people who wanted to attend felt that they might trigger the sanctions simply by being at the meeting to discuss this matter. That is the cautionary environment that we now face.”

The correct response should have been that we recognise there may be some concern from UK and European banks and businesses in engaging in Iran-related trade, particularly those which employ US persons due to fear of non-compliance with US sanctions. However, we place huge importance on tackling the issues that have been raised by the banking community, and want our banks to be able to support British companies working legally in Iran. It is in our economic interest, as well as Iran's, to support legitimate business. After years of restricted relations some challenges remain, but we are committed to working through them with international partners, Iran and the banking community.

To address these issues the Foreign Secretary hosted a banking roundtable with Secretary Kerry and the US Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) in London in May 2016. We subsequently arranged a second banking roundtable in July, to be hosted by the Foreign Secretary with OFAC and the Iranian Central Bank. Although the US participants arrived for the event, and were ready to engage, the Iranian delegation unfortunately did not attend, which led to the cancellation of the event. A meeting did, however, take place between the UK Government and OFAC officials to discuss the banking issues that we are working hard to resolve.

[HCWS2454]

HOME DEPARTMENT**Review of Terrorism Legislation**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, David Anderson, QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2014 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and Part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which was laid before the House on 17 September 2015.

I am grateful to David Anderson for his report and have carefully considered its recommendations and observations. I am today laying before the House the Government's response (Cm 9357) to his report, copies of which will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS244]

TRANSPORT**Rail Update**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I wish to update the House on the programme of rail investment in the Great Western route and the steps we are taking to ensure this improves services to passengers while getting the best deal for taxpayers.

We are continuing to invest £2.8 billion in this electrification programme to provide faster journeys, more services, and better stations while providing new or upgraded trains for passengers, with thousands more seats, and increasing capacity for freight. It will improve the experience on over 100 million rail journeys each year, stimulating economic growth from London through the Thames Valley, to the Cotswolds, West Country and to South Wales.

It is a project unprecedented in scale that is building on and around ageing assets in constant use. This is an ambitious and challenging undertaking, but real progress is being made in delivering it.

Projects completed successfully this year include the digital upgrade of large sections of signalling to improve reliability, the modification of over 100 bridges and structures, flood alleviation work, significant improvements to the resilience of the Oxford route and the introduction of the first Great Western electric services between Hayes and Harlington and Paddington, which run between some of the busiest peak services in the country.

Works on the Severn tunnel this autumn made vital preparation for electrification between London and South Wales. Other enabling works include the progression of electrification towards the west, further re-signalling in Bristol, Cardiff and Cornwall, improvements at Bristol Temple Meads station, enabling works at stations throughout the route, provision of better access for disabled passengers at selected stations, and enhancements to depots from West Ealing in the east to Penzance in the west.

We have been clear that there have been difficulties with this programme. These were set out last year in the review of Network Rail's delivery plan by Sir Peter Hendy. Following the re-planning of work that followed this review, the programme has been placed on a more efficient footing. A key part of this is the ongoing assessment of investment decisions so that passengers and taxpayers get maximum value.

As a result of this scrutiny from the Hendy review I have decided to defer four electrification projects that are part of the programme of work along the Great Western route. The four projects being deferred are:

Electrification between Oxford and Didcot Parkway

Electrification of Filton Bank (Bristol Parkway to Bristol Temple Meads)

Electrification west of Thingley Junction (Bath Spa to Bristol Temple Meads)

Electrification of Thames Valley branches (Henley and Windsor)

This is because we can bring in the benefits expected by passengers—newer trains with more capacity—without requiring costly and disruptive electrification works. This will provide between £146 million and £165 million

in this spending period, to be focused on improvements that will deliver additional benefits to passengers. We remain committed to modernising the Great Western mainline and ensuring that passenger benefits are achieved.

This decision underscores the Government's approach to wider rail investment: that passenger outcomes must be delivered in conjunction with achieving the best value from every pound spent.

[HCWS239]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 8 November 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Syria

The following is an extract from Questions to the Foreign Secretary on 18 October 2016:

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the many barriers to creating safe routes out of Syria is the Syrian Government's practice of declaring stolen passports belonging to those who oppose them. Will the Foreign Secretary, as a matter of some urgency, speak to his colleague the Home Secretary about the

position of Zaina Erhaim, an award-winning Syrian journalist who recently had her passport confiscated as she came into Heathrow?

Boris Johnson: I am aware of the case. It is very difficult, because we must, in law, confiscate passports that have been stolen, but we are doing what we can to assist the lady in question.

Letter of correction from Boris Johnson:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) during Questions to the Foreign Secretary.

The correct response should have been:

Boris Johnson: I am aware of the case. It is very difficult, because **we confiscate passports that have been stolen**, but we are doing what we can to assist the lady in question.

[Official Report, 18 October 2016, Vol. 615, c. 658.]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 8 November 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	1375	BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY—	
Business Growth: North of England.....	1388	<i>continued</i>	
Business Growth Strategy	1385	Innovation	1375
Carbon Monoxide Alarms	1383	Innovation and Research: Science	1382
Clean and Reliable Energy	1389	Manufacturing: Leaving the EU	1380
Counterfeit and Substandard Electrical Goods.....	1379	Small Businesses	1387
Hunterston B Power Station	1375	Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon Project	1383
Infrastructure Investment.....	1377	Topical Questions	1390

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 8 November 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	37WS	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE—	
Civil Service Compensation Scheme	37WS	<i>continued</i>	
DEFENCE	40WS	Ministerial Correction	45WS
Armed Forces Pension Scheme: Contingencies	40WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	45WS
Future Reserves 2020: Update.....	41WS	Review of Terrorism Legislation	45WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	41WS	TRANSPORT	46WS
Environment Council: November 2016	43WS	Rail Update.....	46WS
Environment Council: October 2016.....	41WS	TREASURY	37WS
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	43WS	ECOFIN: November 2016	37WS
Foreign Affairs Councils: November 2016	43WS	Panama Papers Taskforce	38WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Tuesday 8 November 2016

	<i>Col. No.</i>
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	3MC
Syria.....	3MC

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 8 November 2016

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1375] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy

Speaker's Statement [Col. 1397]

UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community [Col. 1398]
Answer to urgent question—(Sir Alan Duncan)

Small and Medium Sized Co-operative Development [Col. 1407]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Mr Bailey)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Backbench Business

Grammar and Faith Schools [Col. 1410]
Motion—(Lisa Nandy)—agreed to

Veterans and Service Personnel [Col. 1449]
Motion—(Stephen Doughty)—agreed to

Petitions [Col. 1487]

Capita Contract (Coventry) [Col. 1489]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

CPS and Disability Hate Crime [Col. 493WH]

Cardiff Central Station [Col. 516WH]

West Anglia Taskforce Report [Col. 525WH]

Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests [Col. 543WH]

Animal Cruelty: Sentencing [Col. 551WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 37WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 3MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
