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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 14 November 2016

HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 18 MAY 2015]

SIXTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 617

SEVENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2016-2017

House of Commons

Monday 14 November 2016

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

GCSE Pass Rate (Northamptonshire)

1. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What the GCSE A to C pass rate was in Northamptonshire in (a) 2010 and (b) 2016. [907221]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): In 2016, 53% of pupils at the end of key stage 4 in Northamptonshire achieved five or more A* to C grades, including English and maths GCSEs. This is an increase of 1.1 percentage points from 51.9% in 2010.

Mr Hollobone: Although the figures are going in the right direction, educational attainment and performance in Northamptonshire are still below the national average. Through the Secretary of State, I thank the Schools Minister for meeting a delegation of county MPs last month and for agreeing to see us again next April. What are the main things that the Secretary of State thinks local schools need to do to get the figures to much improve over the years ahead?

Justine Greening: As my hon. Friend recognises, as a Department we have worked very hard with his local authority to try steadily to increase and improve results. In addition to the work that is already under way,

we want to see stronger school improvement via schools collaborating more effectively and by ensuring that more of the UK or England-wide programmes, such as Mathematics Mastery, are properly rolled out in his local area.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): One way to improve GCSE attainment in schools in Northamptonshire is through school libraries. Is the Secretary of State as disturbed as I am by the report from the School Library Association about the collapse in the number of librarians and library facilities in our schools, and will she ask Ofsted to make school library provision one of the inspection criteria?

Justine Greening: Of course, this Government have spent much time and resources on improving reading and literacy in our schools. We have protected the core schools budget across the course of this Parliament and it is up to schools where they want to spend that money, but we certainly want to see continued improvement in literacy and reading results across England.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Getting it right early is crucial to securing future success for our young people in Northamptonshire, so will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Woodnewton learning community on winning the Marjorie Boxall quality mark award for its brilliant nurture group and send her best wishes to Ellen Wallace, the headteacher, and her brilliant team?

Justine Greening: Yes, I congratulate Ellen Wallace and the team at the school that my hon. Friend talks about. They have done a fantastic job in achieving that award, showing that strong leadership in a school alongside collaboration between schools is a key way for schools to improve.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): The Secretary of State might have us believe that results in Northamptonshire have improved under this Government, but the fact is that the pass rate peaked immediately after the end of the previous Labour Government and

has been falling since 2012. Nationally, this year saw the largest fall in GCSE results on record. If the Secretary of State had given us a breakdown of the data, it would have shown that those from disadvantaged backgrounds lost out the most. Last week, the Sutton Trust showed that people from white working class backgrounds face particular barriers at GCSE. Will the Secretary of State tell us which, if any, of the trust's recommendations she will accept?

Justine Greening: I do not think that the Government need to take any lessons from Labour, who in government presided over grade inflation and young people leaving our education system who were simply unable to read or write. I remind the hon. Lady that, according to the CBI, on Labour's watch the number of employers who were dissatisfied with school and college leavers' basic skills remained stuck at around a third. In other words, it had not shifted at all. In fact, 42% reported that they had had to provide remedial training for school and college leavers.

Work Visas

2. **Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on reintroduction of the post-study work visa. [907222]

4. **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on reintroduction of the post-study work visa. [907224]

18. **George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on reintroduction of the post-study work visa. [907238]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The UK has an excellent offer for overseas students who graduate here. They can remain in the UK to work following their studies by switching to several existing visa routes, including tier 2 skilled worker visas. Visa applications from students to study at Scottish universities have increased by 10% since 2010 and the most recent year, to June 2016, showed a continued year-on-year increase.

Stuart C. McDonald: The truth is that the options open to students for staying on after their studies are a second-rate substitute for a proper post-study work visa along the lines of what the UK once had and what our competitor countries still have. As Scotland seeks to continue sustainable levels of population growth, will the Minister listen to the coalition of universities, students and businesses and champion a proper post-study work visa for the UK?

Joseph Johnson: We have a competitive post-study work visa. That is reflected in the fact that applications to our universities continue to rise and are up 14% since 2010. We continue to look for opportunities to support high quality institutions wherever they are in the country to recruit genuine students.

Roger Mullin: When will the Government publish a detailed impact analysis of the academic and recruitment impact on Scotland's universities of abandoning post-study work visas?

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this issue many times in Bill Committee in recent weeks. I point him to my earlier answer, which is that Scottish institutions continue to see year-on-year growth in the number of overseas applicants, which has increased by 10% since 2010, and we continue to look for opportunities to support them in recruiting genuine students.

George Kerevan: The Universities Minister is known for his affinity with India. When the post-study work visas were removed in Scotland, the number of Indian students at Scottish universities fell by two thirds. Would the Minister please consider including a Scottish university in the pilot scheme for the new post-study work visa?

Joseph Johnson: Yes, it was a successful visit by the Prime Minister to India last week, during which we were able to reiterate the long-standing Government policy that there is no limit to the number of genuine international students who are welcome to come and study at our world-class universities, and no limit to the number who can switch into work with a graduate job once they have finished their studies.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The perception is that we are not encouraging students from abroad to come here to study and then to work. I am encouraged by what my hon. Friend has said about switching visas. We do not want to turn our backs on the bright young people from China, India and all over the world who would come to study and then, hopefully, work for a period. Who knows, when my hon. Friend gets to talk to his opposite number in the new Trump Administration, he might talk about encouraging young American students to come here to study and work.

Joseph Johnson: We certainly are not turning our back on genuine international students. We welcome them warmly. There are no limits on the number who can come here and no limit on the number who can switch into work after they finish their studies. We want to see more in the years ahead and we look forward to supporting our high quality institutions in recruiting successfully in countries such as the ones my hon. Friend mentioned.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister must know what is going on in the universities. They are in turmoil about the future of demand from foreign students to come here. Has he seen what the vice-chancellor of Sheffield University said about the Prime Minister's visit to India? Why are students still classed as immigrants when they come here merely to study?

Joseph Johnson: I advise hon. Members to send out a positive message about how welcoming we are in this country. When we look at the statistics, we see that international students are still coming here in record numbers. Visa applications from non-EU international students to study at British universities are up by 14% since 2010, so let us not paint a completely misleading picture of what is going on. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Sheffield, which is a Russell Group institution. Numbers are up 39% at Russell Group institutions since 2010.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Minister is somewhat missing the point, which is that we want these international students to stay afterwards so that they can provide economic levers. We watched with interest when the pilot of the post-study work visa was introduced at four institutions in England. I have written to the Minister about extending that pilot to Scotland, but I have yet to get a response. Perhaps he can tell me now when we can expect to see the pilot of the post-study work visa extended to Scotland.

Joseph Johnson: The Home Office is conducting a successful pilot. It is under way with four institutions—Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College London and Bath. This is a Home Office responsibility and I encourage the hon. Lady to direct her questions there.

Carol Monaghan: The Home Secretary told the Conservative party conference that a consultation would look

“at whether our student immigration rules should be tailored to the quality of the course and the quality of the educational institution”.

Edinburgh University is currently ranked 27th in the *Times Higher Education* world rankings and Glasgow 88th, both significantly higher than Bath, which, although 200 places lower, was included in the pilot. Perhaps the Minister can explain to the Scottish higher education sector why it has been deliberately snubbed.

Joseph Johnson: The Home Secretary has announced that there will be a consultation that will look into non-EU work and study immigration routes. This will include consideration of what more we can do to strengthen the system so that institutions that stick to the rules can do more to attract the best talent.

Nursery Schools/Children's Centres

3. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the potential effect of planned changes to the early years funding formula on the financial viability of maintained nursery schools and children's centres. [907223]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): Maintained nursery schools are a small but very important part of the childcare market, and they do have costs that other providers do not, which is why we are providing £55 million a year in supplementary funding while we consult on how to ensure their future sustainability. The way in which we fund children's centres gives local authorities the freedom to decide what services are appropriate to meet local need.

Helen Hayes: Some 99% of maintained nursery schools are rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, and 65% of them are in the 30 most deprived areas of the country, including in my constituency. Yet, across the early years sector, experts are warning that proposed changes to the funding formula will place many of these nurseries at risk of closure after the two years of supplementary funding run out. Will the Minister commit to a sustainable level of funding to enable maintained nurseries to continue their important work of providing the best possible start in life and addressing disadvantage?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to point out that maintained nursery schools provide some good and outstanding care in the vast majority of their settings and in some of the most deprived parts of the country. That is why we have said that we are going to protect their funding for at least the next two years. We will say more about that funding shortly when we respond to the early years national funding formula consultation.

20. [907240] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Yesterday's British Chambers of Commerce survey concluded that childcare should be considered part of our national infrastructure for keeping people in work. Nursery schools provide that service in some of our most deprived areas, while promoting social mobility, so why on earth are the Government stripping their resources away at this critical time? In two years' time, we will still face the same challenges in terms of social mobility and education, and we will need nursery schools to be properly funded.

Caroline Dinenage: I challenge all the things the hon. Lady said. We are not stripping funding from nursery schools; the supplementary funding of £55 million a year is part of the record investment in childcare of £6 billion a year by 2020. That is more than any Government have ever spent.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): With respect, I think the Minister is missing the point. This is not simply a question of childcare; it is a question of quality early education, and that is about narrowing the gap between the most disadvantaged and the rest. Could she go further and tell the House what maintained nursery schools, which employ teachers and other staff who want to carry on working for them, will do after this two-year period? It is no good for schools to know that they have security for two years—they need more than that.

Caroline Dinenage: I would say that we have made 6 billion points about how important we regard the sector to be. The hon. Lady is right that it does need to know about its future, but it does not make sense to make decisions about the future funding of maintained nursery schools before we have consulted on what that future should be. We will be consulting on that future, and we will make an announcement shortly.

Nursery Schools

5. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What long-term funding plans her Department has for maintained nursery schools. [907225]

17. **Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What progress her Department has made on its planned consultation on the future of maintained nursery schools after the two-year supplementary funding arrangement. [907237]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to link Question 5 with Question 15. Maintained nursery schools make a very important contribution to social mobility. We want

them to be sustainable in the long term. We have already committed £55 million a year of supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools for at least the next two years, and we will shortly be consulting them on how to do this further.

Mr Speaker: Forgive me, but I think the grouping is with Question 17 rather than Question 15—not that I wish to be pedantic; I just wish to be precise. *[Interruption.]* I think I have the advantage of being correct in this case, incredible though the hon. Lady may judge that to be.

Andrew Stephenson: I met Jan Holmes, the headteacher of Walton Lane Nursery, and many other Pendle nursery headteachers recently. Further to many of the points that have already been made, will my hon. Friend commit to extending the funding for maintained nursery schools beyond the two years indicated in the consultation, as nursery schools really do make a difference to some of the poorest children in my constituency?

Caroline Dinagen: Mr Speaker, I would never, ever accuse you of being wrong about anything. My hon. Friend is also right: maintained nursery schools play a vital role in tackling disadvantage. As I said, the £55 million commitment is for at least two years. We will say more about the funding of maintained nursery schools shortly, when we respond to our consultation on the early years national funding formula.

Heidi Allen: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for preserving my Question 17. I am so pleased to hear that the Minister understands the real difference that local authority-funded nursery schools provide, and that a plan to fund them sustainably beyond two years is imminent. May I add my calls on behalf of Homerton Children's Centre in my constituency? That announcement cannot come too soon. These children are vulnerable and they need a secure future.

Caroline Dinagen: My hon. Friend is right to say that maintained nursery schools often offer very high-value education, with 98% of them rated good or outstanding and 80% of them in areas of deprivation. As I have said, we will say more about their funding very shortly when we respond to our early years funding formula consultation.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The early years funding formula will detrimentally affect maintained nursery schools. There is a fantastic maintained nursery school in my constituency called Balham Nursery School that supports so many vulnerable families, and the thought that it needs to close in two years is absolutely unacceptable. There are three such schools in Wandsworth facing that fate. Will the Secretary of State meet me and these nursery schools to discuss securing their continued existence?

Caroline Dinagen: First, we have consulted on the early years funding formula. We have not yet released the findings of that consultation, but they will be released shortly. In addition, we have said that we will support maintained nursery schools with an additional £55 million for at least the next two years. That is not saying that any maintained nursery schools are going to be shutting. I am more than happy to meet any nursery schools, and I have met a number from up and down the country—

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the Secretary of State meet mine?

Caroline Dinagen: Of course I will meet them. I will reassure them that we value the amazing work that they do. They are very small in number, but they do outstanding work and we want to help them to do so.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I have two maintained nursery schools in my constituency: Ellergreen and East Prescott Road, both of them rated outstanding by Ofsted. May I urge the Minister to listen to Members on both sides of the House today? This uncertainty is very damaging for the nursery school sector, and I urge her to reach a decision for long-term, sustainable funding for nursery schools as quickly as possible.

Caroline Dinagen: As I have already said, I am more than happy to do so, but I want to consult the maintained nursery sector before I do that. There is no point in Government taking a high-handed approach and thinking that they know best. We need to consult the sector and plot the best possible way forward to maintain its outstanding future.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The cuts currently planned by the Government will be crushing in the nursery sector. Does the Minister not realise that the current level of nursery provision will be unsustainable if these cuts are implemented?

Caroline Dinagen: There are no cuts. The cuts are a figment of the hon. Gentleman's imagination. We are putting an extra £6 billion of funding into this scheme by 2020. It is more than any Government have ever spent on early years childcare.

Social Mobility

6. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve the social mobility of children and young people. [907226]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): We are driving up social mobility by levelling up opportunity. That is why it is so vital to drive up standards in education, in terms of both academic routes and technical education. Opportunity areas are also in the vanguard of our approach.

Mr Cunningham: I am interested in the Secretary of State's answer to that question. Further education, which produced lots of apprentices and highly skilled people in industry—particularly in manufacturing—has been cut by 28%. How can the Secretary of State say that she is doing a lot for highly skilled education?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman will be aware—or perhaps he has missed it—that we are bringing the Technical and Further Education Bill before Parliament on Second Reading later today. It matches the fact that we have aspirations to drive up standards in further education in the same way as we have done in academic education routes.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that lifting the ban on selective schools can create greater opportunity for the least advantaged,

and that doing so would enable more children in Telford to realise their full potential and enter top professions such as medicine and law?

Justine Greening: I do, and what we should not do is to allow ideology to get in the way of giving parents greater choice. The reality is that boys on free school meal provision who go to grammars have got three times more chance of getting into Russell Group universities than their other counterparts.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): Nurseries and childcare providers in Wakefield are at breaking point, and over 50 have closed their doors since 2010. Will the Secretary of State set out how she will meet her manifesto commitment to provide 30 hours of free childcare a week for three and four-year-olds, given that the average increase for childcare providers next year will be just 21p an hour?

Justine Greening: I am sure that the hon. Lady welcomes the Government's ambition to double the amount of childcare from 15 to 30 hours during this Parliament, which is why we are putting in more funding. We have consulted on that, and we will respond to the consultation shortly.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): One of the social mobility issues is about encouraging teachers to get pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to Russell Group universities. What are the Government doing to encourage young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to apply to the top universities?

Justine Greening: I met the vice-chancellor of Exeter University only last week to talk about some of the work that he and, indeed, the broader Russell Group are doing. It is important that we push this even more in the future than we have in the past. Alongside the proposals on selective education, some of the work we are doing in specific areas, such as on areas of opportunity, will make a massive difference over time.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): If the Government were serious about improving social mobility, they would have a plan to reduce child poverty. With 3.9 million children living in poverty and the Institute for Fiscal Studies projecting that poverty among children will increase by 50% during this Parliament, what is the Secretary of State doing to reduce the appalling levels of child poverty we are experiencing in our country?

Justine Greening: First, we should all recognise that social mobility is a long-standing generational challenge that will not be fixed overnight. It has been present in our country for many decades. In the end, the route out of poverty is to have a strong economy, coupled with strong productivity. That is why the education agenda is not just about allowing people to reach their potential, but about enabling our country and our economy to do the same.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Parents in Dover and Deal want the choice of social mobility, with new grammar schools and new faith-based schools. They also want to thank the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills for his dogged support of higher and further education in east Kent.

Justine Greening: I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be very pleased to receive that compliment. I know that my hon. Friend has been a strong champion for his local community. Alongside all the other work we are doing, including in introducing the Technical and Further Education Bill later today, 3 million apprenticeships during this Parliament will be a step change in providing opportunities for young people in our country.

Schools: London

7. **Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con):** What steps she is taking to improve funding provision for schools in London. [907227]

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): We will introduce a national funding formula from April 2018, so that schools in all parts of the country are funded fairly and consistently. This significant reform will mean children with the same needs are funded at the same rate wherever they live. We will put forward our detailed proposals for consultation later this year, and make final decisions in the new year.

Robert Neill: Does the Minister accept, in looking at appropriate funding, that there is a great deal of complexity within London, that needs and demands vary within the capital and that, for funding, we currently deal with an artificial distinction between inner and outer London boroughs? That distinction goes back to the disappearance of the London County Council in 1966, and it is no longer relevant to the modern demographic and social pressures that our schools face.

Mr Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question, which I will take as a response to our consultation document. The proposals in the document for an area cost adjustment are about using either a general labour market methodology or a hybrid methodology with two elements: the four regional pay bands and a general labour market methodology for non-teaching staff costs. We will respond to the consultation shortly.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I was not around in 1966, when that decision was taken. The reality of the Government's policies in London is that schools are having to rationalise the range of choice in modern languages and are cutting back on subjects such as drama and music. The funding settlement for London does not currently meet the real needs of pupils in London today. Instead of mucking about with ideologically driven projects like grammar school expansion—there is no evidence that that will improve social mobility—why are Ministers not focusing on the bread and butter issues of the right funding, the right teaching and proper opportunities for all pupils across all parts of London?

Mr Gibb: We are protecting core school funding in real terms. We can do that because we have a strong economy. The hon. Gentleman may not have been here when the last Labour Government were in power, but he should be aware that the number of students taking modern foreign languages plummeted as a direct consequence of a decision taken by Labour in 2004 to stop languages being compulsory up to GCSE.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Notwithstanding the generally higher funding for London schools, will my hon. Friend update the House on the progress towards a fairer funding formula for the rest of the country?

Mr Gibb: Yes. We are considering the consultation document we published in March. The consultation finished in April, and we are looking at the responses. We will respond to the consultation shortly.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Far from core school funding being protected, as the Secretary of State said a few minutes ago, we know that schools are set to lose £2.5 billion by 2020. Headteachers in the Minister's county are threatening a four-day week because of the funding formula. In that context, how will he secure fairer funding for schools, especially in London, which has had the additional benefit of the London challenge formula?

Mr Gibb: The Secretary of State was right: we are protecting core schools funding in real terms. We are consulting on a range of factors such as deprivation, English as an additional language and sparsity, for which there is a flat figure per school. All those factors are part of the consultation document because we are addressing an historic unfairness in the funding system that Labour presided over for 13 years. This Government are taking action to address that. I would have hoped that the hon. Gentleman would support the consultation, rather than criticise it.

Higher Education

8. **Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): What priorities her Department has identified for higher education in the negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the EU. [907228]

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Government are fully committed to ensuring that our universities get the best possible deal from the negotiations with the EU. We recognise the key issues for the sector as being the ability to recruit EU students, the student financial support to which they have access, EU programmes and funding streams and the status of UK students studying abroad. The future arrangements on all those issues will have to be considered as part of the wider discussions about our future relationship with the EU.

Dr Blackman-Woods: As the Minister knows, the higher education sector contributes a massive £73 billion to the UK economy, including £11 billion of export earnings, yet the Department for Education has no representation on the EU Exit and Trade Committee or Sub-Committee. What reassurances can he give the House that the priorities for the sector, such as growing the number of students and sustaining research funding, are being identified and protected in the Brexit negotiations?

Joseph Johnson: The Department has moved rapidly to provide significant reassurances to the sector in a number of respects, particularly on the continuity of the funding arrangements for Horizon 2020 resources. The Treasury will make up the continuing obligations on payments that fall due after we have left the EU. We have

made it clear that EU students will be able to access our loan book and home fee status for the duration of their course of study if they start in the 2016-17 or 2017-18 academic year.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Some 15% of Scottish academics in higher education institutions are EU nationals. That rises to 25% in institutions such as Edinburgh University. Some universities already report having lost advance staff who were due to come from Europe. Will the Minister speak to the Home Secretary and try to get a guarantee of rights for EU staff before we lose any more talent?

Joseph Johnson: We fully value the contribution that EU staff make to the success of UK institutions. The higher education sector has a long-established tradition of attracting brilliant academics and students at all stages of their careers, and we are working hard to ensure that that continues. The Prime Minister has given assurances that she has every expectation of being able to guarantee the status of such academics, provided that other countries reciprocate for British nationals in their countries.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The only way we will bring new jobs and industries to areas like the black country that have lost their traditional industries is if we have the skills that new modern and high-tech industries need. Will the Minister guarantee that the £50 million from the EU that is currently spent on skills in institutions such as Wolverhampton University and other organisations in the black country will be maintained after we leave? Will he use the rest of the money that we currently contribute to the EU to get behind brilliant institutions such as Dudley's new institute of technology and to ensure that we have university campuses in areas like Dudley that do not have them at the moment?

Joseph Johnson: As I said in my earlier answer, the relationship we have with the EU will be the subject of a broad discussion, and among the important issues at stake in that will be the future of our access to funding streams that have been of value to institutions such as those the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Apprenticeships

9. **Jake Berry** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): What steps the Government are taking in schools to promote apprenticeships. [907229]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): May I begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), and wishing him a speedy recovery?

We are transforming Britain into an apprenticeship and skills nation. We have ensured that schools provide high-quality careers guidance to pupils on their different options, and there is a legal requirement for schools to inform pupils about apprenticeships and other vocational options. We have also established the Careers and Enterprise Company to transform careers provision for young people, to inspire them and prepare them for the world of work.

Jake Berry: Sian Nixon, the modern languages teacher, is one of the many inspirational teachers at Haslingden High School. She has invited me and a local manufacturer to go into the school and talk about the value of modern languages before pupils make their GCSE choices. Will the Government say what can be done to encourage more businesses to enter schools, in particular to promote apprenticeships in areas of high manufacturing worth such as Rossendale and Darwen?

Robert Halfon: I know that my hon. Friend is an incredible constituency champion on skills and careers. I hope that when he goes into that school he will talk about apprenticeships as well as modern languages. We have created the Careers and Enterprise Company, with £90 million of investment. It has 1,200 enterprise advisers to help more than 900 schools interact with businesses and have work experience and other career options.¹

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): At present, only 8% of young people finish apprenticeships with a higher level of qualification than they started with. Will the Minister set a target for young people starting higher level qualifications rather than just the target of 3 million starts that he has at present?

Robert Halfon: I have very good news for the hon. Gentleman. The number of apprentices doing higher apprenticeships has gone up by 500%. If we include degree apprenticeships, in which we are investing millions of pounds, more than 28,000 people are doing higher apprenticeships or degree apprenticeships.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I am delighted to hear the Minister speak so warmly of the Careers and Enterprise Company, and I know he will do a terrific job in his post. For schools to promote apprenticeships successfully the apprenticeship positions must be there for students to move into. He will have had a letter from IMPACT Apprenticeships and Loughborough College in my constituency about the latest announcements regarding apprenticeship training agencies and levy paying companies' not being able to transfer funds to the agencies, as that will be delayed until May 2018. Will he meet me to discuss that further?

Robert Halfon: I am very happy to meet my right hon. Friend and the apprenticeship training agency she mentioned. As she has said, from 2018 it will be possible for employers paying the levy to transfer up to 10% of the levy funds to indirect employers.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): A few months ago, the Secretary of State prayed in aid the Technical and Further Education Bill, which we will debate today, as a measure to help apprentices. That Bill changes the name of the Institute for Apprenticeships and includes vast numbers of provisions to deal with further education colleges and sixth-form colleges going bust. Will the Minister tell me exactly which part of the Bill does anything to promote apprenticeships, in schools or elsewhere?

Robert Halfon: As I said, we are transforming our country into an apprenticeships and skills nation. The whole point of the Bill is to drive up standards to help improve our technical education offering. We already have an Institute for Apprenticeships, which will be up and running by April 2017.

1.[Official Report, 23 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 1MC.]

15. [907235] **Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** As the Minister is aware, developing skills through apprenticeships is key for today and for the future, and across my constituency businesses such as JC Payne are playing their part in creating apprenticeships. Will he reassure me, though, that, as we move forward and develop more apprenticeships, this will not just be about quantity but about quality?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is about quantity as well as quality. We made it a requirement that all apprentices have to be employed and have to do a certain amount of training. We tightened the definition of apprenticeships in law to ensure they are real apprenticeships. We are creating the new Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, and we are moving from frameworks to standards to improve apprentices' qualifications. Everything we do—in addition to the 3 million apprentices and the 619,000 apprentice starts since May—aims to drive up quality as well as quantity.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): To promote apprenticeships in schools, strong careers guidance is critical. However, this month's cross-party verdict from the two Select Committee Chairs who have looked at this, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), is that

"Ministers appear to be burying their heads in the sand while careers guidance fails young people".

Will this Minister—the third Minister to whom I have put this question—back the Select Committee's recommendation to restore proper work experience in schools at key stage 4? Will he lift his head out of the sand?

Robert Halfon: I suggest the hon. Gentleman stops being a doom-monger and becomes an apprentice-monger. We are providing the Careers and Enterprise Company with £90 million to boost career provision in schools, with £20 million for investment. The National Careers Service is getting £77 million to help people with careers. We have thousands of enterprise advisers in schools all over the country. This is what the Careers and Enterprise Company is all about. The Government are investing in careers, investing in skills and investing in apprenticeships.¹

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): Following the disability apprenticeship report by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), Scope and Mencap, which I set up with my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), will the Minister confirm that it is a priority to open up apprenticeships to those with learning disabilities?

Robert Halfon: I thank my hon. Friend for his work as Disabilities Minister. That is exactly the case. We are ensuring significant financial support to encourage investors and providers to provide apprenticeships to those with disabilities and special needs. We are investing in a special £2 million fund to help to provide apprenticeships for those with mental health difficulties, and we have agreed to adopt the reforms suggested by the Maynard review in full.

1.[Official Report, 23 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 2MC.]

Bullying

10. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle bullying in schools. [907230]

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): This week is national anti-bullying week, an opportunity for us to come together in condemnation of bullying in all its forms and consider how best to tackle it, particularly in our schools. The Government are providing 10 organisations with £4.4 million to enable them to deliver effective anti-bullying projects, including for children with special educational needs and disabilities and the victims of hate-related bullying, together with support for pupils and parents to report bullying online.

Fiona Bruce: Do Ministers share my concerns that no platforming and other endeavours to shut out free speech at universities are becoming increasingly close to bullying? What discussions have Ministers had with universities about this highly disturbing trend?

Edward Timpson: I think we can all agree that students should be able to challenge those they disagree with by means of open and robust debate. Academic freedom and freedom of speech are central to our higher education system. There is no place for intimidation to attempt to shut down open debate. Universities have a clear legal duty to secure freedom of speech for students, staff and visiting speakers, and they must have clear policies for how they will ensure that that can happen. Should my hon. Friend wish to discuss this further with either me or the Minister with responsibility for universities, I would be happy to oblige.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Sadly, bullying occurs in most schools. In some cases, it leads to young people effectively self-excluding from school, which puts themselves and their parents in a particularly difficult position. Groups such as Red Balloon in my constituency do very good work. What support would the Minister give to such groups?

Edward Timpson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We can safely say that every school will have bullying at some point in some form, and we need to ensure they have the tools available to tackle it in the best way possible, particularly with the additional threat of cyber-bullying outside the school gates. ChildLine, which the Government help to fund, is receiving more calls. This will remain a very high-profile issue for years to come. That is why we support organisations to help schools more effectively tackle these issues, but we need to be alive to the new ways that bullying will emerge in the future. We will continue to work on that with all organisations, including Red Balloon.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): After the EU referendum, teachers warned us of a disturbing rise in levels of racist bullying in schools, and now we are seeing the same following the election of Donald Trump in the US. In the spirit of Anti-bullying Week, will the Minister take this opportunity to condemn not only such bullying but the politicians whose hateful, divisive rhetoric has made some children think that this is acceptable?

Edward Timpson: As I said, I think we all condemn all forms of bullying, from wherever it comes and for whatever its purported reasons, but we also need to make sure that we educate our children to understand the effects that bullying has on others, so that, as they grow older, they do not repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before them.

Education Provision: 16 to 19-Year-Olds

12. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of recent changes in the level of (a) funding and (b) costs on the provision of education to 16 to 19-year-olds in England. [907232]

16. **Yvonne Fovargue** (Makerfield) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effect of recent changes in the level of (a) funding and (b) costs on the provision of education to 16 to 19-year-olds in England. [907236]

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): We are committed to protecting the base funding rate of £4,000 per student for the rest of this Parliament. Moreover, the proportion of young people participating in education or training is now 81.6%, which is higher than ever before. Following reforms to qualifications, the system is delivering better quality provision to prepare young people for jobs and further study.

Nic Dakin: Sixth-form colleges have suffered a 17% cut in their funding since 2011, which has had a real impact on the quality and breadth of curriculum they can offer. Will the Minister, with the Secretary of State, commit to evaluating how much funding is necessary for 16-to-19 education so that it is of the global quality we deserve?

Robert Halfon: The important thing is that we have equalised the funding and that the money now follows the student, not the qualification, to ensure a fair balance between sixth-form colleges and further education.

Yvonne Fovargue: Winstanley College is one of the highest-performing sixth-form colleges in the country and won *The Daily Telegraph's* Educate North college of the year award, but it estimates that by 2019 it will have seen a real-terms cut of 20% to its funding, which will fall to a level last seen in 2004. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure fair and equal funding for sixth-formers in England?

Robert Halfon: It is good news about the performance of the hon. Lady's college—I thank her for expressing it—but it is worth mentioning that we are investing £7 billion in 2016-17 to ensure that every 16 to 19-year-old has a place in education or training and that we have protected the funding base rate of £4,000 per student. It is also worth remembering that we have the lowest level of youth unemployment on record and the lowest number of those not in education, employment or training. This shows that our investment in further education is working.¹

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Funding forms a chapter in an excellent report by the Headteachers Roundtable. Is the Minister willing to meet me and this group of heads to discuss their report in Parliament?

1. [Official Report, 20 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 12MC.]

Robert Halfon: Either I or the Minister for School Standards would be pleased to meet my hon. Friend.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Over the next four years, funding for education is due to fall by 8% per head, although I note that Ministers have been describing this as “protecting” core funding, which is a funny use of language. So low is funding for sixth forms that schools that have formed academies are increasingly getting rid of their sixth forms because they are not profitable, thereby cutting off large numbers of opportunities for people, often in poorer areas.

Robert Halfon: As I said, by 2020 we will be giving more funding to further education than at any time in our island’s history. It will have increased by 40%, which is something we should be proud of. Our investment is working. As I said, we have the lowest youth unemployment and the lowest number of NEETs on record. The hon. Lady should be celebrating that.¹

Childcare

13. **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): What progress her Department is making on the provision of 30 hours of childcare to working parents. [907233]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): We are committed to ensuring that we have the high-quality affordable childcare that families need, and we are on track to deliver 30 hours of childcare to working parents. We announced a record funding of £1 billion extra per year by 2020; we have consulted on a fairer and more transparent funding system; and eight early implementer areas are already providing more than 3,500 places—one year early.

James Cartlidge: Does my hon. Friend agree that the greatest potential impact of extending support for childcare is helping families to make the transition from being on benefits and into sustainable employment?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We must tackle the causes of poverty, and the Government have set out stretching ambitions to remove barriers to work and to increase employment. The 30-hours offer will contribute significantly, helping families with the cost of childcare.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I note the Minister’s earlier response, but I am sure she is aware that of the nurseries that responded to her very own consultation on free childcare, half said that they were desperately in need of funding and a quarter said that they were not receiving enough money to cover their basic costs. In the run-up to the general election, the Conservative party promised millions of people in Britain that they would receive 30 hours of free childcare. Given that nurseries are struggling to meet even their basic costs, more money is needed—not just to fulfil this pledge, but to fight off the threat of closure. Will the Minister join me in pushing her Chancellor to include in the autumn statement next week the vital extra funding needed to ensure that our nurseries are protected?

1.[Official Report, 20 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 12MC.]

Caroline Dinenage: As I have pointed out on numerous occasions today, we are investing an extra £6 billion in this, and the sector has already demonstrated its ability to meet growing demand in the near universal take-up of our current childcare offer. We are now backing this with record investment.

Topical Questions

T1. [907246] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): This Government want to ensure that all children and young people in our country, whatever their background, can go as far as their talents will take them. We set out plans to deliver more good school places in more parts of the country, and I am pleased to say that work on the first opportunity areas is under way. We are already legislating to strengthen our world-leading university sector even further, and now we have introduced a Bill to help deliver consistently high-quality technical and further education. Together with the Government’s commitment to create 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, these are part of our drive to improve dramatically the skills base in our country, and make it work for everyone—not just the privileged few.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Secretary of State for her response. The Government’s proposed apprenticeship funding changes for young people in deprived areas is of great concern across the House. Given that some 625,000 young people between 16 and 24 remain unemployed, can the Secretary of State explain what is going to happen to the disadvantaged uplift after one year, and provide an assurance that it will be maintained in the long term?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Lady has pointed out, we are making sure that the funding is there to maintain the investment that is going into 16-to-18 apprenticeships, particularly in disadvantaged areas. I simply say to her that this is the first time our country has had a broad-based strategy on apprenticeships that is about not just Government investment, but employers investing too. I think the whole House should welcome that.

T6. [907251] **Lucy Frazer** (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): East Cambridgeshire ranks as the 14th worst area in the country for social mobility. Given its location so close to Cambridgeshire businesses that can help to improve aspiration and standards, does the Secretary of State agree that the area would benefit hugely from the opportunity fund so rightly being promoted by her Department?

Justine Greening: As my hon. and learned Friend points out, one of the underlying principles behind opportunity areas is getting businesses to work with schools and provide opportunities that are good not only for developing the life skills of young people, but for setting higher aspirations. I have no doubt that it could work most effectively in East Cambridgeshire, which, as she set out, was recently ranked very low on the Social Mobility Commission index.

1.[Official Report, 20 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 12MC.]

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Despite investment, the National Audit Office has judged child protection services to be “unsatisfactory and inconsistent”, which suggests systemic rather than local failure. Six years of Tory tinkering, rebranding and outsourcing has resulted in too many children’s services being deemed simply not good enough. Can the Minister tell us how much longer children will have to suffer because of his Department’s failures?

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I realise that the hon. Lady wants to press the Government to do right by vulnerable children, but I am sorry that she has tried to create a division on something about which we agree. In fact, over the past six years the Government have intervened in 60 failing local authorities, 34 of which we have turned around, and we are now investing more than £300 million in an innovation programme to ensure that we can do right by children in our care and provide them with the best possible outcomes. I hope the hon. Lady will agree that we should never, ever settle for second best for children who are vulnerable. The work that we are doing is intended to ensure that we give them everything they deserve.

T7. [907252] **Andrea Jenkyns** (Morley and Outwood) (Con): During my visit to The Morley Academy, Michael Cornfoot, the senior assistant principal, inquired about the new nine-to-one grading system for GCSEs. He would like more clarity on how to assess performance against a grade. What work are my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and her Department doing to clarify the system and to ensure that students are assessed accurately?

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): The purpose of the grade descriptors is to give an idea of average performance at the midpoints of grades 2, 5 and 8. The descriptors are not designed to be used for awarding purposes, unlike the descriptions that apply to current GCSE grades A* to G. The descriptors were, of course, developed with the input of subject experts.

T2. [907247] **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Last week I visited Tech for Life in Newcastle. It provides science, coding and electronics sessions for teachers, but schools say that they do not have the money or the time to take up those opportunities. We currently have a huge, devastating digital skills gap. What are the Government doing to provide, incrementally, additional funding and time so that teachers can become digital champions?

Mr Gibb: It was, of course, this Government who transformed the computing curriculum in our schools. We removed the ICT curriculum, which had become outdated and dull, and replaced it with a computing curriculum. We have also provided funds for the training of a whole cadre of teachers who will be able to teach that very difficult subject.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to improve financial management and accountability in multi-academy trusts and academies, especially academies that were established in some haste before 2010?

Justine Greening: We are bringing more transparency to academies’ financing. As my hon. Friend will know from a recent Education Committee session, we are also improving our annual accounts to increase transparency. They will appear alongside the “Academies annual report” that we published previously.

T3. [907248] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): None of the amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill that were tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) were accepted by the Government in Committee. What guarantees can the Minister give members of the Scottish research community that they will be fully represented in UK Research and Innovation?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Higher Education and Research Bill will provide mechanisms, through UK Research and Innovation, to ensure that our science and innovation system stays at the cutting edge for decades to come. It will, of course, also ensure that the excellence and expertise that exist in all parts of the United Kingdom are fully reflected in decision-making structures.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Some parents and teachers in my constituency find it frustrating that if Cheltenham’s schools simply received average funding per head, funding pressure could be dramatically alleviated. Can the Secretary of State assure me that fair funding is on the way?

Justine Greening: Yes, I can. As my hon. Friend knows, we are going to launch the second stage of our consultation. Ensuring that we have a fair formula which makes our funding follow need involves an incredibly complex calculation, but that is what we are doing. I know that he will look forward to and, no doubt, respond to that second stage of consultation.

T4. [907249] **Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): When it comes to school improvements, Ministers talk least about what works best, which is getting the best teachers into the schools that need them the most. When will schools in coastal towns be able to count on having the same proportion of outstanding teachers as those in London?

Mr Gibb: We have a record number of teachers in our school system—15,000 more today than in 2020—and UCAS’s figures for the 2016-17 intake show that 27,000 graduates are coming into teacher training. We have very generous bursaries—£1.3 billion-worth—to attract the best graduates into teaching.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Last week I visited the excellent Eastleigh College, which is delivering 5,000 apprenticeships and would love the new Minister to come to Eastleigh. It was noted that apprentices gained the maths qualification but were struggling to get through the English qualification. Will the apprenticeships Minister help in this area?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work she does. I will be very pleased to meet her to discuss these matters and to come to see her college.

T5. [907250] **Stuart Blair Donaldson** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): In 2014-15 the EU-funded Erasmus scheme meant that 1,600 students from Scottish higher education institutions were able to enrich their learning and gain greater understanding of different European people and cultures by studying abroad. What assurance can the Minister give to young people across Scotland that they will be able to continue to benefit from the Erasmus scheme following the UK leaving the EU?

Joseph Johnson: We welcome student mobility schemes in both directions: the ability of international students and EU students to come to this country and the ability of our students to go and experience the higher education systems of other countries. Clearly, our membership of Erasmus will be part of the broader discussions on our future relationship with the EU.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): On Friday I met Futureworks Yorkshire, which has been successful in supporting apprentices through shared apprenticeships, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises in the construction industry. It seeks assurances about what provision has been made for that in the levy. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and Futureworks to make sure that this successful scheme continues?

Robert Halfon: Of course I will be pleased to meet my hon. Friend and the organisation he mentions. We are investing heavily in skills and construction and doing everything we can to improve the quality and quantity of apprenticeships.

T8. [907253] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Nursery providers have been contacting me because they are very anxious about the changes that are likely to result in reduced funding per child. The Minister has been very clear today that that will not happen. Will she meet my local providers so that we can have an exchange of information?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinanage): I will be more than happy to.

Mr Speaker: Splendidly succinct.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Ministers may have noted that earlier this month I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill highlighting the issue of school admissions for children suffering from autism. Will the Minister confirm that he will work with me to deal with the situation and improve the present lot of many families?

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend will know that in the code of practice, which all schools must adhere to, the rules on school admissions for children with special educational needs and disabilities are very clear. I was present for his ten-minute rule Bill and heard what he had to say, and am very happy to discuss it with him further to see what more we can do to make sure that these children do not miss out on the places they require.

T9. [907254] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What discussions is the universities Minister having with his Treasury colleagues about their proposed cuts to widening participation funding

for higher education? How are we going to get more people with disabilities and from poorer backgrounds into higher education while that money is being cut—by 50% by 2020?

Joseph Johnson: The amount spent through access agreements by our universities has increased substantially, from about £400 million to over £800 million in the last year. That is a significant amount of resource that universities can put towards widening access and participation. By bringing the Office for Fair Access into the future office for students we will have a more strategic ability to manage our widening participation funds, the student opportunities funds and the access agreement money to the best effect for the use of all young people from disadvantaged backgrounds seeking to benefit from higher education.

T10. [907255] **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about the fair funding formula she wishes to introduce. Analysis by the National Union of Teachers says the Government's proposals will mean that for Hull schools will lose £13 million and 370 jobs by 2020. Is that correct: yes or no?

Justine Greening: No, it is not, and indeed we have not set out the second stage of the consultation, so there are no figures to base that analysis on.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spennings) (Lab): I have just spoken to a headteacher in my constituency who has already had to let four teachers go and not replace them, whose budget is already in the red and who has told me that further cuts will impact on their ability to deliver top quality education. Can the Minister assure me and that headteacher that fair funding will not come at the expense of schools in Batley and Spennings?

Justine Greening: As I have said, we have protected the core schools budget and, in addition, we are bringing forward a new national funding formula that will ensure that the funding is spread fairly across schools in England.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Parents and children at the Minerva free school in Westminster were horrified to discover that the temporary lease on their building will expire at Easter next year, and that their new building will not be ready until the autumn of 2018. That means that the children will have to be educated in three separate school buildings over the course of 15 months. Is that acceptable?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady has set out those challenges and I would be very happy to meet her directly to see what we can do to ensure that they will be dealt with effectively.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Encouraging children to take an interest in current affairs can also boost literacy. Will the right hon. Lady welcome the Let's Read: Leeds initiative organised by the News Foundation and supported by the *Yorkshire Evening Post*?

Justine Greening: Yes, I do welcome that initiative. Whatever works to get children into reading should be encouraged. For some, it will be fantastic novels and books; for others, it will be an interest in what is happening around the world.

Under-occupancy Charge

3.36 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on the Supreme Court's ruling of 9 November on the under-occupancy charge.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): The removal of the spare room subsidy was introduced in April 2013 to all working-age claimants in the social rented sector as part of this Government's plan to create a welfare system that is fair for those who use it and those who pay for it. Under the previous system, the taxpayer had to subsidise benefit claimants to live in houses that were larger than they needed, despite the fact that people renting in the private sector were receiving housing benefit on the basis of the number of people in their household rather than the number of bedrooms that they had, which has been the case since 1996. Since we introduced the policy, it has saved over £1.5 billion, and the number of households affected by it is going down.

We, of course, operate a number of exemptions to the policy, and they include: all pensioners; households with a dependent child receiving the middle or higher rate care component of disability living allowance; households in which an overnight carer is allowed for the claimant or partner; households in which the claimant or partner is a foster carer; and households with an adult child who is in the armed forces and deployed on operations. In addition, we provide local authorities with funding to provide discretionary housing payments to claimants whom they evaluate as needing additional support with housing costs.

Turning to last week's Supreme Court judgment, it was welcome that the Court found in our favour in five of the seven cases. These cases related to a panic room, a claimant with mental health issues and those requiring an extra room to house medical equipment, as well as cases involving shared care and adapted properties. The Court also agreed with our view that discretionary housing payments are generally an appropriate and lawful way to provide assistance to those who need extra help. In the two cases in which the Court did not find in our favour, we will take steps to ensure that we comply with the judgment. In most cases, local authorities are best placed to understand the needs of their residents, which is why we will have provided them with more than £1 billion to offer that support by the end of this Parliament. This ensures that people in difficult situations and those who are vulnerable do not lose out.

Debbie Abrahams: The Supreme Court's judgment on Wednesday clearly stated that the bedroom tax is discriminatory, as Labour Members have repeatedly highlighted. The Court upheld the claim of Jacqueline Carmichael, who is disabled and cannot share a room with her husband, Jayson; as well as that of Paul and Susan Rutherford, who care for their severely disabled grandson, Warren. I pay tribute to them, as well as to the other families, for their courage, tenacity and determination in pursuing these cases.

The ruling states that housing benefit regulations allowing claimants to have an additional bedroom when children cannot share a bedroom because of a disability

should be extended to adults. Likewise, adults who need an extra room for an overnight carer have been exempt from the bedroom tax, but children such as Warren have not. Those anomalies, the judges ruled, were "manifestly without reason".

The Department's spokesperson indicated that the Government accept the Supreme Court's ruling. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether his Department also unequivocally does so? Will he tell the House how much taxpayers' money has been spent on legal fees in the attempt to defend the Government's bedroom tax policy? How many families does the Department calculate have been affected by the Government's unlawful imposition of the bedroom tax on disabled people and their carers? When and how will the Government inform the families affected by the judgment? How quickly will the Government comply with the Supreme Court's judgment and revoke the bedroom tax for those families? Will such a revocation be backdated and, if so, to when? Will the Government now formally apologise for the pain and suffering inflicted on disabled people and families caring for a disabled child? Finally, will the Government undertake to look again at their policy on safe rooms for victims of domestic violence, which affects a relatively small number of incredibly vulnerable women who live their lives in fear and are being punished by the Government for heeding security advice and being safe in their homes?

Damian Green: I am happy to repeat what I said in my statement. We of course accept the Court's view and, to answer some of the hon. Lady's subsequent questions, we will take the appropriate action as soon as we practicably can. She said that the removal of the spare room subsidy was unlawful, but it patently is not, because the Supreme Court found in the Government's favour in five of the seven cases before it. It is interesting that those involved in every one of those cases—all seven—were receiving discretionary housing payments, which are the best way to ensure that those who are affected can be helped if they need it.

Discretionary housing payments are up fivefold since 2011-12 and the Government are committed to a further £870 million over the next five years—[*Interruption.*] I am surprised that the hon. Lady complains about the payments, because her local authority received the best part of half a million pounds for discretionary housing payments this year, which makes it clear that people in her area find them useful. She might also be interested to know that 63% of those who are affected and unemployed have decided to look for work, which shows one of the policy's effects.

I hope that the hon. Lady will address the basic issue of fairness. Without these measures, neighbouring households could be treated differently, which many people would regard as unfair.

On the hon. Lady's point about those receiving disability benefits, all seven cases involved people receiving discretionary housing payments. Four of the five people involved in the cases won by the Government have a disability, so the policy is clearly not unlawful. Her basic analysis is wrong. The Government are spending £50 billion a year on disability benefit, which shows that we want a practical system that cares for people with a disability. This court case does not alter that at all.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I remind the Secretary of State that the real anger is not from Opposition Members, but from the 241,000 families in

overcrowded accommodation who are desperate to access family homes. It is those families, not Opposition Members, to whom the Secretary of State should be listening.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend, who knows a huge amount about this subject, is absolutely right. The Government are indeed taking steps to try to alleviate housing problems, but he is quite right about the indignation among Opposition Members.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): Last week's Supreme Court ruling is a damning indictment of the Government's willingness to make disabled people and their families bear the brunt of austerity cuts. The ruling follows hard on the heels of a report by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which was also published in recent days. Among other conclusions, the report notes that the Government's measures

"have caused financial hardship to persons with disabilities resulting in...arrears, debts, evictions and cuts to essentials".

I am sorry that it is necessary to remind the Secretary of State today that, according to the Government's own impact assessment, around two thirds of the households affected by the bedroom tax include a disabled adult. In Scotland, the proportion is a massive 80%, and I am proud that the Scottish Government have taken action to protect all affected families. Will the Government recognise that the bedroom tax has failed in its objectives and continues to harm disabled people? Will they finally call time on this destructive, discriminatory experiment?

Damian Green: I do not agree with the hon. Lady about that, and nor does the Supreme Court. As I said, it had seven cases before it, and five of them were found in favour of the Government, so she is wrong to say that the policy has been in any way found unlawful. She will have seen my response to the UN report, which I thought was out of date. It took completely the wrong approach by measuring the effectiveness of a policy towards disabled people purely according to the amount of benefit spend, because this is about the amount of practical help that people can get. The fact that 300,000 more disabled people have gone into work in recent years shows the success of the Government's policies in helping disabled people. I hope that Opposition Members will also welcome the recent Green Paper, which will provide more practical help for disabled people.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Will there be any retreat from a fairer and rational allocation of housing?

Damian Green: No, there will not. I am happy to reassure my right hon. Friend that the fair and rational allocation of housing is not only sensible but fair housing policy because, as I have said, it is clearly sensible that people in the social rented sector and those in the private sector should be treated as equally as possible in terms of benefits.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): In 2014, I had the privilege of meeting Paul and Sue Rutherford and their grandson, Warren. That meeting left a profound impact on me. They are heroes in our community, and they should be treated as such by the Government, rather than being penalised with policies such as the bedroom

tax. When they were first charged the bedroom tax, they applied for a discretionary housing payment but were not granted it—they got it only on appeal—so the idea that discretionary housing payments are helping all the families is just wrong. After the Court verdict, Paul Rutherford said that he was happy but "exhausted". He should never have had to go through what he went through. May I ask the Minister how many more families have been illegally charged the bedroom tax, and when will they stop being charged it?

Damian Green: I appreciate that the hon. Lady has campaigned very effectively with the Rutherford family for a long time. As she said, they received discretionary housing payments, and such payments are the main tool that we are using to make sure that people are given appropriate help. Obviously we are still looking at the number of people who may be affected as a result of this case, but I can only repeat that we will take steps to make sure that we comply with the Court judgment.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Does the Secretary of State find it strange, as I do, that Labour Members are protesting, given that in 2008 they introduced exactly the same changes in the private rented sector? *[Interruption.]* Does he agree that there should be equality for tenants receiving housing benefit, be they in social housing or the private rented sector?

Damian Green: I do agree with my hon. Friend about that. The fact that Opposition Members tried to shout her down rather than listening to her question suggests that she has hit the mark.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): This Secretary of State is no improvement on his predecessor. Is he aware that there is one advantage of the bedroom tax: it is a constant reminder of a Tory vendetta against social tenants, particularly those on low incomes? He should be thoroughly ashamed of himself for coming out with the same Tory line as his predecessor. This illustrates that the Tory Government have not changed at all as a result of a new Prime Minister.

Damian Green: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman asked a question, but his idea of a vendetta against tenants in social housing is completely bizarre, given that under the previous Labour Government, whom he supported, the number of social rented homes fell by 420,000 while waiting lists increased. In addition, more than twice as much council housing has been built since 2010 than was built in the previous 13 years, so this Government and the predecessor coalition are proving a much better friend of those tenants than the previous Labour Government—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Opperman, you are a cerebral figure in the House. You now occupy high office as a Government Whip. Chuntering from a sedentary position and gesticulating—even under provocation—is not quite the statesmanlike posture that we have come to expect from a man of your exalted status. I call Mr James Cartlidge.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am reassured to hear my right hon. Friend say that the number of claimants for this subsidy is actually falling and that

[James Cartlidge]

part of that is due to the fact that people are moving into work from benefits. There are always difficult cases in the welfare system—cases that fall outside the normal rules—but the big picture is that worklessness, which is the biggest cause of poverty, is at an all-time low, and that the spare room subsidy has played a part in delivering that.

Damian Green: I agree that the subsidy has played a small role. It is also consistent with the rest of our welfare policy, which is about making sure that, as work is the best route out of poverty, as few people as possible face worklessness and that they are helped better than ever before. We have helped more people to get into work and progress in work. [Interruption.] I am afraid that the Opposition do not understand any of that.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) is also a proud product of the University of Buckingham in my own constituency, which is another consideration to boot.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The bedroom tax has always hit disabled people especially hard. More than any other single measure, it has driven the increase in food bank use and in penury that we are seeing in communities up and down the country. Surely it is now time, finally, to abandon this hated measure.

Damian Green: I just do not agree with the underlying analysis of the right hon. Gentleman. I know that he has considerable expertise in this area, but the fact is that, across the social rented sector as a whole, approximately two thirds of claimants are disabled. It was initially estimated that under two-thirds of those potentially affected by this measure could be considered disabled. That fact shows that there is no disproportionate impact of the type he claimed.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend make sure that local authorities are clearly marking and marketing discretionary housing payments to constituents, particularly disabled constituents? In my surgeries, I have had to explain this process to people who are worried about this matter. Local councils can do better.

Damian Green: My hon. Friend is right that some local authorities are not taking up their full allocation of central Government funding for discretionary housing payments. On top of that, they are allowed, if necessary, to increase by two and a half times the amount given by central Government. Considerable sums are available under discretionary housing payments, and I join her in urging local authorities to use them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just talked about getting people back into work. The pay-to-stay scheme will probably mean a hike in rent for tenants of £87 a month. Is it really fair for the Government to be talking about making work pay when they are attacking people who are striving to get back into work through schemes such as pay to stay?

Damian Green: I do not think that the scheme has the effect that the hon. Lady fears. I can stand here and recite figures to her if she likes, but it is patently the case that more people are in work than before. We have more

women in work than ever before in our history and unemployment is at its lowest level for more than 10 years. Our welfare policy has had a huge success in getting people into work. If we accept that work is the best route out of poverty, then that is the best measure that any Government can take to alleviate poverty in the long term.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering borough council. Can my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State confirm to the House that disability spending will be higher in each year of this Parliament than was the case in 2010?

Damian Green: I can, and my hon. Friend makes his point using his particular expertise in dealing with these cases not just as a Member of this House, but as a local councillor as well. I mentioned the figure for disability spending earlier, and that figure is indeed rising.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): It is not only councils, housing organisations and charities that have made it clear that the people who are now exempted through the court case should have been exempt all along; the Secretary of State also realises that he failed to listen to the will of this House when it passed the Affordable Homes Bill. Will he now listen and ensure that when people cannot find homes because there are no suitable homes to move to they are also not penalised?

Damian Green: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman and I think that this Government have a good record on affordable housing—we certainly have a considerably better record than the previous Labour Government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has announced more money that will be used in part for affordable housing to ensure that we deal with what is absolutely a genuine issue.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): May I invite the Secretary of State to come to Liverpool and see the impact that the bedroom tax has had, particularly on some of the poorest communities, including those in my constituency? His remarks today will ring hollow to some of the poorest families in my constituency. May I urge him to think again about the whole policy and suggest that the best way to implement the Court ruling is to repeal the bedroom tax?

Damian Green: I am always delighted to visit Liverpool, but I can only repeat that the Court ruling in five of the seven cases was in favour of the Government. I cannot sensibly draw the conclusions that the hon. Gentleman draws from the judgments.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): My local authority, Cyngor Gwynedd, has used discretionary housing payments year on year, helping about 1,000 of the 1,400 people affected by this charge, many of them disabled, and effectively protecting this Government from the consequences of their own folly. Will the Minister accept that these wasteful churning bail-outs cannot continue indefinitely?

Damian Green: As I have said, the use of discretionary housing payments by local authorities is proving successful. Inevitably, some local authorities are using them differently

from others but, as the Court confirmed, they are a sensible and practical way to proceed to ensure that those who need help will get it.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State confirm how much it would cost to exempt victims of domestic abuse from the bedroom tax and how does that compare to how much money the Government have spent defending the bedroom tax in court?

Damian Green: I do not think that that first figure is available. If it is, I will certainly write to the hon. Lady with it. She will be aware that one of the seven cases specifically related to that issue and the Court found in favour of the Government in that case. Obviously, the Government are very proud of our record on domestic violence and domestic abuse, and there have been many initiatives taken. It is certainly an area that I keep under constant review.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street:

“I know you’re working around the clock, I know you’re doing your best, and I know that sometimes life can be a struggle. The government I lead will be driven not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours”,

did that apply to everybody who is struggling except those struggling with the bedroom tax?

Damian Green: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has absorbed the words of the Prime Minister on the steps of Downing Street, which were indeed memorable and correct. All Government policies are related to achieving what she set out to achieve.

Pat Glass (North West Durham) (Lab): I cannot stress too highly the pain that has been caused to families in my constituency living with a family member who is disabled. Many of them have got into debt to pay the bedroom tax. When can those families expect to get back the money that the Government have taken from them illegally?

Damian Green: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady heard me when I said that all the cases—those that the Government won and those that they lost at the Court last week—were in receipt of discretionary housing payments. It is not a question of the money—they were getting money—but of the structure of the policy, which is what the Court has challenged. The discretionary housing payments have been paid to those people.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In trying to present the Supreme Court judgment as a 5-2 result, could the Secretary of State take more care not to imply that the Court found that discretionary housing payments were necessarily the best or only way of helping those in extra need? In taking steps to comply with the two judgments, will not the Secretary of State take the opportunity to have a wider and more fundamental recast of this controversial policy?

Damian Green: I can only present the facts, which are that there were seven cases, five of which were won by the Government and two by other people, but I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the wider policy. We look at all our policies all the time to ensure that they are delivering what they set out to achieve.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): In what can only be described as coalition fervour, my Liberal Democrat predecessor voted for the bedroom tax eight times, despite a severe local impact. Based on the court decision, how many of the 4,238 people hit by the bedroom tax in Southwark should not have been affected?

Damian Green: I do not have figures at that level of detail. I hope that Southwark Council has been assiduous in using discretionary housing payments to make sure that people have not lost out financially, because those DHPs are available.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Instead of standing here saying that he welcomes the fact that five judges found that a woman with a panic room should be subject to a bedroom tax, should not the Minister go away and review his entire policy? Instead of attacking the people on the demand side, the Government need to look at the supply side of housing. The Government should end the right to buy, where a quarter of houses end up on the buy-to-let market, further pushing up the housing benefit bill, and they should target the right areas.

Damian Green: No, I do not think I should stand at the Dispatch Box and challenge the Supreme Court. The hon. Gentleman is right about the supply side, though. The supply side is as important as the demand side. That is why this Government are spending huge amounts of money to help the housing market generally, and the affordable housing market specifically. I wish that previous Governments had done the same.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Can the Minister tell us how much the Government have spent on legal fees defending one of the most hated policies, the bedroom tax?

Damian Green: I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. The Department has spent approximately £206,000 in legal costs in respect of the Supreme Court proceedings.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituents Ann and Kevin Gresham, who live in a two-bedroom flat, are unable to share a room owing to Ann’s various disabilities. They successfully fought the bedroom tax in court but this caused them significant heartache and stress. When will this Government finally stop punishing the disabled, admit that the cruel bedroom tax just is not working, and axe the tax?

Damian Green: As I said in response to previous hon. Members, I do not agree that the overall policy is not working, and we have no plans to change it.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My constituency has the highest number of bedroom tax cases in the country, with more than 3,000 families affected. I want to raise the case of Mr Tony Gunning in my constituency. He needs regular kidney dialysis and he does not get a discretionary payment because he lives in Tory Trafford. If he had lived in Labour Manchester in my constituency, he would have got the discretionary payment. He has been hit twice by the Conservative party.

Damian Green: I have said that I hope local authorities will claim the discretionary housing payments that are available to them, and I say that to all local authorities.

Croydon Tram Incident

4.3 pm

The Minister for London (Gavin Barwell): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about the tragic tram derailment in the early hours of Wednesday 9 November, close to Sandilands junction in Croydon.

The tram was running from New Addington to Wimbledon via Croydon town centre. Sandilands junction is the point where inbound trams from the Beckenham Junction, Elmers End and New Addington routes converge shortly before they arrive at Sandilands tram stop to the east of Croydon town centre. Trams approaching from New Addington have to negotiate a sharp, left-hand curve with a speed limit of 12 mph before reaching the junction. The derailment occurred on the curve and the Rail Accident Investigation Branch says that initial indications suggest that the tram was travelling at a significantly higher speed than is permitted.

Seven people lost their lives—Dane Chinnery, Robert Huxley, Philip Logan, Dorota Rynkiewicz and Phil Seary from New Addington, and Donald Collett and Mark Smith from Croydon. A further 51 people were injured and a number are still in hospital. Our thoughts at this time are with the families and friends of the bereaved, and the injured.

I visited the scene with the Mayor of London and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport on Wednesday, and again on Thursday and Friday. I would like to take this opportunity to express my profound thanks to staff from London's emergency services, Transport for London and the RAIB for their professionalism and dedication in the most difficult circumstances. I would also like to thank staff from our local NHS hospitals—Croydon University and St George's—who treated the injured. Without these amazing public servants, more people would undoubtedly have lost their lives.

Croydon Council has set up a centre at Croydon Adult Learning and Training New Addington, on Central Parade, which is being staffed by council officers, the British Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Victim Support, rail care teams, and local church and community groups to provide support, counselling and advice to anybody affected. My officials have participated in the council's recovery co-ordination meetings, and we have offered the Government's help, if that is needed. We stand ready to deal with any requests promptly. People can also obtain help from the Sarah Hope line, which was created to provide specialist support to people affected by fatal or serious injuries on London's transport network. Run by TfL staff, it provides practical, financial and emotional help, and can also make referrals for counselling and specialised support.

The tram was removed from the site in the early hours of Saturday morning and has been transported to a secure location. Work is now under way to repair the damaged track so that tram services can resume as soon as possible.

The RAIB immediately began a major investigation to ensure that the relevant lessons are learned to improve safety and prevent a similar accident from occurring. This investigation is being run independently of, but in parallel with, the British Transport police's investigation, as well as that of the safety regulator, the Office of Rail

and Road. The BTP's investigation will consider whether there were any breaches of criminal law. The ORR's investigation will consider whether there were any breaches of health and safety law, which it is responsible for enforcing.

The RAIB intends to publish an initial report into the accident later this week. Its final report will take months to produce, but if urgent safety learning comes to light during the investigation, this will be published without delay. As much as we are all desperate for answers, we need to give the professionals time to do a thorough job. The victims deserve no less.

Our rail and tram services have had a good safety record in recent years. I know I speak for not just the Government but the whole House and the industry when I say we are determined to maintain this. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will give urgent and careful consideration to recommendations as he receives them, and I am confident the industry will do the same.

When we say goodbye to our loved ones each morning, it never crosses our mind that we may not see them again. Seven families are now having to face that terrible reality, and other people will return to their loved ones only after a lengthy stay in hospital and with life-changing injuries. They will need support in the days, weeks and months ahead, and the Government will work with the Mayor of London and Croydon Council to make sure they receive it.

I have made this statement in my capacity as Minister for London, but hon. Members may be aware that the accident took place in my constituency and that six of the seven people who were tragically killed were my constituents. The last few days have been the toughest in my six and a half years as a Member of this House, but I have been sustained by the way in which the people of Croydon have supported the emergency services, as they have carried out their difficult work, and the families and friends of those who lost their lives or were injured. We are a strong community, and we will support each other in our grief.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before I call the shadow Minister, I am most grateful to the Minister for his statement, in terms both of the content and the way in which he delivered it. I feel a duty to inform the House that two commis chefs in the service of the House were among those injured in the tram incident last Wednesday. On behalf of all colleagues, I have written to both to express the hope that they will enjoy a full and, if possible, speedy recovery.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

4.8 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I begin by thanking the Minister for London for his statement and for giving me early sight of it? This is the first time we have debated London matters across the Dispatch Box, and I am sorry that it happens under such tragic circumstances. These have been the most difficult days for him and his constituents, and particularly the victims of the derailment—the injured and their families, and the families and friends of the seven people who died. Let me associate myself and everyone on the Opposition

side of the House with the Minister's closing words: to lose a loved one is the hardest thing at any time; when disaster strikes from nowhere, and someone is taken away without warning or the chance to say goodbye, it is even harder to bear. The whole House will echo the Minister's thoughts for all who have been touched by this accident and will join him in expressing sympathy for the bereaved.

All Members will, at some point, experience tragic events to which they and their communities have to respond. In my experience, such events bring out the best in all of us and bind us closer in solidarity. They also bring out the best in our emergency services. Let me add my thanks to the London ambulance service, the London fire brigade and the Metropolitan police. Of course, we all know and value our emergency services, but it is at times such as these that we truly comprehend their professionalism and heroism.

Let me turn to the aftermath of the accident. Staff from Transport for London, the NHS, Croydon Council and many other statutory and voluntary bodies have worked, and continue to work, tirelessly to resolve the practical, emotional and physical consequences of the derailment. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has taken the lead in expressing the sorrow and sympathy of all Londoners at this terrible tragedy. His officers are working closely with Croydon Council to provide immediate specialist help and support for those most affected by the crash.

Finally, let me turn to the investigations into the derailment and the lessons to be learned. We await the reports of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch, the British Transport police and the Office of Rail and Road. Clearly, it is too early to expect answers to questions about what caused or contributed to the accident. In any event, there is a criminal investigation under way. However, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it is imperative that the operator and those conducting the inquiries ensure that even interim findings are translated into immediate action to provide the necessary reassurance that any further such incidents can be averted.

Trams are a very safe form of public transport, but incidents such as this reinforce the fundamental principle that when it comes to our public transport systems, there can never be any compromise on safety. It is essential that the investigations examine whether there were any organisational, as well as individual, errors or omissions that contributed in any way, and whether there was any prior evidence or concern that such an event was possible or likely. In such circumstances, it would be critical to understand why and how any such prior warnings were not recognised and acted on.

There have been calls from some in the transport industry for the introduction of automated braking systems on trams, similar to those used on the docklands light railway. May I ask the Minister to raise that specific matter as part of the inquiries? The Minister may be in a position to say when tram services in Croydon will resume; I believe that there is a test tram running today. In any event, could he say what interim steps will be taken to reassure passengers that this service and similar services around the country—in Nottingham, Sheffield, Edinburgh and Manchester—will be safe to use for the foreseeable future?

Gavin Barwell: I am hugely grateful for, although not at all surprised by, the tone of the hon. Gentleman's response. It is good to have the support of the Official Opposition for the work that we are undertaking. I have paid tribute to the agencies, but I would like, on a personal level, to thank the Mayor of London for the support that he has provided to Croydon Council and for the detailed briefing that he has ensured that I, as a constituency MP, have had at every stage of the process.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that we should not speculate about the causes of the accident. Three investigations are under way, and it is important that we give the professionals the time to do their work thoroughly. The victims of this terrible tragedy deserve the whole truth, and that will not be served by too much speculation at this stage. I want to reassure him on two points. First, the RAIB has been very clear that if anybody has any evidence—either specific to the accident that took place on Wednesday morning or, more generally, concerns about the operation of the system—it wants to hear that evidence, and I encourage anybody who has such evidence to put it forward. Secondly, the investigation will be very thorough.

The hon. Gentleman asked about automation, and lots of constituents have already raised that issue with me. Essentially, trams are buses on rails. Because they run part of their route on rails and part of it on roads, trams have to rely, at least for part of the route, on drivers driving according to the conditions in front of them. Therefore, trams cannot have the same kind of signalling systems as trains. However, there is a legitimate question about sections of the route where trams run on rails and are akin to trains, and I am sure that that will be one of the issues addressed in the investigation.

The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that the record of this system over the history of its operation shows that it has been extraordinarily safe. As and when the system reopens, people will obviously be looking for reassurance, but they can look at the safety record and have confidence in that regard. I also give him the assurance he was looking for that if recommendations are made during the course of the RAIB's work, the Government will of course give them urgent and very careful consideration and make sure that all necessary steps are taken.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman is right to say that the track has now been repaired and that TfL is running test services today, so I anticipate a decision about when the service can reopen fairly imminently.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Communities across Croydon are certainly united in their grief and sympathy for the families of the seven victims. From attending remembrance services in Croydon South yesterday, I know that the hearts of people there have gone out to the families who suffered so tragically on Wednesday. I associate myself with the comments of the Minister and the shadow Minister in paying tribute to the emergency services, who responded so well in very difficult circumstances.

I want to tell the Minister that many of my constituents who also use the line, part of which runs along our constituency border, have contacted me in the past four or five days to say that they have felt in the past—not on Wednesday, but in general—that trains approaching the Sandilands junction from the tunnel to the south have been running at very rapid speeds. Will he confirm to

[Chris Philp]

the House that the investigations will cover that? I believe tram users would find it reassuring if there was an opportunity to install either a warning system or automated braking in other trams, as the shadow Minister said, as well as in the ones in Croydon, to prevent any repetition of this accident.

Gavin Barwell: Like my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Remembrance Day services in Croydon at the weekend obviously took on a special poignancy, with people taking the opportunity to remember those who gave their lives in the past to protect our freedoms in this country, but also those who lost their lives in this tragic accident.

Like my hon. Friend, I have had people contact me with their concerns about the operation of the system over a period of time. I assure him that the investigation will look into those issues. As I said in answer to the shadow Minister, I do not think we should prejudge what needs to happen at this time. Clearly, the investigation will look into such issues, and the Government will take very seriously any recommendations from that investigation.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): May I add my condolences to those expressed by the Minister to those who have suffered injury or have lost loved ones in this tragic incident? I reiterate his gratitude to the emergency services, NHS staff—particularly those at the hospital—and the council, whose speedily professionalism undoubtedly saved lives after the incident. Croydon is an extremely tightknit community, and tragedies like the one we have just experienced has brought that community closer together. The shock and sorrow about what has happened has been felt in every part of the borough.

We need the inquiry to conclude as quickly as is reasonably practicable, because once the tram system starts moving again, people will need absolute reassurance that it is safe. Will the inquiry look at other recent incidents on the tram network, such as the impact between a car and a tram near to the Sandilands tram stop a few weeks earlier? That flags up that there have been other incidents that will cause concern to people using the system.

I thank the Minister for the work he has carried out. In conclusion, may I commend the people who have set up a fund to support the victims of this tragedy? Families that have now been hit with funeral expenses may not have the finances at hand to deal with them, and the fundraising that is going on will help to ease the financial strain, which comes on top of the emotional strain they are already suffering.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman, who is a constituency neighbour, is right to draw attention to the work that the council and the Mayor have done in setting up the fund, which will prove invaluable to some of the families. Given the nature of the communities from which they come, some of them will face costs that will be difficult to bear. He is quite right to draw attention to that issue.

I reassure the hon. Gentleman, as I have reassured my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), that the investigation

will look at all the evidence on the safety of the system that is drawn to its attention. If constituents contact the hon. Gentleman, I encourage him to direct them to submit such evidence to the inquiry.

On the speed of the inquiry, I reiterate that an interim report will be published this week. There may well be issues that the RAIB can draw to the attention of the regulator, the operator and the Secretary of State. Experience suggests that the full report will take 10 to 12 months to produce. However, as I said in my statement, if issues emerge during its work, it is able to make recommendations in the interim. Our constituents should rest assured that any issues that come out of the investigation will be drawn promptly to people's attention.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Many of my constituents travel to or through Croydon, as do I, so we join my hon. Friend in sending our deepest condolences to all those who have been adversely affected. I appreciate that three investigations into the incident are ongoing and must take priority, but a broader concern that constituents have raised with me is the safety and speed of trams at transport interchanges, such as East Croydon station. I wonder whether, at a later date, consideration can be given to those broader safety issues.

Gavin Barwell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words on behalf of his constituents. A number of hon. Members have contacted me over the past four or five days, and I am very grateful for the support they have expressed.

My hon. Friend is right that the tram network, by its nature, runs on rail on parts of the route but also on main roads through the centre of Croydon, where there are clearly risks in relation to motor traffic and pedestrians, including right outside East Croydon station, which is one of the country's busiest railway stations. Again, I say that if people have concerns, they should draw them to the inquiry's attention.

The tram system has a very good safety record. My colleagues from Croydon who are in the Chamber will confirm that thousands of our constituents use it to get to work or school every day. It is one of the best things about the town, but everyone will want reassurance that its operation is safe.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On behalf of the SNP, I pass on our condolences and sympathies to the bereaved families. It was poignant that the Minister said that six of his constituents were among those who were killed. As he said, when we say goodbye to our loved ones in the morning, we expect to see them at night and to spend time catching up on the day, rather than to go through the trauma of what happened. I thank those in the emergency services who were involved.

It is clear that we need to understand what happened. That is why the three investigations are very important. I look forward to the initial interim report of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch. Other Members have touched on the speculation, which is clearly not helpful. Unfortunately, I have read three variations in newspapers, apportioning different types of blame to the driver. That does not help us to get to the bottom of the matter and it does not help the bereaved families. I imagine the Minister will share those concerns.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman touches on one of the most difficult issues with such disasters, which is the media's reporting of them. We all understand and respect the job the media have to do, but I can report that the families of the victims whom I have met have found the media intrusion at a time of terrible grief very difficult to come to terms with. One family sat down to watch the news of the US election, only to see a photo and the identity of their loved one revealed on a TV news bulletin. They had not been told in advance that that was going to happen. I am sure all hon. Members understand how distressing that might be.

We all understand the vital role the media play in our society in disseminating information. It is natural that a day or two afterwards, attention turns to what caused the accident, and that naturally leads one into speculation, but the most important thing is to allow the three investigations to run their course, because that is the best way to make sure we get the facts about what caused the accident and understand what each of us needs to do to ensure that it does not recur.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his statement and for the way in which he has conducted himself, both as a Minister and as a constituency MP, in dealing with this episode. There seems to be a general view that the tram was going too fast at a sharp left-hand bend. Will he reassure the House that the investigators will take advantage of all the international experience in preparing the report, as there are lots of trams around the world? However, I think he and his constituents would be surprised if the final report need take 12 months. Surely, it can be done quicker than that. In a city the size of London, with a growing number of people using the tram network, most people would expect a comprehensive final report well within that 12-month time period.

Gavin Barwell: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words. If I may make a generic observation, in my three to four months as a Minister my reaction to nearly everything I have been told has been, "Can't we do it quicker than that?" I am sure that he is right that most of my constituents would want to see the final report as quickly as possible, exactly as the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) said; none the less, I do not think that it is my job, or our job in this House, to rush people who have a very difficult job to do. On Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, I had the opportunity to see just what is involved in gathering the kind of evidence needed for an inquiry of this kind. I have the utmost respect for the work that those individuals are doing.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank my friend the Minister for his statement and echo his condolences to the families. I also echo your comments, Mr Speaker, about the members of House of Commons staff affected—I have the honour of speaking on behalf of the Commission, and wish to log my sympathy for what happened to them. I thank the emergency services, the local hospitals, Croydon Council and others who have played a significant part in ensuring that the aftermath of this was addressed properly, and also Transport for London for keeping Members informed. The tramline comes through my constituency of Carshalton and Wallington, and clearly many of my constituents will have been affected.

I wish to make two points. Following on from the point made by the hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), I welcome the fact that previous incidents will be looked at as part of this inquiry; perhaps it should look as well as what action happened as a result of those incidents—whether there were technical measures that needed to be taken or training issues that were addressed. Is there a clear mechanism for passengers to report concerns if they believe they are on a tram that is travelling too fast—is it clear what action they can take to ensure that that information is logged somewhere?

Gavin Barwell: I am very grateful to my friend the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. As he says, part of the network passes through his constituency and there is a long-standing ambition on behalf of the people of Sutton to extend the route down to Sutton town centre, which I am very keen to support—in my constituency capacity, I should hasten to add.

The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about previous history. I will add that the operator is required by law to notify the RAIB immediately of any incident that, had circumstances been only slightly different, could have had a serious outcome. I am sure that the investigation will look into whether there have been any notifications of that kind over a period.

Without in any way casting any doubt on the concerns raised with me, as I have felt them myself on the tram, I would observe that we are not as individuals necessarily the best judges of speed on trams, in particular on this route, which passes through a tunnel where the tram gets up to its top speed before coming to the bend and having to slow down. I am informed that the operator does regular speed checks, so there should be a body of data that will provide good evidence about the record over a period of time. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for drawing that matter to the House's attention.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): May I associate myself with the eloquent and compassionate words of the Minister and the shadow Front-Bench team, and with your words, Mr Speaker? Will the Minister promise that any learning from this tragedy will be disseminated to all tram networks in the UK and in particular to those of us who have huge tram network infrastructure in our patches?

Gavin Barwell: Those of us who have tram networks in our constituencies are aware of what a fantastic contribution they can make to our transport policies. They are quick, efficient and environmentally friendly modern methods of transport, and I am sure we are all keen for them to be expanded. The Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), and the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), are both sitting alongside me. I am hugely grateful for the support given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in coming down to Croydon on Wednesday to see the scene for himself. I know that they will want to ensure that any lessons that can be learned from this tragic event are applied not just to the Croydon system but to light rail right across the country.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): On behalf of the all-party group on light rail, I would like pay my condolences to all those affected, in particular to the

[Greg Mulholland]

families of those who died and those who were injured, as well as to the whole community and to the Minister, the constituency MP, for the burden he has had to shoulder over these awful few days.

What is particularly shocking about this awful tragedy is that light rail is such a safe form of travel, with 300 million passengers every year. The last passenger killed on a tram in this country had been in 1959. It is clear that this was one incident on one part of track. I am not asking the Minister, in looking at the incident and finding out what went wrong, to speculate on whether there was an engineering error, a human error or both. However, will he assure the House that he will make it clear to colleagues that light rail remains a safe form of travel and encourage his constituents and others to keep using the wonderful tram system that has, on this rare occasion, failed people badly?

Gavin Barwell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He makes a very powerful point. Last year was the ninth consecutive year in which there were no passenger fatalities as the result of an accident such as that we saw last Wednesday in Croydon on any railway in the UK. That was a testament to the hard work of the industry, the regulator and the Government to ensure we learned the lessons from tragic accidents such as Potters Bar, Hatfield and Ladbroke Grove more than a decade ago. He is right to point to the safety record of tram systems across the country overall.

What we need to do now is support the families of the victims of this tragic accident and ensure that the professionals are given the time to carry out their investigations, so that we can learn the appropriate lessons. I think that it is clear from these exchanges that we all share a determination to ensure that our transport systems are safe for the people who use them.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): As I once represented the constituency, may I take this opportunity to express my own deepest sympathy to all those involved?

Gavin Barwell: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that expression of sympathy. I think I am right in saying there are six living former Members for my seat, which reflects either its attractiveness as a place to live or its hyper-marginality.

Point of Order

4.32 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is customary in this place for Ministers to make announcements here, rather than in the press. Would you be able to comment on whether, if an announcement has been made in a different place—for example, in the media—you would expect Ministers to respond immediately, even if it was not an announcement made by a Minister? I have in mind the King's Fund report, which today seems to suggest that my local hospital, St Helier, or at least some of its services, may be under threat of closure. Clearly, I think that is a matter of great import, which I would have thought Ministers would have wanted to present themselves, at the earliest opportunity, to explain precisely what is going on.

Mr Speaker: As a former Deputy Leader of the House, the right hon. Gentleman is a very ingenious Member, well-versed in the mechanisms available to him to register his constituents' concerns. He has just used one of them. If I were to engage with his point directly, I would say only that Ministers must judge when it is proper to come to the House to make a statement. In fairness, I do not think it is incumbent upon a Minister to do so immediately after the publication of a report that might comment on, or even have implications for, Government policy. There are probably dozens or even hundreds of such reports produced within the course of a month. They do not necessarily require an immediate oral response, but some might do so and the right hon. Gentleman will use his powers of discernment to conclude, at least for himself, which merit a response and which do not.

Technical and Further Education Bill

Second Reading

4.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The background to the Bill is that the Government have worked tirelessly over the past six years to embed our school reforms so that we can raise standards and ensure that an excellent academic route is open to all students. That work continues. Thanks in no small part to the hard work of the teaching profession, over 1.4 million more children are now being taught in schools rated as good or outstanding than in 2010. This is vital if we are to be a country in which everyone not only has a level playing field for opportunity, but has their potential unlocked and can thereby do their best. This transformational progress has been great news, particularly for those young people who choose to build on their time at school by pursuing an academic route through Britain's world-class universities on their way to joining the workforce and making a contribution to the economy. The truth is, however, that half—last year, most—of our young people, often those from disadvantaged backgrounds will choose not to go to university, but to follow a less purely academic route, or perhaps one that plays to their individual strengths, talents and interests.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that we are failing nationally to train enough graduate engineers to serve our own needs. One reason is the teaching of mathematics and the failure of young people to acquire skills in that subject. A lot of effort has been put into improving the quality of mathematics teaching in schools. Are we now starting to see the fruits of that extra effort?

Justine Greening: I believe that we are. Not only have we seen investment in more effective mathematics teaching—through some of the Mathematics Mastery work, for example—but we have tried to widen participation by making sure that girls do maths and science courses, thereby better balancing our engineering careers between men and women. Alongside that—this is why the Bill matters so much—we must recognise routes into such professions that are not purely academic which, for many of our young people, will take the form of technical education.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): Do the Government still want young people who do not achieve a C or above in maths and English to repeat their GCSEs, rather than having a more useful level 2 post-16 qualification?

Justine Greening: We have been clear that we do not want children to be left behind by not getting a GCSE in maths or English when they could have achieved one, so we want those who score a D to take resits. For others, however, there is the option to study for functional skills qualifications, and it is important for employers that we make sure those functional skills qualifications work effectively.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab) *rose*—

Justine Greening: I will make a little more progress. I will definitely let the hon. Gentleman intervene but, as he will know, I have some way to go as I introduce the Bill.

I was setting out how most young people will not necessarily go down an academic route, but choose more a technical educational route. Despite that fact, the technical education route open to those young people for decades has often lacked sufficient quality and failed to offer a proper pathway into the world of work. That is not acceptable. If we are to create a country that works for everyone, it is time that we gave technical education the focus it deserves, alongside our school and academic education reforms, so that people who choose to pursue this route have as good a chance at getting a high-skilled career as someone taking an academic route.

Nic Dakin: I think that everyone applauds the direction of travel for technical education. In response to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) about GCSE maths and English, the Secretary of State focused on functional skills. Is she saying that those functional skills will remain as an equal qualification in the future, because I do not think that that is being said to institutions or students?

Justine Greening: What we are saying is that we want an education system, particularly at the primary and secondary level, that really stretches our young people to get through their GCSEs and to come out with GCSE qualifications that are well recognised and respected by employers. Alongside the resit policy, we want strong functional skills qualifications that can, in conjunction with a broader offer for technical education, enable young people to demonstrate their attainment in both maths and English. No young person should leave our education system without something to show for all their time spent on maths and English. It is important that they are able clearly to demonstrate their level of attainment to employers. At the same time, we need to make sure that people achieve as high a level of attainment as possible to recognise their potential in maths and English. STEM subjects, especially maths and English, have been a strong push for this Government so that we ensure that we give young people the critical building blocks that are important not just for their future careers and work but, much more broadly, so that they have a chance of being successful in life.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is being generous with her time. There is still quite a lot of confusion about this point. She says that she wants to make sure that GCSEs are well understood and that they have a certain status, so will she clarify whether those who will take the new maths and English GCSEs next year will be required to resit if they get a 4 or if they get a 5? Will that apply thereafter, or is it a transitional arrangement?

Justine Greening: Of course, a level 4 broadly equates to a C grade. We will make sure that the resit policy aligns with the new way of grading GCSEs that will come through next summer. I hope Members recognise that the most important thing is to ensure that young people come out of our education system with adequate skills, particularly in maths and English, as well as—dare I say—adequate digital skills, which are also important.

[Justine Greening]

The aim of the Bill is to ensure that there is a genuine choice between high-quality academic and technical education routes. The Government want to build on what exists in the further and technical education sector and steadily create a gold standard of technical education for the first time so that students can be confident that if they commit their time and effort to a course, they will be building towards a successful career. We will unlock those opportunities only by addressing the challenges facing further education. We need to get to the root causes of poor-quality provision, including weak employer engagement, ineffective training methods, the proliferation of qualifications that are not highly valued and, of course, institutions with uncertain finances.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Is collaboration between local institutions part of the process? Will my right hon. Friend commend the work of Kingston College in leading the way by federating with Carshalton College to provide a much better offer to local students?

Justine Greening: That work shows that colleges acting collectively can provide not only a higher-quality offer, but a broader one. We hope that through the local area review, other colleges will steadily make sure that they are co-ordinating their local provision for young people. Wherever young people are growing up, it is vital there is a strong further education offer on their doorstep if they want to follow a technical education route.

The good news is that much of the work is already well under way. Lord Sainsbury's report on skills in this country led to the skills plan, which was published in July by my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). Let me take this opportunity to wish him well, as will Members on both sides of the House, following the recent announcement about his health. I am sure that all Members look forward to seeing him back in the House as soon as possible.

The vision that my hon. Friend outlined in the skills plan involves streamlining technical education so that, despite the plethora of career opportunities, there are clearly identified routes into work that students can easily understand and that enable them to make informed decisions about their futures. The skills plan also explains how important it is for employers to play a big role so that the qualifications that young people obtain equip them with the skills and knowledge that they need to enter the jobs market successfully and start their careers. I shall come on to how the Bill will help us to deliver that.

Some 2.4 million apprenticeships were created during the previous Parliament. We want to build on our commitment to increasing both the quantity and quality of apprenticeships, and we remain committed to our target of creating 3 million more by 2020.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I accept that the Secretary of State is determined to ensure that enough students and other young people take up apprenticeships, but will she commit herself to a target for completing them, as well as a target for starting them?

Justine Greening: We do want to ensure that students complete their apprenticeships. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Higher Education and Research Bill

commits us to widening our review of how inclusive and open higher education is, taking account of not just the number of young people who embark on courses, but the number who finish them, particularly if they are from more disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds.

As part of last year's spending review, we announced that we would provide more than half a billion pounds this year alone to help further education colleges and sixth forms to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those with low prior attainment. Moreover, we are already committed to future funding levels. Those assurances will give the sector the security that it requires to deliver the skills that young people need if they are to succeed in modern Britain. We are committed to doubling the 2010-11 spending on apprenticeships, in cash terms, by 2019-20, and to protecting the national base rate of £4,000 per student in 16-to-19 education for the duration of this Parliament. By 2019-20, our funding for 19-plus skills participation will be £3.4 billion, which represents a cash increase of 40% on 2015-16. The steady progress of the Government's programme of area reviews for the further education sector means that we have taken another important step towards giving institutions the opportunity to put themselves on a secure financial footing.

Lucy Powell *rose*—

Justine Greening: I will give way once more.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Secretary of State for her generosity. I welcome the fact that further education funding streams have stabilised recently, but does she accept that the pernicious and deep cuts that the Government imposed on further education and technical education budgets during their first five years in office had a long-lasting and difficult impact on further education, and that that is why we are now so far behind our international comparators when it comes to post-16 funding?

Justine Greening: I do not accept the picture that the hon. Lady presents. In the long term, our technical education offer for young people has not met the ambitions that all of us should have had for it. However, when we went into government in 2010, we asked Alison Wolf to look into further education. Her report said that at least 350,000 young people had been let down by courses that had

"little to no labour market value."

She said that those courses were not valued by employers and did not prepare young people for further study. Perhaps as damagingly, she also said that students had been "deliberately steered" away from challenging qualifications—that

"funding incentives have deliberately steered institutions, and, therefore, their students, away from qualifications that might stretch (and reward) young people and towards qualifications that can be passed easily."

I make the point about what Alison Wolf said about the further and technical education system to demonstrate why the body of work undertaken over the last six years is so important. It has at its heart the Sainsbury review that was undertaken alongside Alison Wolf's work, and what came out of that was the skills plan. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will now swing in behind the skills plan and, indeed, the Bill, which is part of how we will develop it.

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): What steps are being taken to address the continuing gender imbalance in our apprenticeships?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We want to make sure that young girls get exactly the same opportunities as young boys. We know that part of the challenge relates to the kinds of industries that might offer apprenticeships. The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) asked me about the engineering profession. It is important to ensure that the technical education route is as desirable for young women as it is for young men, and among the ways we will do that is by steadily changing its image, by ensuring that it is of high quality, and by making sure that people know that if they follow this route, they will come out with experience and qualifications that employers truly value. That is why part of the Bill's purpose is to put employers at the heart of our technical education strategy.

University technical colleges have also been established to address skills gaps in local and national industries. They provide technical education that meets the needs of modern businesses. Indeed, they also give a much different offer to young people who are interested in specialising through a technical education route.

Nic Dakin *rose*—

Justine Greening: I would like to make a little more progress. I recognise the hon. Gentleman's long-standing interest and expertise in this area, but let me get on to the Bill itself.

Alongside our wider education reforms, the Government's work on technical and further education over the past six years represents a firm foundation on which we can now build a really strong technical route in this country. The Bill serves to do exactly that. Part 1 focuses on technical education. It extends the role of the Institute for Apprenticeships to give it responsibility for classroom-based technical education in addition to apprenticeships. It will be renamed as the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. The measures take forward and support the reforms set out in Lord Sainsbury's report and the skills plan so we can truly streamline the technical education system and ensure young people can follow clear routes to skilled employment. That will ensure that we have strong standards as part of an employer-led approach on technical education so that courses and apprenticeships develop knowledge, skills and behaviours in individuals that meet the needs of employers and improve overall productivity.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The right hon. Lady may well know that those of us who have worked in factories and in similar jobs realise that often the people at the chalk face, as it were, know at least as much as employers about what skills are needed. How will we ensure the revamped institute includes workers or their representatives—as well as employers, of course—so that there is a rounded view of what is needed and what is appropriate for a particular skill?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have talked significantly about our plans to make sure that workers have more representation at the higher echelons of business. As the Institute for Apprenticeships becomes responsible for technical education, it will of course have employers at its heart,

but it will also work with other stakeholders including, importantly, further education colleges themselves. We will make sure that the institute can truly deliver on our ambition for it to be at the heart of how we drive forward and improve standards in technical education.

Part 2 of the Bill puts in place protections for students for the first time and provides greater certainty for institutions by introducing an insolvency regime for further education and sixth-form colleges. It applies normal insolvency procedures to colleges. At present it is not clear whether or how colleges are covered by existing insolvency law, and the resultant uncertainty is bad for colleges and for students. The Bill will remove the uncertainty for all parties by putting in place a regime that allows for an orderly process in the very unlikely event of a college becoming insolvent. As I have said, we need to rectify the lack of protection for students. Crucially, chapter 4 of part 2 will put in place a special administration regime that will have the special objective of minimising or avoiding disruption to the studies of existing students at affected colleges. These measures will ensure that students can be protected if a college becomes insolvent.

As I mentioned earlier, the current programme of area-based reviews is already putting the sector on a sustainable financial footing for the future. Part of the review process is to encourage colleges to consider needs and provision locally. That will help to ensure that the right provision is available in the right places. The proposed insolvency regime and technical education measures also require certain delegated powers, and we will be providing more information about those to the House before the Bill goes into Committee.

Part 3 of the Bill, the title of which is "Further education: information", includes a measure to amend existing legislation to ensure that, after the devolution of further education functions and the adult education budget to a combined authority, FE providers and others will continue to submit relevant information to the national data system. This will ensure the continued availability of relevant data that are needed to make intelligent and strategic policy decisions about investment in further education.

Six years ago, we inherited a system from Labour in which too many young people—often those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds—left school or college without the skills and qualifications that they needed to build a successful future. Our wide-reaching reforms have had a transformational effect on the education system in this country, and it is important that we now build on the work of my two immediate predecessors in this role, my right hon. Friends the Members for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan).

We know that there is still so much more to do, which is why we are doubling free childcare for working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. We are also working hard to put our first-class universities on an even stronger footing so that they can continue to compete with the very best in the world. We are starting work on opportunity areas to ensure that the education system as a whole can work better to drive social mobility in those parts of the country where it has been stalled for generations, and we have doubled the previous Labour Government's spending on school places and

[Justine Greening]

set out plans to make more good and outstanding school places available to more families all over the country.

The newly broadened remit of the Department for Education, with skills and further education back under one roof alongside schools, gives us an exciting opportunity to build on the excellent work that has already been done over the past six years, both in FE and in the wider education sector. In the end, education underpins how this Government want to create a country that works for everyone so that, irrespective of their background, people can get the skills that they need to take advantage of the opportunities in our country. This is not only good for individuals, but will ensure that we have the skills that our businesses and our economy need so that we can drive up prosperity across the country. The Bill will allow us to take the next steps to give the technical and further education route the status and the spotlight it deserves so that it can flourish as a genuine, high-quality alternative to the academic route, and one that leads to successful careers for those who choose to pursue it. I commend the Bill to the House.

4.59 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I start by associating myself with the well-wishes for the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles).

The Opposition do not intend to oppose the Bill's Second Reading, but many questions remain for the Government to answer during its passage. We accept that the provisions on insolvency are necessary, but their necessity is a sad reflection on the circumstances facing providers under this Government. Further education helps 4 million people a year, playing a vital role in giving our young people the skills they need and supporting older learners into retraining and learning new skills. Since 2010, however, the sector has suffered a real-terms budget cut of 14%. I am sure that the Secretary of State will have seen the National Audit Office report on "Overseeing financial sustainability in the further education sector" and will know that 110 colleges had recorded an operating deficit by 2013-14—more than double the number that had done so in 2010, when her party took office—and that the number of colleges judged by the Skills Funding Agency to have inadequate financial health has more than doubled. However, in the face of that financial crisis, the Government's solution is not the investment that the sector needs, but is simply a way to sweeten the bitter pill of insolvency.

I needed a second chance at education, and many of my Opposition colleagues have experienced the transformative effect that technical and further education can have on young people's lives and on learners at all stages in their lives. That is why the Opposition see the Bill as a missed opportunity. Britain needs a highly skilled, highly trained workforce to succeed in the economy of the future, particularly following Brexit and given the productivity gap that we face.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend share my bemusement at the Secretary of State standing before the House this afternoon extolling the transformational—that was the adjective she used—changes brought about by her Government and the previous coalition Government

and extolling the high-quality work that has been done? Does my hon. Friend share my bemusement that, despite apparently hordes more skilled workers as a result of the changes introduced by this Government and the previous Government, this country's productivity is still absolutely rubbish? If technical and further education were so fantastically transformed, productivity would have improved a whole lot, but it has not.

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree that this Government have done nothing to provide technical skills. Colleges have faced dramatic budget cuts. It is audacious for Ministers to stand at the Dispatch Box and say what they have when they have failed. In fact, the Government included the word "technical" in the Bill only as an add-on—it was not there in the first place.

I would be the first to say that an excellent academic education must be provided to all pupils from all backgrounds, but given that many will not go to university, other educational routes remain vital. That is why it is so important that further education is put on a sustainable financial footing. It is not too late for the Government to do that and to bring forward the changes that the sector needs. Next week, the Chancellor will stand at the Dispatch Box and deliver his first autumn statement. The Government could take that opportunity to ensure that the hundreds of millions of pounds that has been cut from the further education sector since 2010 are reinvested in colleges across Britain, in our future and in our best and most valuable asset: the people.

The Secretary of State could get the Chancellor to bring back the education maintenance allowance, which helped hundreds of thousands of young people from low and middle-income backgrounds to stay in education. The Institute for Fiscal Studies confirmed that the EMA represented value for money for the taxpayer, boosted the rates of young people staying in education and improved attainment. I fear, however, that we will be left disappointed once again. After all, this Government have struggled to match warm words with policy when it comes to education.

James Berry: The hon. Lady is listing a litany of failures, but would she like to take this opportunity to welcome the massive boost in apprenticeships, something which I am sure many of her constituents, like mine, have enjoyed?

Angela Rayner: I will come on to that, because although I welcome some of the Government's proposals on the Institute for Apprenticeships, some of the substance is lacking—let's be honest, it is not in the Bill. The Government have struggled to match their warm words, and were planning to push ahead with cuts to apprenticeship funding that would have been devastating to those in disadvantaged areas. It was only the concentrated opposition in this House, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), along with many other Labour Members, that forced the Government to do a U-turn.

James Berry *rose*—

Angela Rayner: I will make progress and let the hon. Gentleman in again later. Even then, the Government did not announce new investment, nor did they abandon the cuts. Instead, cuts of 40% have become cuts of 20%,

and cuts of 50% have become cuts of 30%. So although we welcome the Institute for Apprenticeships, now to be renamed the “Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education”, we are concerned that changing the name is the extent of the progress made in the Bill. For example, there is no role for apprentices or learners on the institute’s board. First, the Government gave us an office for students with no students, and now we get an Institute for Apprenticeships with no apprentices. There is no inclusion of further education providers, colleges, universities, the relevant trade unions or local authorities either, and I cannot help but wonder if anyone in the sector will actually be allowed on the board. Despite that, we have long welcomed the institute in principle, as the body to implement a plan to improve both the quality of apprenticeships, and access to and participation in them. We will now have the institute, but where is the plan? Why is there so little mention of the institute’s need for a strategy to promote participation among care leavers, learners from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and learners with disabilities? Why have the Government not used the Bill as an opportunity to enshrine in law the recommendations of the Maynard review on apprenticeship accessibility? We simply know too little of the Government’s plans for what the institute will do, and how it will help providers and students in the years to come.

However, that is not really a surprise. After all, the Government do not seem to know what the capacity of the institute will be. In a recent written answer, the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills said:

“We are currently developing the detailed structure of the Institute for Apprenticeships, and therefore we are not yet able to set out initial staff numbers”.

So the Secretary of State and the Minister can come to this House with a Bill to set up this institute, but they cannot tell us how it will be structured, staffed or operated. We can only hope that the institute will fare better than every other body this Government have set up to help them deliver their policies in further education.

Tristram Hunt: Is my hon. Friend also aware that the Minister for School Standards, having said at the Dispatch Box that the royal college of teaching was up and running and had full Government support, has said in answer to my parliamentary questions that there have been no meetings with the Secretary of State, no meetings with Ministers of State, and no effective funding? The royal college of teaching is something we should all support in this House, and I would hope those on the Treasury Bench would get behind it. *[Interruption.]* That is what the parliamentary answers said.

Angela Rayner: I will be interested to see what the Secretary of State has to say about that. I find it absolutely shocking—

Rob Marris: Shocking.

Angela Rayner: Absolutely shocking. We have seen the Skills Funding Agency lose nearly half of its staff since 2011, and we have seen continued and accelerating decline in the staffing of the National Apprenticeship Service and the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. Of course, all those bodies were threatened with further cuts under the “BIS 2020” project, which was overseen by McKinsey for the former Secretary of State. We found out about the details of that not from

any ministerial statement, but through internal documents leaked to my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) in April. Perhaps the Secretary of State can take the opportunity today to clarify that that process is no longer ongoing, and what her plans are for the staffing of bodies transferred from the former Department.

Given that businesses will contribute to the apprenticeships programme through the levy, it would help if the Minister reassured them that they will not be short-changed or end up just paying in to cover for cuts rather than for a genuinely new and improved level of service. As welcome as the institute is, there is concern that it will not deliver if it is not resourced for the job. With all the challenges facing the further education sector today, with the hundreds of millions of pounds of funding lost, and with the sky-rocketing number of providers facing deficits or requiring direct intervention of the Government, now is the time for radical action to ensure that our further education sector is able to continue on a sustainable footing in years to come.

James Berry: The hon. Lady could at least welcome the apprenticeship levy, which her party considered so radical that it would not even include it on its platform for the last election.

Angela Rayner: It is always a pleasure to take an intervention from the hon. Gentleman. I will come on to that point.

I have no doubt that the Secretary of State read the same National Audit Office report that I did on the growing financial crisis in further education. It was that report that recommended the creation of an insolvency regime. That recommendation is in the Bill, but it would be alarming if that were the only response on offer. The Secretary of State seems to be aware that dozens of providers are reaching crisis point, but instead of deciding that something needs to be done about it, she seems to think that we should be helping that process along. While Labour Members call for investment, Government Members offer insolvency.

This Bill offered the Government an opportunity to improve the situation faced by providers and students. Instead, they seem content with managed decline. We should make no mistake that the decline of a sector that helps more than 4 million people every year will fail not only them, but the needs of our economy and society as a whole. For that reason, I urge the Secretary of State to look again at the opportunities that may have been missed in this Bill. We will not oppose the Bill tonight, but we will most certainly seek to improve it.

5.11 pm

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate. I very much welcome the Bill and pay tribute to the ministerial team who are rightly focusing on providing opportunity for all. I speak as somebody who went to a school that was bottom of the league table in Worcestershire and who employed many young people in the 10 years that I ran a business. I recognise the absolute importance of equipping all young people, regardless of background, with the necessary skills to fulfil their potential in their working lives.

[Justin Tomlinson]

I wish to focus on a very narrow part of the Bill, which is to do with the opportunities for young disabled students, particularly on the apprenticeship programme. Typically in this country, non-disabled people have an 80% chance of being employed. If a person has a disability, that figure drops to 48%, which is still up 4% on 2010—an extra half a million more disabled people in work. If a person has a learning disability, they would typically have only a 6% chance of having meaningful and sustainable careers. All Governments of all political persuasions have tried their very best to look at different initiatives and different programmes to try to boost that figure, but, by and large, that figure has stuck rigidly at 6%, and we all desperately want to see huge improvements in that area.

I had the pleasure of visiting Foxes Academy near Bridgwater. It has taken over a former working hotel and takes on young adults with learning disabilities in a three-year programme. For those first two years, their time is split between learning about independent living, slowly progressing up the floors of the hotel as they become more independent, and more skilled and confident. They learn real-life tangible skills within the hotel, which can be transferred to local employers in the restaurant trade, the care homes and other local hotels. On this visit, I was absolutely staggered to see that, at the end of that three-year course, 80% of those students—not 6%—remain in work. That was because of that three-year, constructive and patient approach to learning to give them those skills. They spent the final third year in supported training with local employers, patiently being taught the skills that are needed. It was no surprise that those employers, having invested in training and support, were then keen to keep on those young adults.

I was so impressed that I invited people from the academy to come to see me in Parliament when I was Minister for Disabled People. I asked them why we could not have one of those projects in every town. They said that in the first two years they could take on as many students as they could fit in the hotel, but the challenge was the cost of the supported training in the third year. I said, “Well, surely this is just an apprenticeship by another name. Why can’t we call it an apprenticeship? You can access the funding for the Government’s commendable pledge to have 3 million more apprentices by the end of this Parliament.” They said, “We can’t, because most of our students wouldn’t get the grade C in maths and English that is the typical entry requirement to access an apprenticeship.”

We agreed that we would look into this as a matter of urgency and I met my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), who was the skills Minister at the time. He shared with me that he thought this was both a frustrating situation and a real opportunity to make a difference. We commissioned my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan), Scope, Mencap and many other experienced colleagues, to look at what we could do. As part of this Maynard review—we only gave him three and a half weeks, as we had a suspicion that my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford and I might no

longer be in a position to sign things off after that, and it is a credit to him that he rushed it through—they identified that if we made an exemption for those with a learning disability, we could offer real, tangible opportunities for those young people through the apprenticeship programme. I am delighted that the Government have been so positive in welcoming that. In the Minister’s closing remarks, I would be keen to hear what steps need to be taken for this to happen, how quickly we can do this and how we can advertise it to local employers.

The other key lesson was that there were many local employers who were willing to engage and offer that opportunity. They were not doing that to tick a box, or as a favour because they wanted to feel good. They did it because these young adults, after patient training, proved to be excellent employees who would stay with their organisation year after year. I was sent photographs of many of these young adults on their first steps into a career, and every one of them had a huge beaming smile because of their pride in having the opportunity to work. They were not always full time—some were part time—but they felt proud, as did their parents.

I have one other slight request, to do with university technical colleges. I am very proud that Swindon has its own UTC; I am a huge fan. In fact, our party launched its election manifesto from the Swindon UTC, which mixes modern technology and Swindon’s proud railway heritage in one wonderful, fantastic building.

UTCs could go much further if entry was at the beginning of secondary school, not at 14. I have talked to many of those students and they chose to go there not always because it was the right route for them but because they were unhappy in their secondary school. I have also talked to people who should have gone to the UTC and have a natural aptitude for the courses it offers—in higher engineering or computer programming; in the sorts of roles in which we have desperate skills shortages in this country—but who were already settled in their secondary schools with lots of friends. They did not want to break away from that, so they missed out on taking advantage of the opportunity of going to a UTC. If we could change the entry age to the traditional entry age for secondary school, UTCs would compete on an even footing and those who would most benefit from this opportunity would be more likely to take it.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as well as talking to young people about the time at which they can enter the UTC, parental knowledge is important in influencing that choice? The lack of information for parents, particularly from many local authorities, stops the progress of the UTCs.

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Lady for making that important point. When we talk to the heads of UTCs, they say that one of the biggest challenges is that secondary schools, when seeking to recruit students, go into neighbouring primary schools and get involved in assemblies, have displays and make contact with parents. The primary schools work with those secondary schools to advertise those opportunities, but, obviously, UTCs are seeking to take students away from secondary schools—and with those pupils comes the funding—so the secondary schools are not always receptive to opening their doors and saying, “Look, there’s an alternative. Why not take the funding that follows you to another organisation?”

If we put it back on an even footing by having the same entry point as secondary schools, primary schools will be able to engage with those parents and provide those opportunities.

UTCs are training those young adults with the skills we very much need, and we need to do far more to get businesses to support UTCs by providing mentoring, work experience and expertise. Too many local businesses are not yet up to speed with the great links they can get with UTCs. If they invest early in those students, they will be their next generation of staff. We can use things like the business rates mailer—all businesses, whether they like it or not, will get one every year—to send out information about apprenticeships and UTCs. Local businesses will then know that by investing a little time and support they can help to fill those skills gaps in the future.

I welcome the Bill, which is a positive step in the right direction to deliver opportunity for all.

5.20 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson).

I do not see many exciting opportunities arising from the UK's decision to exit the European Union, but if we are feeling optimistic, as I always try to be, a rebalancing of educational provision and opportunity is one of the elements that we need to look to as we think about a new political economy for the United Kingdom, and part of that has to be a more effective technical and vocational education system.

In his great work "Our Kids", which I urge the Secretary of State to read if she has not already done so, Robert Putnam charts the decline of social mobility in rust belt America, hinting at what has happened in recent days. He is clear that if people are interested in tackling inequality and promoting social mobility, the two areas to focus on in respect of Government provision are high-quality early years support and an excellent system of technical and vocational education. Those are the two elements that really make a difference in terms of inequality.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend mentioned Brexit. Since the referendum, the pound has depreciated to a much more sensible level, such that manufacturing is starting to grow. Does he agree that it is vital that as manufacturing returns to its previous strength, as we hope it will, we have a good technical education system so that we can provide industry with all the skills it needs?

Tristram Hunt: I knew I would not get away with my Brexit comment with my hon. Friend sitting there. Yes, we need to provide the human capital to revive our manufacturing industry and to make sure that we succeed, but in the modern era of manufacturing, with components coming from across the single market, we are going to take a hit on inflationary pressure in relation to some of the manufacturing competitors—

Kelvin Hopkins *rose*—

Tristram Hunt: But we are not going to go down that road too quickly.

I welcome large parts of the Bill. It is good to see the focus on technical and vocational qualifications. I pay tribute to the work of Lord Sainsbury, and in so doing alert the House to what is in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. He has been a passionate supporter of technical and vocational education, and his time as science Minister taught him that one of the blocks for achieving excellence in British science was making sure that we have not just top-flight research chemists, physicists and biologists, but high-quality technicians in our science-based industries. We are not producing those level 4 or 5 qualified technicians who are fundamental to the success of the science base.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) pointed out, productivity and economic growth demand that we invest more effectively in technical and vocational education. We should also see it as an opportunity. The Edge Foundation has shown time and again that we are going to see a huge growth in jobs in science, engineering and technology, and we need to provide the professionals to fulfil those opportunities. Much of our education system works against that. Whether we think of Progress 8, EBacc or the Ofsted inspection requirements, we have on the one hand a demand for an education system almost on the model that the British set up in Germany to provide our technical and vocational system, and on the other hand every element of incentive in our education system working strongly against that.

I am excited by the addition of the technical component to the Institute for Apprenticeships. I urge the apprenticeships Minister to visit the institutes of technical education in Singapore, which are doing a phenomenal amount on cutting-edge technical and vocational education, as that economy, too, begins to think about the kind of provision it needs to fill the skills gap and about the very demanding requirements on the sector.

My reservations are as follows. First, having the divide at 16 is a missed opportunity. My passion in the next few years will be to see whether we can create a consensus in this House on committing ourselves to ending GCSEs by 2025 and to getting rid of a school leaving qualification for people who do not leave school. We should strip out an examination that is an anomaly across Europe and America and that is not providing our education system with the academic or technical, vocational learning it requires. I urge the House to think much more creatively and imaginatively about having a 14-to-19 framework that includes an academic baccalaureate and a technical baccalaureate. That would get over some of the criticisms levelled at the Bill about having too narrow a focus on educational provision from 16 to 19. A broadly constituted baccalaureate between 14 and 19 would work, so I urge the Secretary of State to think big and to set up some kind of bipartisan thinking about how we—in exactly the same way that countries such as Singapore and Finland manage their education systems—can reach a national consensus in a decade that the GCSE model, having served its time, is no longer necessary. The introduction of differing pathways at 16 in the Bill is interesting, but I urge us to think now about how we put that upstream and have some of those differing pathways from 14 to 19.

Secondly, following on from my comments to my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), careers guidance is so important in this. When we think

[Tristram Hunt]

about accessing UTCs or further education colleges, having decent and effective careers guidance is really significant. The last Secretary of State had a clever plan—a sort of careers guidance and business thing—that was going to work. I do not know what has happened to it, or whether it is coming under review by the new Secretary of State, and I more than accept that there was no great golden age of careers guidance, but if we want technical and vocational education to work, we must have effective careers guidance. We have to make sure that parents and young people not only have the career immersion in primary school, but have effective careers guidance early on in secondary. That is the way they can access FE and UTC provision.

Thirdly, the Secretary of State valiantly defended retakes for English and maths GCSEs. I want English and maths to continue in education until 18, but—I see this in my constituency, and I think colleagues see it in theirs—young people are retaking and retaking GCSEs on a highly academic syllabus, which the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) introduced. We can debate its merits, but it is really not useful or effective in terms of young people's career pathways. What these young people need is a good level 2 post-16 qualification that gives them the English and maths skills they need, but does not give them an academic syllabus that they do not necessarily require. I am all for people pursuing the academic pathway, just as much as the technical, vocational pathway, but if we are forcing them to do that at great expense, and causing them to be frustrated about their learning, that is one element of the previous Secretary of State's system that the current Secretary of State might want to think about.

When it comes to technical and vocational education, we create a lot of institutions: UTCs, FE institutions and career colleges. As I understand it, UTCs were not part of the FE review, so we have divided up the review of further education colleges without taking account of UTC provision, even though there is a lot of crossover between UTCs and further education colleges. In Sheffield, for example, the further education college sponsors the UTC. If the Secretary of State is looking for savings, overprovision and institution-building are prevalent in the English education system, and a bit of co-ordination among those institutions would be a good idea.

That leads me to my final point, which is that the best way to achieve that aim is to devolve educational provision. We are beginning to devolve skills policy to combined authorities and directly elected mayors, but we need to think much more creatively about devolving schools policy to directly elected mayors and combined authorities. The needs of the Cornish economy are different from the needs of the Birmingham economy, which are different from the needs of the Northumbria economy. If we devolve some of the authority to a local level, we will end up with a more effective technical and vocational education system.

I admire some of the principles in the Bill, and I admire the direction of travel, as we now say. I urge the Secretary of State, as she begins to think big, to push this upstream and think about the 14-to-19 technical and vocational pathways.

5.31 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I am going to talk about the local experience of further education in Kent. I welcome the independent report of the panel, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, that conducted an important review into the post-16 skills system. The panel was right to advise on improvements that could be made, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) has just said. Improvements were needed after flaws were spotted following changes made in the last Parliament. The system is over-complex, with a confusing array of courses and qualifications that are insufficiently linked to the world of work and the needs of employers. Lord Sainsbury and the Government were right to accept the panel's recommendations in July 2016 and publish a post-16 skills plan setting out their vision.

The proposals are about boosting technical education to make sure that it is of high quality and responds to employer needs, and the introduction of a new insolvency regime to protect students' interests. Such things matter. In Kent, we have long had a problem with an institution that has variously been called K College and South Kent College. It suffered from debt problems and, frankly, ate principals. The problems were so deep-set that every now and again, the principal would be sacked and the college would be renamed, but the whole thing would continue. The fundamental problems were the big debt overhang and the teaching of courses that employers did not want—courses that did not have the relevance to learners that is completely necessary. That is why the focus on good-quality technical education and information sharing between colleges and local authorities is so important. It is important for everyone—local authorities, employers and educationists—to work together and make a good job of it, because when they do so, learners benefit.

K College finally collapsed in a heap of debt, and it had to be sorted out during the last Parliament. It basically had to be broken up. Part of it was taken over by Hadlow College and part of it by East Kent College. We were able to reset and restabilise the whole situation, but doing so was difficult and took a long time. There was no real process for doing so, because there was no proper insolvency reconstruction mechanism. That is why this Bill is important. It will put in place a proper process, rather than haphazardly trying to make everything work and gluing it all together, and it will ensure that there is a focus on the kinds of skills that learners need.

In my constituency, the East Kent College campus in Dover was threatened with closure as part of the reconstruction. I fought against that for the very simple reason that many people have a low capital base, low household wealth and low aspiration, and they simply would not travel further out of Dover for skills education. That is a real concern, and we made the case for keeping the Dover campus because the skills it taught were more in keeping with the jobs available in the local economy.

The most important thing we can all do for our young people and our learners is to provide ladders in life—to raise the bar of aspiration and to tell people, “You can succeed and achieve, and you can do really well in life. If you go to college and learn some skills, you will do better, and you will achieve and succeed.” The most important thing to do, particularly for this

Conservative Government who are so committed to the new meritocracy, is to allow people to climb ladders in life at any time.

Much has been said about whether we should have skills education from 14, 16 or 19, but we need skills education to be available at any point in life. We need the ladder to descend at any time. Many people with a difficult home life are not able to achieve and succeed in the usual exams—in school at 16, with A-levels at 18 or for a degree course at 21—and many people who have simply been slow to grow up have spent their teenage years less formatively than they might have done and with people who have not necessarily been a good influence on them. For those who have had such a life, but who suddenly wake up at 21 and 25, a ladder should descend for them to climb. Skills education is not just about the teenage years, but about lifelong learning because everyone should be able to climb the ladder of prosperity and success at any time.

For me, it was important to make sure that we kept the Dover campus of K College, which is now part of East Kent College, and to make the case for a new FE college in Deal—I also represent Deal—which suffers from so many of the same issues of low aspiration. In such ways, we can raise the bar and give people greater aspiration and life chances. That will enable them to find it easier to climb the ladders in their home communities—to get more skills and get better-paid jobs in the areas in which they live—without having to move away, as so many do. I am very passionate about such things, because we need more further and technical education in our towns, particularly coastal towns such as Dover and Deal, which too often suffer from less aspiration than they should.

I feel very strongly that we must focus on and do more about building an aspiration nation, with such ladders in life and life chances, and with proper processes for when things go wrong. That is why I think the Bill is fundamentally a good thing.

5.37 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). It is a rare treat for us to agree on something, but I did find myself shouting, “Hear, hear” about his comments on adult education. All of us in the House would applaud that, but I urge him to look at what has happened to adult education during the past six years, because I am afraid that that ladder has been well and truly kicked away for many of the people wanting to get such skills later in life.

It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt). I entirely agree with much of what he said, especially about how we should tackle some of the deep-rooted causes of inequality and of the lack of social mobility in this country. To the issues he raised about the quality of early years education, which is so critical, and technical and vocational education, which we are discussing today, I would only add that we need enough quality teachers teaching all our children, but especially the most disadvantaged.

It is worth pondering for a moment, if you do not mind, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we should have been in the Chamber this evening to discuss a different education Bill—the education for all Bill, which was

going to force all good and outstanding schools to become academies against their wishes. The Technical and Further Education Bill was only meant to be a small part of the bigger education for all Bill. I am glad we are not discussing that Bill, because it would have been a terrible mistake to force good and outstanding schools, against their wishes, to become academies, when we simply do not have the capacity, oversight and accountability in the system to tackle such a change. We all have to admit that in its place, we are left with a much-reduced education Bill. None the less, it contains some important principles, as others have said. I welcome the extra focus on post-16 vocational and technical education and the extra support the Government are giving it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central said, we should all welcome the direction of travel.

I want to raise a couple of issues with the unintended consequences of the Sainsbury review and how it is being implemented, including through measures in the Bill. I worry about the idea that at 16, someone should choose either an entirely technical education or an entirely academic education. That is more akin to the grammar school era of the 1950s and '60s than today's world of work and modern economy. Most of the jobs that we need today and will need in the future involve a blended mix of academic and vocational education. They require general applied qualifications, where those two streams come together. As many Members have commented, that is exactly what the best university technical colleges and further education colleges provide—highly academic and highly technical education alongside one another.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend mentioned joint pathways being undertaken by the same further education institutions. She might like to know that the secondary school where I am chair of governors has a construction academy attached to the main academy. We do everything from elite sport right through to construction and vocational pathways. It is all prestige and all rooted in academic and vocational attainment, all under one roof. We can do it from the beginning right through to further education.

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent intervention. It sounds like just the sort of institution we should explore further and support.

As I said, many of the jobs that we need today and will need in the future require both types of education. The pathways into professions such as nursing, engineering, health and social care and many more require a blend of general applied and academic education, as well as technical and vocational education. That will be especially true in post-Brexit Britain, where the supply of such workers is likely to be reduced further, particularly in nursing, social care, health and engineering. Closing down those pathways at this point in time could have serious unintended consequences.

It is a well-trodden pathway for people to go to university to study nursing, health and social care or engineering with an applied general academic qualification and some technical BTEC qualifications alongside it. That pathway is highly regarded by universities. We should be careful about closing down that pathway, because if Ministers look, they will see that the vast majority of the tens of thousands of undergraduates who come into the system through that route have that blended mix of academic and vocational qualifications.

Rob Marris: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. We need to think about technical education not just for the jobs of tomorrow, but for the jobs of the day after tomorrow. I am considerably older than her and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) is a little older than me. When he entered the workforce, let alone when I did decades ago, many skilled jobs existed that do not exist now, such as in printing. Typesetting basically does not exist now. The world has changed and we have to equip the coming generation with not only the skills they need now, but the flexibility to adapt to what the workforce will look like, inasmuch as we can foretell that, in the next 30 years.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend makes a great point, although I do not want to get into the relative ages of Members here. But I look at my own children and think of the world of work ahead of them. We perhaps have an old-fashioned view of jobs such as engineering—engineers come in all shapes and sizes now, from digital engineers, sound engineers and construction engineers to the other types of engineer that we may know about. A key issue with the productivity gap we are facing in this country is the problem we have in applying technology and technological advances in small and medium-sized companies.

I want children from Manchester Central to have exactly those types of skills; they will therefore need literacy, numeracy and other academic qualifications but also education in digital engineering and many other technical areas. The combination of the two will be the route for so many, and for all jobs in the future—I firmly believe that. I look at my own son, who I think will want to be an engineer one day; he is highly technically able—he has great skills there—but is highly academic as well. I want him to have the option to do both right through till 18.

The Minister seems to recognise the issue here, as he has recently launched degree-level apprenticeship scheme, which I welcome. However, the tiny numbers involved in that scheme can in no way make up for the tens of thousands already going through the university vocational pathway. I hope that he is not falling foul of the same ideological dogma that his colleague the Minister for Schools and a previous Secretary of State for Education perhaps fell for in trying to cut away entirely the university professional pathway into teaching. As the Minister will know, that has in no small part caused the recruitment crisis in the teaching profession; stripping away the university pathway to teaching has meant that teacher supply is now at crisis point. I know the Minister, and so know that he is a lot more pragmatic than some of his colleagues; I urge him to watch the situation carefully, and make sure that these well-trodden routes—both academic and vocational—into professions remain very much open for our young people.

I will touch on a couple of other points that have already been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central raised resits. I concur with him entirely. We have to look again at the enforcing of required resits post 16. In many cases, less than 50% of children are passing those GCSEs the second time around. Many FE and post-16 institutions are struggling to get in the teaching skills needed to get children through GCSEs, as that is not something they are used to doing. The size and nature of the maths and English curricula make them increasingly difficult for

some children to pass, and they are not necessary for the types of careers those children may want to go on to.

Like my hon. Friend, I entirely support the notion that children should do English and maths right through to the age of 18, but the Minister should clarify what will be required for resits. Will it be a level 4 or a level 5? I understand that it is a level 4 this year and next year, and will then go to level 5. We do not know what is happening; never mind parents and children, what are employers to make of that?

Finally, we should not have this debate without looking at the international comparisons for our funding levels for 16-to-19 education in this country. We compare really badly with our OECD competitors: we do well in terms of funding from five to 16, but then there is a significant dip in per-pupil funding. After that, funding goes through the roof for those who make it to higher education. We need a better and more consistent funding stream. The transformation we need in this area will be achieved only when we couple this sort of reform with funding.

5.50 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): For too long, technical and vocational education has been seen as the poor relation to academic education, so I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment, in her speech last week, to bring the "same lens and focus" to the technical education routes that most people follow. Perhaps more than many hon. Members, I know the importance of technical education because my constituency sends fewer of its young people to higher education than any other, although we have a lot of young people in further education and on apprenticeships. That is the genesis of my interest in, and passion for, this issue and the Bill.

I want the Government to succeed with their ambitious target of 3 million apprenticeships. I also want the Government to succeed with the Bill because I believe its spirit is well placed. Its basis is sound, too, and I welcome the fact that it aims to deliver the recommendations of the Independent Panel on Technical Education, chaired by Lord Sainsbury, but—it is important for an Opposition party to have a "but"—I am concerned about a number of issues. I want the Bill to work for the people of Bristol South, so I want to use this contribution to seek some clarity from the Government.

The Institute of Apprenticeships and Technical Education will have a huge remit. I support its aims and will help to support its success, but I would like more detail about how it will deliver its remit in such a short timescale, especially as the Institute for Apprenticeships is currently operating without a permanent chief executive. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee, which looked at proposals for apprenticeships, I believe that there is a danger that the reform could suffer if the new institute's remit also includes sweeping changes to technical education. Will the Minister assure us that such fears are groundless and that the institute's "lens and focus" will remain rigorous?

As the Secretary of State acknowledged last week, the way in which we as a country help young people to fulfil their potential and use their talents will become more important than ever in post-Brexit Britain. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central

(Tristram Hunt) considered the positives that Brexit might bring in this area, but they will be something of a challenge. We all know that in any period of change and transition there is a danger of focusing only on future beneficiaries and neglecting those already in the system, especially if the existing system is flawed. I would therefore like assurances that my constituents who are going through the system will not lose out in the transition to the new framework.

It is important to consider those who stand to gain in the future: young people who are currently in school, and their parents and carers who want to help them to navigate and plan for their futures. What are the Government doing to ensure that those who will encounter the new system receive the guidance and advice they need now so that they will not lose out when the new frameworks and assessments are introduced? My concern stems from a number of new provisions, particularly in relation to university technical colleges. Parents are not involved in these discussions. As a parent of three boys in secondary school, it has been eye-opening to find out how little information gets to parents and how little we understand about the future of our own young people. We cannot allow those who lack the necessary prior knowledge to navigate the system to flounder, so will the Government please provide proactive support and guidance? How will they do that?

I take issue with the idea in the Bill that employers should be at the heart of the system. Surely it is students— young people themselves—whose interests must be at the heart of any Bill that seeks to improve their opportunities.

On social mobility, I have explained that my constituents' interest in this matter runs deep, not least due to our low take-up of higher education, but there is more to it than that. I welcome the introduction of the 15 vocational pathways but, given that I represent a constituency in which 80% of apprentices are on schemes with the lowest wage differentials, I want to know how the Government will ensure that young people are doing vocational training, including apprenticeships, in the right areas, and that that training gives them greater earning potential and more career opportunities.

I also want to know how young people will access opportunities in areas where local providers struggle to improve quality, alongside dealing with their financial difficulties. As the Minister is aware, the Public Accounts Committee has looked closely at the sustainability of the FE sector and how apprenticeships can work when providers are struggling. Some of the 15 routes appear to be apprentice-only openings but, as we know, many employers will not countenance taking on a 16-year-old apprentice. Additionally, what careers advice will be available to young people in my constituency to ensure they are best advised on which pathway to follow? I would welcome more clarity on the process for switching between academic and the technical routes, which I raised with the Government last week.

Finally, I appeal to the Government to make the revised system as easy to navigate as possible for young people, and their parents and carers. Much work has been done in recent years to make academic pathways easy to navigate, but we need to take the chance the Bill presents to ensure parity of transparency and ease of navigation for those pursuing this all-important technical route.

5.56 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a great privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who rightly set the Minister a series of challenges around pathways, transparency, equivalency and all those sorts of things. She raised very important issues.

Drawing on the Association of College's key facts and figures, I will begin by reminding the House of the value of colleges and their contribution to the country. Colleges provide a range of education and training, helping to provide skills and qualifications to students entering the workforce. Colleges educate and train 2.7 million people, including 1.9 million adults, and 744,000 16 to 18-year-olds choose to study in colleges. Almost every general further education college offers apprenticeships, with 306,000 people choosing to take one in a college. Some 153,000 people study higher education in colleges, and students aged 19-plus in further education generate an additional £70 billion for the economy over their lifetimes. It is worth reminding ourselves of the great contribution that colleges make.

I declare an interest as someone who has led a college—back when I had a real job—and therefore knows the nuts and bolts of doing that. John Leggott College in my constituency, which I was privileged to be principal of, is still doing a cracking job locally, as is North Lindsey College, the general FE college. These colleges make a real difference to people's lives day in, day out. However, the funding challenges that colleges face are very real: a 17% cut in sixth-form college funding since 2011; and a significant squeeze in adult education funding, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) set out earlier.

I have high hopes for the Education Secretary, the first Secretary of State to have been educated in a comprehensive sixth-form college, but when she says that area-based reviews are already putting the sector on a sustainable funding footing for the future, I fear that she is being over-optimistic. The area-based reviews have reported, but nothing has really happened as a result. Indeed, if the funding cuts continue and the autumn statement does not contain a commitment to the 5% increase in college funding that the AOC is calling for, the challenges facing colleges will remain significant. I therefore do not think that area-based reviews will be the cavalry coming over the hill.

We have seen under this Government a plethora of confusion in post-16 provision. Area-based reviews did not look at the new university technical colleges or post-16 provision in schools. We have a complete hotch-potch: free schools, studio schools—a whole mess has replaced the preceding coherence.

I am in favour of university technical colleges where they are needed, but if a college is established as additional capacity in an area that does not need it, that creates much more inefficiency. It is not good enough for the Government to continue to fund such colleges more generously on the basis of estimates rather than real numbers. We see problems in these areas that we all know about as politicians—even in times of austerity, we can fund our pet projects—but it should not be like that, because that lets our young people down.

The insolvency scheme introduced by the Bill is probably not necessary, but we will need to see how it develops. The Sixth Form Colleges Association is concerned that

[*Nic Dakin*]

it might create unintended consequences in the way banks lend to the sector, so we need to make sure that the right conversations take place between the Government and the banks. We would not want the policy to make it more difficult for colleges to go about their business.

Let me pick up one or two issues that hon. Members have raised, starting with the debate over GCSE C grades in maths and English, and the matter of functional skills. When I was principal of a college, all our students did either English and maths GCSE, or functional skills. They are both good, solid qualifications, but overall it was the opposite of the holiday postcard: there was a very different feeling from “Wish you were here” in maths and English classes. Thankfully, however, and thanks to great maths and English teachers around the country, the situation has been transformed, and people now do quite well when they resit maths or English post-16. The post-16 sector has always had bespoke qualifications that are appropriate for an older age group studying additional qualifications alongside them, rather than a system of merely repeating what was done at the pre-16 level. I ask the Minister to think carefully about functional skills because it seems that they are being put to one side. If the Minister is going to correct that, it would be very helpful, because that is certainly felt outside this place.

The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) is pursuing a good campaign on getting apprenticeships for young people with learning challenges, which I support. He cited the example of what is happening in the hospitality sector. My example would be a young constituent who recently contacted me. She has level 2 functional skills, which she achieved with great effort during her time in college. She is now doing a level 3 apprenticeship, but she has been told that she has to get a grade C in English GCSE and that her level 2 functional skills will not count. I hope that the Minister will confirm that he will brush that aside, because that seems like unnecessary repetition for a young person who has worked extremely hard. Instead of following the route suggested by the hon. Member for North Swindon, things seem to be going in the opposite direction, so I encourage the Minister to find ways to address the situation

That brings me to the key point I want to focus on: the nature of applied general qualifications. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central said, those qualifications are crucial so that young people can work towards the professions and jobs that will be needed when an ever-changing workforce face ever-changing challenges. Paragraph 2.18 of the “Post-16 Skills Plan” states:

“We plan to review the contribution of—
applied general qualifications—

“to preparing students for success in higher education; what part they can play in a reformed system; and the impact any reform would have on the government’s ambitions on widening participation. We will announce our decisions later in the year.”

Well, it is quite late in the year already, and those qualifications are crucial because of the way in which they work. They are combined with other qualifications: a student might study for a BTEC alongside an A-level, for instance. That combination gives students flexibility, enabling them to gain applied general qualifications as well as academic qualifications, and to move forward positively and successfully.

I know from my own experience that those qualifications have allowed young people who might not be suited to a full programme of three A-levels to find a successful model in an area in which they are interested and to which they are committed, with good, strong progression routes. I am anxious for us not to end up, in the course of our entirely proper search for more rigorous and effective technical education, throwing the baby of strong applied general qualifications out with the bathwater.

I know that the Sixth Form Colleges Association has been convening round tables of practitioners and arranging for members of the Department to visit sixth-form colleges to see the good work that is going on there, but I urge the Minister to champion applied general qualifications and the role that they can play for young people in driving up standards and developing progression routes. I hope that he will also give us some idea of when the review mentioned in the skills plan will take place, and when it is likely that a report will be produced.

6.7 pm

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who shared with us his professional experience of guiding many young people towards the paths that they need to take. It is a shame that we have not given greater priority to further education in the past, because the skills challenge that we face remains acute, as it has been for a very long time. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the shadow Minister, shared with us her own rocky path from secondary education to a career and secure work. A number of people find it a difficult path. That is the challenge that the Bill seeks to meet, and many of us are supportive in respect of both the path and the challenge.

I left my school in Bognor Regis—ironically, the constituency of the Minister for School Standards—with almost no usable qualifications. I had to return to secondary school at the age of 25 to obtain the qualifications that I needed in order to return to the education system. I know from first-hand experience that for many young people, the door to education is slammed shut and needs to be broken down. We all tend to assume that the doors to education, and indeed to all our public services, are open all the time. I am very keen to remind Labour Members, as well as others, that doors are often shut and that it is our job to break them open, rather than expecting individuals to remove the barriers to getting the best out of our public services the first time round without waiting for the second.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is making a strong point. Some years ago, funding for adult education at sixth-form colleges was taken away. Excellent teachers and wonderful facilities are no longer used in the evenings, which used to enable adults to go back and take A-levels, for example, and possibly go to university after that. The door was shut very firmly some years ago, and it should be reopened.

Peter Kyle: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

This door being slammed shut, often in the faces of young people who do not have the skills to break it down or a background that encourages them to break it down, is one of the reasons why we have ended up with a society where those who are asset-rich will succeed in life and those who are talent-rich but asset-poor will

very often not succeed. That is why it is incredibly important that we get this Bill right. It is of paramount importance for the Government's plans for technical education, apprenticeships and the apprenticeship levy, which is now only a matter of months away from being launched.

It has long been my view that the levy as currently formatted is too rigid to fully take into account the skills challenges facing our country. When taking evidence on the issue of skills as a member of the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills and as chair of the all-party group on further education and lifelong learning, it became clear that some sectors will struggle with the way the levy is currently formulated. The technology sector, for example, needs to invest very early, right back to the early years. I have visited many technology companies that are investing in nursery and primary education, and in secondary education. It is a sector that needs programming skills, and it needs imagination, flair and creativity in the way that young people develop those skills. Often in such sectors post-16 is just too late. I support the apprenticeship levy, but we need to get it right, and if we are not careful we will end up with a perverse incentive in the system whereby technology companies are forced to invest in post-16 education, and in order to pay for it, they will be withdrawing their support for pre-16 education, which would be a tragedy for our economy, particularly in the post-Brexit era when we might find that such companies struggle to secure investment and recruits from abroad with the right skills. We are entering tricky territory and we need to get this right first time. On mention of the word "Brexit", I am very pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) is still in his place.

It also concerns me that existing spending on employer-sponsored degrees or graduate schemes will not be recognised by the levy. That risks closing those routes in favour of what could be entry-level apprenticeships in order for companies to get back what they pay for the levy. The Bill creates an institute for apprenticeships that also covers technical education. I want to see that institute play a strong role in ensuring that standards remain high in apprenticeships and technical education. I still have real concerns that the levy, along with the Government's pledge to have 3 million apprenticeship starts—starts, not completions, I note—risks incentivising a dash for quantity rather than quality.

I listened with great interest to the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) who made a fantastic contribution about the role of apprenticeships in providing productive pathways into the workforce for people with disabilities. At a recent surgery I was visited by the mother of a young woman who is trying to apply for an apprenticeship. She has a very specific disability that has always prevented her from succeeding in maths. It is an extremely difficult disability for her to live with, but all through the education system she has been provided with specialist support and allowances that have enabled her to succeed. However, she cannot apply for any apprenticeships because she does not have the maths qualification. She is applying for a dog grooming apprenticeship. It seems absurd to me that she is prevented from taking this incredible pathway into work because of her disability. I have raised this with Ministers in writing, and I hope that in his winding-up speech the Minister will show a willingness to inject a little common

sense for those few people who struggle with the current system. Although this has an impact on very few people, it is a profound impact.

I have pressed the previous Secretary of State and the previous Minister for Skills on these matters. I should like to join other Members in wishing the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) well. He stood as a parliamentary candidate in Hove in the 2005 general election, in which I played a key role in the winning candidate's campaign. I got to know the hon. Member well at the time, and I say with all sincerity that I and all those who worked on the campaign wish him a very speedy recovery. I pressed him and the then Secretary of State to introduce a target for the number of apprenticeship starts at level 3 and above, because that is where the training will really address our skills needs. It is nice to know that someone has been reading all the parliamentary questions that I have been submitting on this subject, because the Policy Exchange's report on apprenticeships, which was released on Friday, calls on the Government to do just that. I hope that the present Minister will take heed of that report. I would support him in embedding targets for quality as well as quantity in the Government's plans.

I have also pressed the Government to set a target for apprenticeship completions, which I am sure we all agree is the key figure. There is no point in getting 3 million people to start apprenticeships if a significant number of them simply drop out. The Minister has not previously shown any interest in setting a target for completions, but I noted that the Secretary of State was more conciliatory on this point when responding to an intervention today. I hope that means that the door is still open and that such a target will now be considered.

The Institute for Public Policy Research report calls for an assurance that the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will have the necessary resources and power to properly enforce quality standards. I totally agree with that. Only last week, I asked the Minister for details of the staffing levels for the institute. I hope that we will get clear answers to these questions during the passage of the Bill. Given the imminent closure of the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, which did a great deal of work with employers to utilise labour market information to map out skills gaps and sectoral needs, it is vital that the institute is able to fill that void. If it cannot, we will be much worse off.

The Bill also introduces a new insolvency regime for FE colleges, with the aim of protecting students if such an institution should become insolvent. The Government say that this follows on from the area reviews, which aimed to ensure that all FE colleges within a certain area were on a solid financial footing. In Brighton and Hove, we are lucky to have three excellent colleges: BHASVIC, City College and Varndean College. Our area review, covering Sussex, started last year, but despite an expectation that the final report would be published some months ago, it still has not seen the light of day. I hope the Minister can offer some reassurance to me and my neighbouring MPs, as well as those in other areas who are waiting for their reviews to be published, that they will be released shortly. Providers and students are anxious to know what the future holds for the institutions in which they work and study. In the Budget in March, which feels like a very long time ago, the Government pledged to "review the gaps in support for lifetime learning, including for flexible and part-time study."

[Peter Kyle]

I wonder if the Minister could update us on that, too. When can we expect the results of that study?

I welcome the Bill as a chance to focus on technical and further education, which often feels neglected in the overall educational landscape in this place and beyond. However, the Bill and the Government's policy priorities leave a lot of questions unanswered, and I hope that the Bill's passage through Parliament will give us a chance to remedy that.

6.18 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in the debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). He is currently the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning—a job that I had many years ago. I have had a long association with the further education and post-16 sector. I taught in further education more than 40 years ago, and while I was teaching a basic statistics course, I discovered that one of the major problems with education in Britain is the poor level of mathematics teaching. The students I taught had difficulty with basic computation, multiplication and division. I found that quite shocking at the time, but the problem has continued.

Some 20 years ago, the great Lord Claus Moser produced a report on numeracy and literacy, finding that more than 50% of the population was functionally innumerate. He illustrated that point by saying that 50% of the population did not understand what 50% meant, which is quite surprising—if not shocking. More recently, I asked the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), why we were having to recruit so many qualified engineers from abroad and he said that it was because our mathematics is not good enough to produce sufficient engineers. There is a serious problem.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem with mathematics is down to English culture? It is still acceptable for people to say words to the effect of, "Ooh, I don't do maths," without that being seen by their interlocutors as an admission of abject failure. It is just seen as a bit of a joke. It is a cultural problem. This is about not only the education system, but our culture, particularly in England. It is appalling.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with my hon. Friend, but it is changing and I am optimistic about that. People such as me who are good at maths are regarded as being a bit of a geek, but what is wrong with being good at maths? In the country of Isaac Newton, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Alan Turing, why should we be ashamed of being good at maths? That is being addressed, but we are still having to recruit thousands of engineers from abroad because people cannot do the maths to become engineers through our education system.

As I said, I taught in further education 40 years ago, but I also spent four years as chair of governors at the then Luton College of Higher Education when we were producing hundreds of qualified engineers doing ONCs, HNCs and then AMIMechEs and so on. They were good engineers and they could do the maths. It may just be that we have declined in some areas because the manufacturing demand is not as great as it was. We are

now trying to pick up the manufacturing sector again and we are realising that we have missed out on maths.

I am happy to say that Luton College of Higher Education went on to become the University of Luton and then the University of Bedfordshire. The vice-chancellor is now Bill Rammell, a former colleague in Parliament, and its chancellor is Mr Speaker—the greatest honour of all—and I am absolutely delighted about that. I have also been a governor of the superb Luton Sixth Form College for 25 years. It does brilliant work and gets better and better every year.

Barnfield College is also in my constituency. A dozen or so years ago, it was the first ever general FE college to be given beacon status, but it went into serious decline and wound up almost collapsing into a state of failure a year or two back. It has now been picked up by its great new principal Tim Eyton-Jones and I am sure that it will be revived, but it needs Government support. It should never have been allowed to get into that situation. The neglect of colleges was criminal. Barnfield is now on the up and will be great again, but it needs the active support of Government, particularly in finance.

In Parliament, I was for some years chair of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning—lifelong learning is also important—but I am now chair of the all-party parliamentary group on sixth form colleges and am pleased about that. Colleges in general, FE colleges in particular, have been neglected over decades. Colleges represent an abused sector of education, and one reason for that is that so many people in the political sphere have no connection with further education. They go to posh schools—grammar schools, public schools, whatever—and then to university. Indeed, some become special advisers—a former Spad is in our midst now—and then go into politics never having touched further education or understood what it is about.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend recall the reorganisation of Government Departments in about 2007—sadly under a Labour Government—when the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills was set up? It took a week for the Government to realise that they had not put further education in either of the two possible Departments.

Kelvin Hopkins: There is another story, which may not be true, about what happened when incorporation was introduced in 1993. When the legislation was going through, the then Education Secretary was asked what was going to happen to sixth-form colleges and he said, "Oh, shall we put them in the FE sector?" It was a last-minute thought just to drop them into that sector. Sixth-form colleges are really schools and had they stayed with the local education authorities, we would by now have a lot more of them because LEAs would never have given away all the sixth-forms from their schools to create new sixth-form colleges because they were a different, independent sector.

Unfortunately, LEAs, and indeed, councillors are possessive about their institutions and do not want to give them away. I have experience of that, because when I was chair of governors of the Luton College of Higher Education, we had a battle royal to get that college into the higher education sector—out of LEA control and into the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council.

The chief education officer threatened to sack the college principal for pursuing that avenue, and I had to intervene to say to the CEO publicly, “If you sack the principal, you will have me to contend with and I will fight you all the way.” He backed off and we got what became the University of Luton and, subsequently, the University of Bedfordshire. LEAs are, understandably, possessive and they are not going to give away their sixth-forms to move towards sixth-form colleges. Had they done that, our education system would be much better, but that is another story.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about people’s understanding or experience of the FE sector, but may I just invite him to reflect on the statement he made a moment or so ago? He said that the Conservative Benches are full of posh boys and girls who went to posh schools. A good four or five of us sitting on the Parliamentary Private Secretary Bench this afternoon paid no fees at all for our education and are products of state school, hard work and good teachers.

Kelvin Hopkins: I thank the hon. gentleman for his intervention, but I think the majority of Members, probably on both sides of this House, have not gone through the further education sector. A small number have, and they understand this, but a high proportion are not very familiar with FE and the vast contribution it makes to our society, in all sorts of ways.

Karin Smyth: I agree with my hon. Friend about this. I went to an FE college to do my A-levels, but what he is saying applies not just to politicians, but to people in our media, our legal establishment and throughout other walks of life. They do not have experience of going through that sector, which means that it is often the forgotten sector.

Kelvin Hopkins: I agree with my hon. Friend about that, and of course another cultural factor is the fact that we are not aware of things. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) says, there is this idea that mathematics is something we do not do; we say, “Oh, I can’t do maths”. People do not boast about how they cannot read. I want to make sure that everybody can read, and we should have adult education to make sure that everyone can. There is a problem with our mathematics, and I invite Ministers and shadow Ministers to visit the wonderful sixth-form college where I am governor to find out how to do things well, because so much that goes on our college is brilliant.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is making some good points. I did an A-level in not just maths, but further maths. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”]

Rob Marris: Good for you!

Lucy Powell: I did not do very well in the further maths.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House is going to defend the hon. Lady. We have heard hon. Gentlemen say that this is something about which we should not laugh, and nor should we

Lucy Powell: I find myself feeling how I did during my A-levels, when I was the only girl in the class doing science A-levels—it has taught me well for this place.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) agree that the issue of maths teachers is now a looming crisis in this country? Someone who has a first or a 2:1 in maths is a very desirable potential employee, and therefore the teaching route is just not as attractive as it once was and we are facing a crisis in maths education.

Kelvin Hopkins: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that. One of the most interesting things about Britain is that we produce more accountants than almost other country in the world. People who are numerate can become an accountant and with an accountancy qualification they can earn a lot more money than they can by being a teacher. An accountancy friend of mine said years ago, “The reason we have so many accountants in Britain is that we are so bad at maths, we need accountants to do our work for us—our tax returns and so on.” I am digressing.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The hon. Gentleman mentions teaching, and I have been waiting patiently for him to refer to his own experience of teaching at the excellent Oaklands further education college, to which many of my constituents send their children. As a comprehensive-educated special adviser, it was somewhere that I got a lot of experience of the excellent education one can get at a further education college.

Kelvin Hopkins: Indeed. In my day, it was certainly an excellent college and we did our very best.

I keep digressing from the points I am trying to make. One problem we have is that we try to pick up problems in mathematics post-16, in further education—as shown in Alison Wolf’s report—when the real problem is lower down. If someone misses out on maths in primary education, they will have much more serious problems later on. Picking it up later is much harder than picking it up at six, seven, eight or nine. My two granddaughters are studying at a wonderful school, and they are very good at maths. One was doing her long division, or whatever, yesterday, and she got everything right, because they are being well taught now. I hope that that will feed through the system, but it certainly was not the case all those years ago when I was teaching.

At the sixth-form college—I hope that this can happen in FE colleges as well—we are putting massive resources intensively into retakes for GCSE maths. The retake results, as in most places, were appalling until about two years ago, then we introduced a system with extra resource and the best possible teachers and we doubled the pass rate for GCSE retakes. That means that many more youngsters can go off to university or to apprenticeships with a maths qualification at A to C. It can be done, but it is hard work and takes more resource. I hope that the Government will recognise that. If they want to get the maths results up post-16, resource has to be put in. That means recruiting more teachers and ensuring that we have the best teachers teaching maths—people like my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who feel comfortable with the subject. Someone who is comfortable with maths is more likely to be a good teacher of maths than someone who feels uncomfortable or who has it as an add-on to something they have been doing elsewhere.

There are many other points I wish to make, but some have been made by my hon. Friends and by honourable colleagues on the Government Benches.

[Kelvin Hopkins]

The contribution that sixth-form colleges must make to our communities and our economy is vital for our future. If we do not get it right, we will not have the successful future we should have. We will see a declining scientific and technical culture, which we cannot afford. We must ensure that our maths is good and that our maths teaching is good at every level. Picking it up in further education has to be done, even though it is difficult, and I support Alison Wolf and her report, but we have a long way to go to ensure that we catch up with some of those other countries.

6.33 pm

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I must declare that I, too, am a comprehensive-educated special adviser from a long time ago, which may be familiar to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We will move on from that. I spent many years in business, too, and that is why I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate.

Before I get to the meat of my remarks, I want to join my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) in recognising the important work that FE colleges do throughout the country. In Macclesfield, we have a great principal in Rachel Kay, who is moving things forward. That is great.

There have been lots of interesting developments over the past few months. Following on from Brexit, there has been Trexit—we might want to think what is Next—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] It took a while. It is not clear what will happen, except that it is clear that there are vital lessons we need to learn. One lesson I took away from the referendum campaign and from Brexit was that there was an underlying concern from many people across the country about the impact of immigration.

As I spoke to people during the referendum campaign, it was clear to me that the concern ran deeper than just that. There was a sense of insecurity and a desire for greater security about jobs, work and prospects for the future. Those concerns will not be addressed by changes to immigration policy alone. That is why the Government are right to take a more comprehensive approach, a more comprehensive response, working to enhance an industrial strategy, continuing with welfare reforms, and pressing ahead with plans to address the skills gap that has been too prevalent for far too long. That is why this Bill is so important.

Since being elected in 2010, I have often spoken in the House on the importance of social mobility. I want to see more first-time entrepreneurs, more first-time employers, more first-time exporters and, crucially for those from the most challenging backgrounds, more first-time employees. A strong focus on those four roles, the four E's, as I call them, and on motivating people to take on those roles, especially for the first time, delivers the key to economic success.

Progress in technical and further education and in apprenticeships is vital for the life chances of those seeking first-time employment. I therefore strongly support the Bill. I support it because it seeks to open clear, defined, aspirational paths to success, and it has the potential to help create much-needed parity of esteem between academic education and technical education, as has been talked about during the debate. That is

further evidence that we on the Government Benches are the real workers party and that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is at the vanguard of that movement.

Lucy Powell: There is nobody behind him, though!

David Rutley: Let us move on—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We cannot have sedentary remarks and remarks from behind the Chair. That is simply impossible.

David Rutley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Lucy Powell: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to put it on the record that it was I who was speaking from a sedentary position. The Minister is indeed at the vanguard, but the only other discernible member of the Government is the Minister for the Armed Forces, who is standing behind the Speaker's Chair.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): May I make a quick point? As the debate has highlighted today, it is quality, not quantity, that counts.

David Rutley: Indeed.

The Bill is timely. After strenuous efforts to stabilise the economy following the financial crisis, the UK faces a new opportunity—and some challenges—in Brexit. If we are to make a success of leaving the EU, it is increasingly urgent that we tackle our long-standing productivity gap compared with other leading economies. The challenge is to upskill the existing and future British workforce. It is interesting that the Chartered Management Institute says that one in four jobs was left vacant in 2015, owing to skills shortages.

Kelvin Hopkins: The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on our poor productivity level, but poor productivity often results from the availability of cheap labour because employers are not forced to invest in modern technology. That is a factor in the equation. Low productivity and low-priced labour are a problem for us.

David Rutley: The Government have already put in place improvements to the national living wage and will do more in that arena. Productivity is about a lot more than wages. From contributions that the hon. Gentleman has made in previous debates, I know that he is fully aware of that, too. The situation is more complicated.

One in four jobs left vacant in 2015 were due to skills shortages. The CBI has found that one in five employers want candidates for jobs who not only have academic qualifications but can demonstrate other skills as well. So the Government must ensure that their efforts to close the skills gap inspire and motivate those who would gain most—those in training and businesses that need their skills. If we are to strive to achieve the greater parity of esteem that we have talked about and to get businesses actively involved in education and training, we need to motivate more young people who are planning to pursue the non-academic track to gain the skills that will transform their lives. Only then will we secure the prize of greater national productivity. Wages have a role to play, but so, increasingly, does motivating young people to want to acquire these skills.

The key to promoting technical training will be the Government's drive to provide 15 clear routes to 3 million quality apprenticeships. These routes are set out in the post-16 skills plan, which was published in July. It is a strong plan; my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) deserves real credit for setting it out, and I join the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) in wishing him a speedy and full recovery from his current health challenges. Those routes—or “occupational categories” as they are called in the Bill—will signpost such sectors as construction, catering and hospitality, and vital ones such as engineering and manufacturing. The obvious, recognisable nature of these categories will give young people the assurance they need that apprenticeships are, and will be, focused on delivering identifiable careers and are relevant to their own fields of vocational interest. Relevance is absolutely key.

Confidence in these routes as genuine career paths can be bolstered only by involving businesses in their design. Fostering links between business and schools, and between business and the rightly reconstituted Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, has never been more urgent. The Government have taken the initiative in encouraging businesses to step up to the plate and to deliver employer-led technical education that addresses the skills gap. I hope businesses will now seize this opportunity—it is vital that they do.

The Bill should be seen as part of a process of going further in breaking down the barriers between education and business—between school lessons and work experience. I have talked to my right hon. Friend the Minister about this. We need to get more young people out of school and into business, and more businesses into schools and further education. Indeed, schools themselves need to be made more aware of the options for, and the importance of, motivating young men and women in the classroom about wider opportunities to develop skills and career options.

No one in the House wants schools to feel they are being imposed on by the Bill; we want them to recognise the benefits of the Bill for the futures of the young people in their care. It is important to establish, as set out in part 3 of the Bill, an information-sharing relationship between the Department, schools, academies, colleges and other providers. Businesses, too, will need to find it easy to engage with education providers to be motivated to participate. Those relationships will need to be forged—in some cases, from scratch.

Fortunately, there is good practice—from existing schemes to introduce business skills into schools—to learn from and extend. For example, Young Enterprise and Enabling Enterprise provide teachers with opportunities to link up with business, and supply model exercises in flexible, transferable life and work skills. Young Enterprise already has relationships with over 50% of secondary schools. I shall be interested to hear—although this is not directly relevant to the Bill; it relates to the wider issue of what we can do to engage and motivate people—what role my right hon. Friend believes these schemes will play in this vital area of motivating more people.

There is much more that we need to do to close these skills gaps. In South Korea, for example, there is a clear difference between the skills gap among 55 to 65-year-olds, nearly half of whom are low-skilled, and among 16 to 24-year-olds, who have a much higher skills base.

In England, however, about 30% of the 16 to 24-year-old age group and the 55 to 65-year-old age group are classified by the OECD as having low skills. It is clear that we are not closing the gap for the different age cohorts, and the Bill will be fundamental in taking that work forward.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely keen to move things forward on social mobility and to play his part in the party for the workers, which is something he has helped to articulate in recent years.

Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman is extolling the party for the workers, so does he agree that workers and workers' representatives, and not simply employers, should be involved in institutions?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. The Prime Minister has already talked about how we should look at having workers on the boards of companies. Let us see how we can take that forward, and what role they can play.

My right hon. Friend the Minister has a role to play in taking the Bill forward, and he has helped to articulate it further. I wish him well in the work that he is doing. He has already done important work in securing extra funding for businesses that take on an apprentice who has grown up in care. That shows that he has real credibility in driving this agenda forward.

As Conservative Members seek to build a Britain that works for everyone, we must promote social mobility and open up young people's horizons to new experiences and aspirations beyond their own backgrounds. The Bill is vital in taking that work forward. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister will also take the opportunity to learn ways to bring businesses into the classroom and help more young people get out into the world of work. The Bill is an important start, and I wish him well with it.

6.45 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank everyone who has spoken today. We have had a thoughtful, productive and constructive debate. Among Government Members, I particularly welcome the comments of the hon. Members for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), for Macclesfield (David Rutley) and for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). The hon. Member for North Swindon is not in his place—[*Interruption.*] Oh, I am sorry; he is. I particularly want to congratulate him and my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), on the work that they did on the review of access to apprenticeships for those with learning disabilities, which was really important.

We have had some excellent speeches from Opposition Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt) quoted the famous American academic Robert Putnam on the decline of technical education and made a powerful argument for UTCs. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) talked about the importance of adult learning and the need to worry about the binary split, and I will say a couple of things about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) pressed hard the need for upskilling, on the basis of the number of people in FE and schools in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), a most excellent former college head, spoke doughtily

[Gordon Marsden]

for his sector. He talked about the “cavalry coming over the hill”, but I think that the area-based reviews are not so much the cavalry coming over the hill as the “Charge of the Light Brigade”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) drew on his considerable business and FE experience and talked about the rigidity of the levy. The Minister and his colleagues would do well to take on board the points he made. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) brought his own wealth of experience to discuss the pitfalls of reorganisation, and he reminded us all of how these processes come and go and sometimes reincorporate themselves.

The Bill is timely, even if the methodology of its appearance is curious. If we wonder why it is necessary and why the Government should introduce it in a mood of humility, we need only survey the state of play in the twin areas of its operation. I bring to the House’s attention a document published today by Alison Wolf called “Remaking Tertiary Education”, which was supported by the Education Policy Institute. That research finds that technical education at levels 4 and 5 is on the verge of total collapse in terms of numbers. In 2014-15, only 4,900 learners achieved level 4 awards. In England, technical post-secondary awards now account for less than 2% of the qualifications taken and well under 1% of all qualifications funded in the skills system. Where level 4 and 5 qualifications are being delivered, they are not in subjects that meet the needs of the UK economy or labour market. Those are things that we should all think very hard about, and I look forward to Professor Wolf’s further observations when she comes before the Bill Committee as a witness.

We have heard about the decline in the financial health of the sector, and current forecasts suggest that the number of colleges under strain is set to rise rapidly. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) said in her excellent speech, it is no wonder, given the alarm bells about their continued viability that the Skills Funding Agency and the National Audit Office have been ringing. It is not just FE colleges that are feeling the strain. In September 2016, a Sixth Form Colleges Association survey showed that two thirds of colleges had dropped courses as a result of funding pressures, a third did not believe that next year’s funding would be sufficient and 31% thought that the college would cease to be financially viable in the next three years.

That is the context in which the Government decided to introduce a stand-alone Technical and Further Education Bill. We all know why they have done so: because the academies Bill into which they wanted to drop these measures as a feel-good sweetener has itself been dropped. The entire process has been mired in dither, uncertainty and an overall lack of connection. There was no attempt to put these measures into the Higher Education and Research Bill, where they would naturally have fitted. Rightly, the HE White Paper banged on strongly about the importance of technical and higher education skills. However, we have to look at the Bill before us.

As we have said, there is no role in the Bill for apprentices or learners to be on the board or to be involved with setting standards. We are right to draw parallels with the way in which, in the recent Higher Education and Research Bill, the Government resisted

putting stakeholders—in that case, students; in this case, apprentices—into a new institution that is crucial for their success.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Marsden: I am afraid that I will not because I am short of time. [Interruption.] I am sorry, but it was indicated that I had 10 minutes.

The Government’s argument was, “You can trust us. You can leave it to us.” However, the evidence is clear: we cannot leave it to them. The skills plan consistently talks about the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education being employer-led. That is precisely why FE colleges, other training providers and learners need to be an essential component of it.

The Government gave us a body that has had two shadow chief executives so far—one was a career civil servant who left fairly rapidly to become a university registrar, and the other was the head of the Education Funding Agency and the Skills Funding Agency, Peter Lauener, who was drafted in part time. That is very much of a piece with the “make it up as you go along” way in which the Government have proceeded so far. It is therefore right for us to ask how the new institute will co-operate with the Office for Students, given how inadequate the current arrangements are for involving learners and providers. Given the fiascos during the past 18 months—for example, the Apprenticeship Delivery Board, which is tasked with advising the Government, has, with the new Government, lost its tsar and now has only the previous private sector co-chair of the board as its sole chair—we are right to ask such questions. Six months after their introduction, we are no closer to finding out how the two bodies will interact with each other.

We have had no word about what capacity the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education will have, and many concerns have been expressed about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Hove did us all a service by putting that question to the Minister. We know that the body was originally going to involve only 40 employers; it is now suggested that there will be 100 employers. As the chief executive of the Association of Colleges has said, in neither case will it be adequate for the purpose.

The Government have shown little sense about how the institute will operate in the jungle of organisations that now exist. There is the EFA, the SFA, the National Apprenticeship Service and the Apprenticeship Delivery Board. How will their roles overlap? What role will Ofsted play in the process? What about Ofqual? At best, it is an alphabet soup. At worst, it could become a tug of war in Whitehall, with the interests of providers and apprentices pushed from pillar to post.

The Bill has more than 20 clauses on insolvency and administration, which shows the direction in which the Government think things are going in the next few years. We believe that the outcomes of the area reviews may entrench, rather than remove, such liability. The college insolvency regime is being introduced alongside the Treasury-controlled restructuring facility. We will want to look very closely in Committee at that process and at the consultation process. We will also want to make sure that public assets are not handed to private, for-profit companies if an insolvency process is taken

forward. We agree with the Association of Colleges that the Government have missed an opportunity to introduce a legal scheme that would cover both FE and HE corporations. This means that a college might have an additional regulatory burden that will make it harder to secure finance.

The skills plan itself is not without criticisms—how strategic it will be post-Brexit, and on productivity, workplace training and adult training—and the Government will need to talk about such issues. The concerns about binary choices and standards, which my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central spoke about, have been echoed by me, the general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and the University and College Union. We are also concerned about the potentially limiting scope of some of the routes. As Mark Dawe, the chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, has said, a large proportion of jobs in the economy will be outside the scope of the routes. As a Blackpool MP, with my local FE college, I believe it is crucial that the service sector, which will potentially provide huge numbers of apprenticeships and jobs, is not left out of the process.

There is no reference to the new institute having any responsibility to widen access, and nothing on a strategy to promote participation among care leavers, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds or those with disabilities. We need that to be in the Bill. We agree with the excellent analysis of Shane Chowen, the head of policy at the Learning and Work Institute, on that point. We agree that the Bill ought to enshrine the recommendations of the Maynard review, to which we contributed. It suggested that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills revisit the recommendations of the Little report of 2012. The Bill needs to do more for looked-after children and care leavers.

Insolvency might force some students to travel longer distances, but the Bill makes no reference to how they might be compensated or how difficult it might be for suburban and rural colleges. All these points strengthen our argument for the return of the education maintenance allowance.

I spoke earlier this afternoon about the problems the Government have got themselves into over careers advice. If we are to make a success of the institute, it is crucial that young people are alerted early in their school life to the importance and attraction of technical routes, and we must maximise the opportunities for them to get work tasters that translate into real work experience.

I am glad that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills has shown more enthusiasm for the progression from traineeships to apprenticeships than a couple of his predecessors. Traineeships are a key point of entry that can make more young people competitive. However, traineeships have to be progressive. If not, there is a danger that we will see some of the issues we saw in the 1980s.

Finally, I come to the issue of devo-max. In view of the potential for combined authorities to take on skills and education, why does the Bill not take more account of the potential for devolved skills policy? All it contains is a brief but important reference to the need for such authorities to report their statistics to preserve a national database. That is hardly an endorsement of the potential to drive apprenticeships and skills at a local level.

We speak in this debate having seen two overviews from two key think-tanks, the Institute for Public Policy Research and Policy Exchange, cast doubt on the Government's direction of travel. The Government need to think very hard about some of the issues raised, such as whether level 2 apprenticeships are too job specific and whether a significant proportion of the apprenticeship standards are inadequate and a cause of concern. We will give the Bill a fair hearing. We want the Bill to succeed, but if it is to succeed there needs to be more detail and we need to hear less self-congratulation from Ministers and more aspiration for the groups that they have signally not included in the Bill.

6.58 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): I welcome the thoughtful contributions to the debate from Members on both sides of the House.

This important Bill has two purposes: to provide high-quality technical education to students; and, when colleges are suffering extreme financial difficulties, to provide clarity in the unlikely event of insolvency while protecting students as part of the process. The Bill has the protection and best interests of students at its heart, which is why David Hughes, the chief executive of the Association of Colleges, has stated that he is

“pleased that the Government is continuing to take forward the measures outlined in the Post-16 Skills Plan”.

The Bill is vital because we face serious challenges: a chronic shortage of high-skilled technicians; acute skills shortages in science, technology, engineering and maths; and low levels of literacy and numeracy compared with other OECD countries. A number of Members have raised an important issue about maths. We do not yet require all 17-year-olds who have not achieved an A to C in maths and English to resit the qualifications. Students who achieve lower than a D grade at 16 may take other qualifications. We are looking at functional skills. I want functional skills to be better and for them to be as prestigious to employers as other skills.

Kelvin Hopkins *rose*—

Robert Halfon: I ask the hon. Gentleman to hold on one second, because he said that he wanted resources for maths, and we have invested £67 million to recruit up to 2,500 additional maths and physics teachers, and to upskill up to 15,000 non-specialists. We are investing the resources.

Kelvin Hopkins *rose*—

Robert Halfon: I will not give way because of the shortage of time.

A number of hon. Members mentioned the Maynard reforms. We will implement those as soon as we possibly can, particularly with regard to the issue of maths for those with disabilities. We will inform the House as progress is made.

The hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) talked about the levy and technology. The thing is that if companies have apprentices, they do not pay the levy, and they get 10% on top. This is about changing behaviour and raising money to fund millions of apprenticeships in our country.

[Robert Halfon]

We have substantially grown apprenticeships, with 619,000 starts, which is why we have the levy. It will have an impact on employers with a pay bill of £3 million or more and help to fund the quantity and quality of apprenticeship training. We are dramatically reducing the number of technical qualifications available, ensuring even better quality for students.

A lot has been said about FE funding, but by 2020 more will be spent on FE and skills participation than at any time in our island's history—£3.4 billion in the year 2019-20. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) correctly described FE as a ladder of opportunity for young people.¹

We are adopting the Sainsbury report, as has been suggested, and will put in place 15 high-quality technical routes to skilled employment. Those will be implemented by the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, which will oversee the employer-led reforms.

We are proud of the university technical colleges. There is clearly a debate here, as some Members want those for pupils at 14 and some for education at 16. That debate will no doubt continue, but we allow flexible entry to UTCs in certain circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) asked about the role of business. We have created the Careers & Enterprise Company to boost businesses' linking up with students in schools.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) talked about representation. I am very keen for all kinds of organisations to be represented. I am a trade union member myself, and I am very proud that this Government give Unionlearn £12 million. It has an incredible fund that supports thousands of learners and apprentices. I very much hope that trade unions will be involved in the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. The institute will ensure that all technical provision, across both apprenticeships and college-based courses, matches the very best in the world.

Rob Marris: Will the Minister give way?

Robert Halfon: I am sorry, but we have very little time.

Rob Marris: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Order Paper I have says that this debate can continue until 10 pm. Am I misreading it?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): No, indeed. The hon. Gentleman is technically absolutely correct that the debate can continue until 10 o'clock.

Tristram Hunt: Wahey!

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Hunt is excited at the prospect of another three hours from the Minister, but it is incumbent on every Member of this House to judge the mood of the House, the pace of the debate and the necessity of taking up the time of the House. From my observation and experience, a speech of between 10 and 15 minutes from a Minister winding up is usually appropriate and welcomed by most Members of the House.

Robert Halfon: The hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members talked about quality, not quantity. They should practise what they preach.

Let me give an example of the technical education reforms in practice. For someone aspiring to be an engineer, rather than choosing from the 500 qualifications that are currently on offer, many of which hold very little value for employers, there will be one clear route: the new engineering and manufacturing route. That individual will choose an apprenticeship or college-based technical education course by choosing an occupation. They will initially learn a broad base of knowledge based on one approved standard per occupation, and then they will specialise, for example towards electrical engineering. The awarded certificate will be universally recognised and have real value for employers. That is an example of the nature of our technical reforms.

There is no doubt that FE and sixth-form colleges play a vital role in our education system, as the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) noted so brilliantly. That is why I have visited my own FE college more than 50 times since becoming an MP. FE colleges act as genuine centres of expertise. We know that, because 80% of colleges are either good or outstanding, and 79% of adult FE students get jobs, move to apprenticeships or progress to university afterwards. It is worth noting that 59% of institutions are in good financial health and 52% are operating with a surplus.

A minority of colleges, however, are in serious financial difficulties—about 40 colleges face these problems. In supporting these colleges, we forecast by March 2017 a total spend of £140 million on exceptional financial support. That £140 million could have been invested in students. We have to deal with the roots of these problems and ensure that we protect students, which was why we started the area reviews, about which there has been much discussion. They will be completed by March 2017 and will ensure financial resilience, strong leadership and well-governed institutions. We have a moral duty to students that money is spent on learning, and a duty to deliver value for money for the taxpayer. Money that would otherwise be spent servicing debt will be freed up to invest in high-quality education and learning.

Jo Churchill: Will the Minister give way for a brief intervention?

Robert Halfon: I am very sorry, but I cannot because of time, even to my hon. Friend. I apologise.

Let me be clear: no FE or sixth-form college will close as a direct result of the Bill. The Bill will help to ensure prudent borrowing and lending, and to safeguard the protection of students.

The insolvency regime under the Bill will clarify what will happen should a college become insolvent. The special administrative regime we are introducing will allow Ministers to take action to ensure that learners are protected. There will be duties on the Secretary of State to promote education, and to provide suitable apprenticeship training and basic skills training for certain people. All existing statutory requirements will stay in place. Local authorities are also legally responsible for promoting effective participation and making clear how transport arrangements support young people of sixth-form age to access opportunities. That is not to say, however, that creditors are not important. Colleges and banks have long worked together to grow and develop the FE sector. The Bill will introduce a clear process for all involved should a college become insolvent, and will reassure creditors about how their debt will be treated.

1. [Official Report, 20 December 2016, Vol. 618, c. 11MC.]

The reforms in the Bill are fundamental to the Government's vision for a country that works for everyone. It will ensure that we improve the skills base in our country, that we increase our economic productivity, that we protect students, and that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds have a chance to climb up the ladder of opportunity. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Technical and Further Education Bill:

Committal

1. The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

2. Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 6 December 2016.

3. The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

4. Proceedings on Consideration and the proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

5. Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

6. Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

7. Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(*Heather Wheeler.*)

Question agreed to.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Technical and Further Education Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Heather Wheeler.*)

Question agreed to.

TECHNICAL AND FURTHER EDUCATION BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Technical and Further Education Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging of fees, and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Heather Wheeler.*)

Question agreed to.

HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Homelessness Reduction Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(*Mr Marcus Jones.*)

M25: Dartford

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

7.10 pm

Mr Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): I am extremely sorry that the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) did not get his way and see the previous debate continue for a further three hours, because that would have given me time to actually write a speech. It is a bit of a disaster, but I am sure that my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) will be delighted.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): You've got three hours, Adam.

Mr Holloway: I'll need all of it.

This debate has been rather boringly titled "M25: Dartford" but this is not a boring subject at all—I and my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford, for Thurrock and for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) have been looking at this for several years. What we do about another Thames crossing will affect tens of millions of journeys over the next 30 years. Drivers up and down the country, in Kent and Essex, Dartford and Thurrock, are being affected by the appalling congestion at Dartford.

To a very considerable degree, this debate is also about the appalling situation facing the residents of Dartford. As my dear friend—my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford—put it in his speech in January, this is quite simply the worst stretch of road in the UK, and it has a huge impact on local residents, who are now prisoners in their own homes. Children are not getting picked up from school on time. He called it

"congestion like I have never known before."—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2016; Vol. 604, c. 388WH.]

I completely agree. It really is a national disgrace.

It is an appalling logistical travesty for people living in the area, who are being subjected to pollution as they go about their everyday lives—my hon. Friend is very good on the numbers and the impact of pollution on his constituents. In addition, there is gridlock, as well as frustration that for years Governments have done nothing about it. I imagine that that there is nobody listening to this debate—none from among the huge crowds of people here in the Chamber—who has not experienced what a disaster area this is. We can all agree that this is a kind of traffic-induced nightmare.

As the House will be aware, the Government are a hair's breadth from approving gigantic spending on a new lower Thames crossing to the east of Gravesend, under what is known as option C. Back in 2009, the original aim was increased capacity at Dartford to get as many vehicles across at 50 mph and to get everything moving again. Then we had several other options, including: option B, now dropped because of the proposed theme park at Swanscombe; option C, to the east of Gravesend, which we will hear more about; and options D and E, further down the river.

I did not understand until recently the reason for the appalling congestion. If we imagine the River Thames and the wonderful towns of Thurrock to the north and

Dartford to the south, we will notice that the M25 goes straight through both places. At the moment, we have two tunnels, one very good, one very poor, going from south to north, and a great big bridge running north to south. The problems of congestion tend to be in Dartford because heavy goods vehicles have to cross through the right-hand tunnels. Thurrock is awful as well, but since we have had free-flow traffic, it is not as bad. Thurrock is as bad or as good as the rest of the M25, but Dartford remains a real problem.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Holloway: I would love to give way to my hon. Friend, although I am not so sure about the others.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend and I know the problems all too well from our own experience, and my hon. Friend is giving a good description of the problems we face coming from south across a bridge that closes when the wind blows too hard and from tunnels that are not up to spec. Part of the reason for the problem is that that crossing has developed with no real strategy over the last 50 years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is where the real problem lies, and that it is where we must focus our solution? We posed a question back in 2009 that we are trying to answer in 2016, but we have forgotten what the original exam question was. We have had so many changes of teacher and lesson plan since that time that we are now trying to answer the wrong question. We need to get right back to the basics.

Mr Holloway: I completely agree. There is no solution if it adds to the problems faced by the people of Dartford and Thurrock. I shall come back to that.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): As a slightly dispassionate observer from the other end of the county in east Kent, it seems to me that there is a need for new capacity across the Thames. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as a matter of principle—irrespective of the location—there must be a new crossing?

Mr Holloway: Absolutely—100%. A few months ago, I had Mr Potts of the Highways Agency in my office, and I got quite heated with him. I got him to admit that, however many crossings he built to the east of the existing crossing, he would at some point have to come back and fix the M25 at Dartford. It is possible to fix the problems of the M25 only if they are fixed at Dartford. Let me explain why.

There are several different types of traffic that all meet in the congested area between Dartford and Thurrock. First, there is what we could call national long-range traffic. Secondly, there is the regional traffic off the A14 in Essex and off the A2 in Kent. Thirdly, there is the local traffic—people going to hospital appointments or collecting children from school on either side at the exits in Dartford. The problem is that those three different categories—fast, long-range traffic to someone doing the school run—collide at Dartford and, into the mix, we also have to throw heavy goods vehicles and dangerous goods vehicles, as well as a huge amount of freight that comes in from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke).

If we want to fix the problem at Dartford, therefore, we have to find some way of separating those three different types of traffic. As I have said, there were originally a number of options, including option A at Dartford, but none of them, including the current option C, meant new roads to connect one bit of the M25 to another.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Can he tell us why he believes that Highways England, the local enterprise partnership, the freight and haulage industry, Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, both county councils, Lakeside, Bluewater, the port authorities, the chambers of commerce—and the list goes on—are all wrong and he is right on this issue?

Mr Holloway: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I am about to provide an even longer list of people who are in favour of option C, so I shall answer his question then.

Charlie Elphicke: My hon. Friend said he agreed that there must be a crossing somewhere. Wherever that crossing goes, does he agree that it should not simply plug back into the M25, but that there needs to be a join-across to the M11, so that there can be a corridor through to the north of the nation?

Mr Holloway: Yes. There is only one real option now—option C—but I think that if option A were accepted that should be the case, and, indeed, the same would apply to any of the other options, historically.

Charlie Elphicke: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Holloway: Yes, once more.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend. This is my last intervention.

Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are not to make this some glorified M25 relief road, but a route from the channel ports to the north of the nation, we ought to upgrade the A2 as well?

Mr Holloway: Again, I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I also think that it is crazy for all those freight trains to offload at Ashford when they could easily trundle on for another two hours and be well north of the affected area.

Stephen Metcalfe: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Holloway: Of course. I thank my hon. Friends for making my speech for me.

Stephen Metcalfe: We are pleased to be of assistance.

May I return to my earlier point? We all accept that something needs to be done. I do not think anyone doubts that there is a problem of congestion in our part of north Kent and south Essex, caused by a crossing which, according to a written answer from the Department for Transport, failed 300 times last year in one way or another. I entirely understand the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) about an alternative route linking up with the wider road network. That is all very welcome, and option C might well fulfil that requirement. What it would not do, however—because it would only remove 14% of the

traffic—is address the problem where it exists. We have a crossing that is not fit for purpose at the moment, and we need to focus our energies on that.

Mr Holloway: I am really enjoying agreeing with everyone so far this evening. As I have said, for many years no one really thought that option B, C, D or E would be chosen. I remember one of my friends, who was the roads Minister at the time, saying, “Don’t worry; it will be option A, another bridge at Dartford.” I have every sympathy with my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, and I understand his concerns, but we never thought that options that did not do something to ameliorate the M25 would ever be selected. Even the Highways England guy accepts that at some point you will have to go back and fix the problems of the M25, because the M25 is still going down that route today, as it did 30 years ago and as it will in 30 years’ time.

Gareth Johnson: My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does he not accept that the solution is not to funnel more and more traffic through the narrow corridor that is the approach to the Dartford crossing at Dartford? Should we not have more resilience, as we have across the rest of the Thames, and site crossings at various different locations? My hon. Friend seems to be advocating the funnelling of more traffic into the Dartford area, whereas the solution, surely, is to take traffic away and site the crossing east of Gravesend.

Mr Holloway: I think that the solution lies in any number of measures, but there certainly needs to be further capacity. I agree that we cannot try to squeeze more and more stuff into that collision of long-range national, regional and local traffic. I think that we need to seriously revisit the idea of taking Dartford and Thurrock out of the equation. I have spoken to tunnelling experts who say that that is eminently doable. We need—and it is perfectly feasible—a long tunnel that would start south of the A2 and pop out north of the A14, and vice versa, to swallow up the traffic. The effect of such a tunnel would really depend on numbers, and numbers are a moving target. As I shall explain a little later, Highways England is extremely good at making numbers fit whatever its argument is at the time. However, let us say for argument’s sake that 40%—it could be more, but Highways England would say that it was very much less—of the traffic that goes through your constituency, or hangs around for hours in your constituency, killing your constituents—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. By coincidence, the hon. Gentleman’s mistake is actually correct. He is unaware that he has used the word “you”. I never pick people up on that on the first occasion when it is a mistake, but the hon. Gentleman is an experienced parliamentarian, and he will know that if he says “you”, he is referring to the Chair. Normally I object very significantly if a Member says “you”, meaning another Member but technically referring to me. In this case, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to refer to me, but wrong to do so in the way that he did.

Mr Holloway: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; of course you are right and I am sure you have also experienced the nightmare at the Dartford crossing.

[*Mr Holloway*]

For argument's sake, let us say that the national long-range through-traffic going from the area around Gatwick, along the M25 and then up to the north of England without going anywhere near the exits at Dartford and Thurrock is 40%. If we could somehow get rid of all or most of that 40%, we would suddenly find we had 60% of the traffic remaining. So if we were to build a long tunnel, the regional and local traffic, and presumably some heavy-goods traffic, could use the existing crossings, which would, I would think, be great for the people of Dartford and Thurrock, and the through-traffic would not be seen at all.

I understand that Highways England thinks that when in 2025 the road to nowhere to the east of Gravesend is built—unfortunately, the road has no further connectivity south of the A2, which has not been considered too well—there will be only a 14% reduction at Dartford. I intend to comment later on the fact that Highways England has not provided the public with the numbers, although it may have provided them to Ministers.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend is making an excellent case, as I would expect. I want to talk about the statistical modelling around traffic flows and the 14% that Highways England suggests will be diverted to option C, leaving 86% wishing to use the current infrastructure in place between Dartford and Thurrock. When I met Highways England recently I challenged its representatives, saying, “Can you show me the modelling for this because I’m concerned about what happens when the crossing fails, as it does regularly? How will the new crossing alleviate the problems we have between Dartford and Thurrock? Where is the modelling? Show me the stats.” Unfortunately, Highways England was unable to do that; its representative said, “That will be what we have to show at the next stage.” When we are talking about spending many billions of pounds on a new crossing and the impact that will have, the modelling being used has to be beyond question. Would my hon. Friend care to comment?

Mr Holloway: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He and I have been, not always successfully, driving around southern England trying to persuade people that what we need is a long tunnel rather than this road to nowhere. The other day I again had a couple of people from Highways England in my house and we were talking about this. I mentioned that 40% of traffic is long-range traffic, and the guy from Highways England told me that the figure was 12%. Can anybody listening out there in the country or here in the House who has driven on the M25 seriously think that only 12% of the traffic is through-traffic and that the rest joins at, let us say, Dartford or Thurrock and then goes on? It is clearly nonsense, and I do not know quite what is going on with Highways England.

Gareth Johnson: I hope we have some time for this discussion. My hon. Friend talks about Highways England's modelling. Is he aware that it has modelled the possibility of having option C built and has discovered that it would increase overall capacity by some 70%? It has also modelled the so-called A14 option, which is the tunnel my hon. Friend alludes to, and has discovered that not only will it be prohibitively expensive, but that it will take very little traffic away from the Dartford crossing?

Mr Holloway: As I have suggested, I have very little confidence in Highways England's numbers, and that was underlined for me by the meeting a couple of weeks ago where the guy said with a straight face that 12% of the traffic was through-traffic. I will come on to this in a minute, but the benefit-cost ratios are almost changed to fit whatever crisis Highways England has been having at a particular point.

So the crossing to nowhere, east of Gravesend, would reduce the traffic at Dartford by 14% when built. Apparently, it would also reduce by about 25% the number of trucks coming up from Dover at the existing crossing. However, that is nothing compared with the benefits of a long tunnel completely bypassing Dartford and Thurrock. Highways England's sham consultation does not even mention a new crossing at Dartford; it mentions only option C.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has pointed out that the only people who now seem to be against option C are those who live in the areas that would be affected by it, or Members such as my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) and myself, who represent people who will be affected. I have here a list of the people and organisations who want this new road to nowhere. It is a formidable list, and it includes: Highways England; Kent County Council; Essex County Council; the South East local enterprise partnership; Dubai Ports World London Gateway; the Claridon Group; Ebbsfleet Development Corporation; Kent Invicta chamber of commerce; St Modwen Properties; the Port of Dover; London chamber of commerce and industry; the Port of Tilbury; Essex chamber of commerce; intu Lakeside; the Port of London Authority; London Southend airport; Eurotunnel; Kent Developers Group; Navigator Terminals; Glennly LLP; and Cogent Land LLP. Annoyingly, the list also includes the Freight Transport Association and the Road Haulage Association.

Kent and Essex County Councils—and, indeed, all those others—have, quite understandably from their perspective, leapt at the opportunities for economic growth offered by a crossing east of Gravesend. However, the group of people that no one has been thinking about is the road users. They are the ones who will actually have to drive on the M25 over the next few decades.

Charlie Elphicke: That is a formidable list, and my hon. Friend has mentioned road users such as the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association. Given the length of his list, is it not possible that this might actually be the best location, even though it might prove difficult for him and his constituents?

Mr Holloway: I will say more about my constituents in a moment. One reason that I read out the list is that this could become yet another great disconnect between the political and business classes and the ordinary people—not that we need much reminding of such things, given recent events in the world. The message has not yet got out to the users of the M25, but at some point it will. They are the people who will be most affected by this proposal. It was a big disappointment to me that road hauliers support it, because I was pretty sure that they would come on side, given that it is very expensive to have a truck sitting idling in traffic for hours and hours. My worst experience of that lasted about two and half hours, and anyone else listening to this debate will have their own memories of such nightmares.

Stephen Metcalfe: I recently met a representative of a logistics company based in Thurrock—unfortunately, this was after we had met the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association—who estimated that when the crossing fails, the traffic backs up at a rate of a mile for every minute it is closed. The area would therefore still become gridlocked when the existing crossing fails even if a new crossing were to be built to the east. Unfortunately, I did not have that evidence when we held those important meetings. Had I done so, perhaps it would have changed people's minds.

Mr Holloway: Thank you for helping me out there. I did not actually know that. That is very useful. I am looking around the Chamber—*[Interruption.]* Sometimes, the public do not appreciate that many of the people who are not here are actually working quite hard elsewhere. The reality is that the Chamber is virtually empty and that all but one or two Members here have a personal interest in this case. If people realised the enormity of the carnage that will follow if we do not take this opportunity to fix the M25 at Dartford for another 30 years, or however long it takes before we have to come back to sort it, this place would be full of MPs from all parties. There might actually be some Labour Members who would be genuinely and deeply worried about the situation for their constituents and the constituents of Members in the decades to come. The problem is that the people of England have not yet spoken on this matter because they have not realised what the decision to go ahead with option C will mean.

My neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Dartford rightly pointed out that, as the Member for Gravesham, I will of course be against the proposal—not strictly true, but I will come to that in a moment—but it is true that it will blight thousands of homes in my constituency and others. I hope that I have shown this occasionally in my 11 years in this place, but if I believed that the road to nowhere to the east of Gravesend was the right decision, I would pluck up the considerable courage needed to go and see my friend Rev. Nigel Bourne, the rector of Chalk, my friends in the Higham action group or the Shorne action group, with whom we have been working for many years, and the people of the villages of Higham, Shorne, Chalk or Riverview Park to tell them. I would try to show some moral courage even if they hated me forevermore.

However, I will not do that, because the reality is that the proposal is a looming disaster that will become a scandal for this Government when the public realise that the £5 billion opportunity to fix the M25 is about to be wasted and when we all realise that it is too late to stop a plan that will result in another 30 years of misery. There are entirely viable schemes, including the seven-mile tunnel under Dartford and Thurrock in option A, but Ministers in the Department for Transport are highly competent, intelligent people—

Stephen Metcalfe: Hear, hear.

Mr Holloway: It is true, but they are not experts on roads. Ministers must listen to the people who pass for experts—in this case, Highways England.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend and I have been communicating with a Mr Potts from Highways England. He has now left his current position and is moving on to pastures new—I am sure we both wish him well.

Everyone knows that something needs to be done here, but my worry is that we are unable to step off the path we are on because there is no continuity. We have had a change of Ministers, all of whom are capable as my hon. Friend said, and a change of personnel in Highways England. My great concern is that we are on this path and will keep plodding along it without actually taking stock of what we are trying to achieve.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. One thing that I have noted in my time here is that we are told that certain things must happen or cannot happen. Back in about 2007, when we again had appalling traffic at Dartford, I remember writing on the behalf of constituents to say that it was crazy that people have to pay money at the toll and asking why we could not have a free-flow system. We were told back then—I presume by the same people—that there was absolutely no way that we could have free flow because of some safety thing, but that suddenly disappeared. Quangos change their numbers and what they say depending on where the argument is going. We have seen that in some of the disastrous military ventures over the past decade. Officials do sometimes get it wrong. Ministers are prudent to listen to the experts in their Department, but that does not mean that they are always right or that they are always looking after the interests of ordinary people who, in this case, have to use the road for years.

I completely get where my hon. Friends the Members for South Basildon and East Thurrock and for Dartford are coming from, because when the question of a new crossing at Dartford came up, they would rightly have been horrified, equating it with more traffic. But if I were one of them right now, I would be on my knees begging the Roads Minister to look at something that could separate the traffic out at Dartford, and I would be begging the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Transport, and writing to the Prime Minister.

Gareth Johnson *rose—*

Mr Holloway: I will give way in a moment. I fear that something has happened with the political classes in these places. It has almost become a sort of truism: it is quite hard to go anywhere now. I do not know whether I am allowed to ask a question to someone who is about to intervene on me, but I will throw this out there: I would have thought that, if this were possible, my hon. Friend would love to see a long tunnel that could save his constituents.

Gareth Johnson: Yes, I would, but that tunnel would be east of Gravesend. I ask my hon. Friend to consider carefully the fact that any road system we put in place at the approach to the existing Dartford crossing—option A, the alternative advocated by him—would result in at least six years of roadworks and would kill the Thames Gateway area. It would kill the house building and enterprise that exists in that place and would be devastating for local communities, who are already suffering from pollution, which is going through the roof. I ask him to consider some of those issues and to understand that the option C route provides an alternative to all those downsides and can help seriously to improve the current traffic congestion from which we suffer.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. May I say to the hon. Member for Dartford that I am allowing interventions to be very long on the understanding

[*Madam Deputy Speaker*]

that people will not make speeches, but these interventions are turning into mini-speeches themselves? If people could keep their interventions a little more brief, I would be grateful.

Mr Holloway: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Tell that to your constituents in 10 years' time, when the problem at Dartford has not been ameliorated by a long tunnel to the east of Gravesend. Again, I am not an expert, but I think you are thinking in the old way and you are still—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is speaking through the Chair, so if he would refer to the hon. Member for Dartford, I would be grateful.

Mr Holloway: I am sure you are not thinking in the old way, Madam Deputy Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford may be thinking in terms of six years of disaster, building new bridges and so on. I am not an expert on tunnelling, but I would have thought that, where a tunnel is being built, there is inconvenience from things such as ventilation shafts. However, where a tunnel is being started to the south of the A2 or north of the A14—

Stephen Metcalfe: A13.

Mr Holloway: A13. Where that is being done, there are an awful lot of large fields for the large equipment, and all that expertise that we currently have in Britain as a result of the building of Crossrail is available, all in the cause of swallowing up the traffic and rescuing constituents—whether 40% or 12%, if we believe Highways England, or whatever the number is.

Why is this going so disastrously wrong for the residents of Thurrock and Dartford? If this money is spent on the crossing to nowhere to the east of Gravesend, people in Dartford and Thurrock will continue to suffer appalling pollution, traffic and inconvenience for decades. The traffic jams on the M25 will go on and on, and there will be huge economic disbenefits: the millions of pounds lost as people sit in traffic jams, rather than doing their jobs; the huge amounts of money lost to road hauliers; and the cost in personal terms of people sitting in traffic forever. I do not think that the economic disbenefits of millions and millions of hours spent in these traffic queues has been considered at all in the benefit-cost ratios that I will go into in just a moment.

Stephen Metcalfe: Does my hon. Friend agree that if we look at what is being proposed on a map, we would see that we have to commit to option C very early in terms of coming up the A2 and coming round the M25? When that crossing fails, there will already be considerable traffic heading towards it, which is why we will continue to get congestion. This approach will be great for the likes of Dover, but not so great for our constituents.

Mr Holloway: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and that point has been made by Bob Lane, who has been chairing the opposition to the proposal in my constituency. Understandably, early on, when someone raised the prospect of yet another crossing at Dartford, local residents were concerned that it would lead to more traffic, but they were not aware of the tunnel option. Indeed, I think that there are a few other options that

would be considerably less intrusive than what they originally had in mind, which was another great big bridge, squeezing a few more lanes through.

Everyone in this country suffers because of the huge economic disbenefits of millions of hours lost to the economy because of traffic. This is an unquantified figure that is not in Highways England's cost-benefit analysis. The cost-benefit analysis is traditionally used to assess the value for money of something, so it represents the ratio of benefits to cost. If the benefits of a proposal are smaller than the cost, that is, if the benefit-cost ratio is less than one—I am sorry to do this, but it is important—it would represent bad value for money. Generally, the higher the BCR, the better the value for money.

During the 2013 Department for Transport consultation on options for a new Thames crossing, it is telling that reducing congestion was only one of the five key criteria. A comparison of cost and value for money was carried out and BCRs were produced for option A and option C. In 2013, option A's indicative BCR was between 1.0 and 1.8 and option C's BCR was between 1.2 and 1.3. We then come to 2016 and Highways England's consultation and the BCR for location A had gone from 1.5 to 0.9—that is, bad value—and for location C, it had gone to between 2.3 and 1.7, a complete turnaround. I say it again: they fit the numbers to suit the argument, in my view. That takes absolutely no account of the economic disbenefits of people sitting in that traffic for another couple of generations.

I am sorry to be slightly evangelical, but for the good of millions of people, over many years of misery, I ask anyone hearing this debate to tell their friends and not to say that they were not warned. We only fix the M25 at Dartford by fixing the M25 at Dartford. We have an historic opportunity to fix it for all those people living in the south-east of England, all those people driving through and, in particular, for the people of Dartford for whom, if I were in the shoes of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford, I would be on my knees.

Gareth Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that in many ways this is a conversation and a debate that we should have been having 15 years ago? Frankly, it is outrageous that nothing has taken place since the bridge was built to tackle the increasing congestion and projected increase in traffic flows at the Dartford crossing. We are therefore playing catch-up after the failure of what has gone before.

Mr Holloway: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. People in my constituency have spoken about him—people from Gravesham speaking about the Member for Dartford—and have said what an amazing fight he has put up over the years for his people, as has, more recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock. I am not disputing that at all. He is to be commended for that. However, we now have a chance, possibly, and we should be looking into it. I remember speaking to him on the M25 a few months ago, trying to persuade him of this. I think there is a chance.

We should be getting Ministers to talk seriously to Highways England and the tunnelling firms. If we flunk this final chance in favour of a ludicrous scheme that has morphed from solving the misery at Dartford to include road capacity, economic regeneration and all

sorts of other things, we will, even by Highways England's own account, have to come back to fix the M25 at some point in the future. For 30 years or whatever the period is, people will have to sit in traffic if this bizarre decision goes through. I pray that in 15 years' time people do not look back on us and think that we were the guilty men and women.

7.50 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is a great pleasure to respond to the debate and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Mr Holloway) on securing it. It is not the first time that he has raised these matters either in the House or with me. He is diligent in addressing the concerns of his constituents in this regard.

By the standard of Adjournment debates, we have already had an extensive exploration of the subjects before us. For that reason, and so as not to tire the House or delay those Members who wish to make strides towards other important and exciting events, I will abbreviate my remarks by responding closely to what has been said in the debate already. I have 10 points to make, some of which are contained in the text prepared for me and some of which are not; I say that chillingly, as far as my future is concerned, but it will be, I have no doubt, for the excitement of the Chamber.

First, my hon. Friend and other Members, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have known me long enough and seen me often enough to know that however he might characterise other members of the Government, heaven forbid, I am not a man who is a slave to the advice that I receive from my Department. I would not go as far as to say that I entirely share the views of my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) about experts, but I tend to that point of view. I believe that it is for Ministers to make key strategic decisions based on advice that they receive and sometimes based on advice that they do not receive. My hon. Friend can be assured that there will be no slavish adherence to any third-party view of these things. I make the views of this House and of my right hon. and hon. Friends from all sides of the House on such matters the guiding principle by which I go about my work.

Secondly, I am very familiar with the subject of this debate, having been in the Department before. My hon. Friend called for consistency. In that sense, I am the personification of consistency in this job because I have done it twice. I am not sure that many other people could say that about any job in government. I looked at these matters closely when I was first in the Department, as he will know. Since then things have changed, but they have changed only in one way: the problem of congestion has, if anything, become greater. He will know that there are now around 55 million vehicle crossings a year. The crossing is operating at overcapacity of around 117%. Even with free-flow charging, congestion is a very significant problem. There has been a 7% increase in traffic volumes in the past year alone.

I know how difficult the problem of congestion is for my hon. Friend's constituents and others who use the crossing, including those who use it for national purposes. I was impressed by what he said about figures. I want those figures too, so I assure him that when I meet him later this month to discuss these matters, as I surely will, I want to explore those numbers and the split between local,

regional and national traffic in as much detail as we reasonably can. These are not exact figures—we would have to count every vehicle and determine where it was going, why it was going there and where it came from to get those numbers pinpoint accurate—but we can work on broader numbers to his satisfaction.

The third point I would make is that there are no fixed views about this. There was an implication that the Government are entirely rigid in their approach to this matter. That is not true. The circumstances are changing and highly dynamic—I have already illustrated that in what I said about changing volumes—so it is important that we are open-minded. Where there is an absolute consistency—indeed, a certainty—is that we cannot leave things as they are.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. I completely accept what my right hon. Friend says about Ministers, but I do think that Highways England's mind is probably closed. That was well demonstrated by the fact that the so-called consultation we had, which 49,000 people answered, did not, I think, even mention option A.

Mr Hayes: In the end, Highways England is answerable to Ministers, who are answerable to this House. In the approach I outlined at the outset, in the first of my 10 points, I made it clear that Ministers should take the decisions and that those missioned to make those decisions happen should deal not with those key strategic matters but with the delivery of the strategy determined by Government. I hear what my hon. Friend says, and I tell him what I will do—this is not one of my 10 points, but I will add a point, if I might do so, with your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I do not want to lead anyone up the garden path. I will meet the chief executive of Highways England tomorrow and raise exactly this point. I will tell him what has been said tonight, and I will test his view of these things. I will make it clear that we need to be open-minded and to take an evidential approach; we certainly need to take the views of those who know best—by that, I mean my hon. Friend and others—very seriously indeed.

Mr Holloway: Would my right hon. Friend also commend it to those officials that they answer the questions of Mr Steve Gooding, who is the director of the RAC Foundation, and a former very senior official at the Department for Transport? He and the head of another very large motoring organisation have concerns that this has morphed from something just about roads and transport into something much wider. Mr Gooding shares the Minister's concerns that we need some proper, hard numbers. It is clearly complete nonsense to say that only 12% of this stuff is long-range through traffic. I know that the Minister is determined to get to the truth of this, too.

Mr Hayes: As my hon. Friend also knows, I am, by and large, in favour of faith, but I am not sure, when one is dealing with road traffic analysis, that things can be quite a matter of faith. I think it does, as I said, need to be empirical, and I will certainly make that point.

The gentleman my hon. Friend referred to has corresponded with me in just the last couple of days, when he was admiring my work as Minister, I am delighted to be able to report to the House. I will certainly discuss with him his views on these matters when I have the chance to do so.

[Mr John Hayes]

Let me move to my next point. My hon. Friend spoke about the split between local and national traffic. He is right to say that the solutions for each may well have to take a rather different form. Now, I can tell that there is something of a—I will not put this too strongly—creative tension between the perspectives of my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Gravesham. I do not want to draw too much close attention to those differences, but both of my hon. Friends have their point, and both make it well on behalf of their constituents. I understand those arguments, and it is because we are wrestling with them, and trying to get this right, that we are not fixed in our view of what solution would be best. Clearly, we have been through a consultation, we have looked at options for a crossing further east, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham, and indeed the whole House, is well aware, and we are still deliberating on those matters. However, I would not want to give the impression that we are not prepared to listen. We certainly are prepared to continue to listen to the overtures that are made in this House and elsewhere.

Gareth Johnson *rose*—

Mr Hayes: Because I am prepared to listen, I need to give way to my hon. Friend.

Gareth Johnson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Although I appreciate and accept that the Department for Transport has an open mind, does he agree that it would be unusual in the extreme for a whole body of experts in Highways England to say collectively to the Department for Transport, “Option C offers the best value for money and is the best route to minimise the amount of traffic in the area and deal with the traffic congestion,” and for the Department simply to ignore that advice?

Mr Hayes: If my hon. Friend were a harder and crueller man than he is, he might have pointed out what could be described as a contradiction in what I have said. I said that I was not going to be governed by experts and that I would take the decisions, but shortly afterwards I said that those decisions must be entirely evidential—that they must be empirical. It is true that that empiricism will, in part, come from those experts, but that is not a contradiction for this reason: part of the evidence that we collect will be on-the-ground evidence from the users of the road. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham expressed his concern that those who made the decisions might be oblivious to road users’ interests, but I assure him that they are not. It is entirely possible to square that evidential approach with an approach that is responsive to the real, on-the-ground experience of people who use the crossing and the roads that are linked to it.

Stephen Metcalfe: I would like to draw the Minister’s attention to my earlier remarks about the fact that when I challenged Highways England on the evidence it was using—the numbers and the modelling—about the 14% that would use option C, it could not point to where that was. It said that that would come at a later stage. All I am trying to say is that the evidence has yet to be established unquestionably.

Mr Hayes: That is certainly true. It is also true that Highways England needs to do more in the way in which it communicates with Members of Parliament. I have told it so and, to its credit, it has taken that on board. My hon. Friend will know that it is now holding a series of meetings with colleagues from across the country to discuss local and regional concerns. That is a direct result of the emphasis that I placed, when I returned to the Department, on the need for Highways England to provide hon. and right hon. Members with accurate information of the kind that has been requested tonight.

I want to move on, because it is not right that I detain the House unduly, although I want to respond as fully as possible to my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham and others. The existing crossing is at capacity for much of the time, as I have said, and it is one of the least reliable sections of England’s strategic road network of motorways and major trunk roads. Closures and congestion occur frequently and have a big impact on business and communities regionally, locally and elsewhere in the UK.

I emphasise that we can, however, do more with the existing crossing. Reference has been made to the Dart Charge, and hon. Members will know that the introduction of Dart Charge necessitated some changes to the way in which the crossing is managed. Even with free-flow charging, as I have said, there is a congestion problem. We can take a close look at what more can be done. The road signage on the northbound crossing approach is being reviewed, and we are looking at the movements of different types of vehicles as they approach the crossing to see what improvements can be made. Work continues with local authorities on both sides of the crossing to improve traffic flows between the local and strategic road networks. That includes a joint approach from Highways England and Kent County Council on a number of improvement measures for the junctions used by traffic approaching the crossing from Dartford.

Highways England will continue, on my instruction, to monitor the conditions at the crossing and to understand the various factors contributing to its performance. I want to make sure that, notwithstanding the wider debate about a second crossing, we are using the existing system as effectively and efficiently as we can. I note that point, which has been made by various hon. Members, and I think we can probably do more. We are certainly looking at the matter closely, and I will bring further information to the House when we have done so.

Gareth Johnson: I am heartened that the Minister appreciates that wherever the new lower Thames crossing is situated, a lot of work will need to be carried out to mitigate the existing problems at the Dartford crossing. Does he agree that Highways England needs to take a radical approach? It needs to look at the possibility of partially closing junctions and at the better management of box junctions, as does the Department for Transport. Highways England needs to look at this whole matter in a radical way so that we can ensure that, during the approximately 10 years it will take to build the lower Thames crossing, my constituents are not held to ransom by the traffic congestion that we suffer daily.

Mr Hayes: I never like to use the word “radical” except pejoratively, but my hon. Friend is right that we need to be imaginative and lateral in our thinking. The appropriate

application of imagination that he describes is necessary for making best use of the existing capacity, as well as when looking at changes that are needed.

To that end, it is worth saying something about the M25 more widely. My hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham mentioned the M25, if I may put it in these terms, in the round. He is right to say that looking just at the crossing without considering the wider road network would be an error of judgment. We will look at it more widely, and in my meeting with him I want to explore the issue of the M25 in full to ensure that while the steps we take may be many miles from the crossing, they will have an effect at it. He is right to draw the House's attention to the M25 *per se*.

My hon. Friend was also right to talk about continuing dialogue with the community. I have spoken about the exchanges between Highways England and hon. Members, but it is important that the community—through Members and other representative bodies such as local councils—is taken fully into account. I will ensure that that happens in parallel with the work that Highways England does with colleagues.

Highways England has a challenging task, and it is easy for us to be very critical of it. I am quite tough, frankly, with those who work with and for me, but I think that we should adopt a tough and appreciative tone. We recognise that Highways England will be trying its best to get this right, and we need to work with it to ensure the best possible outcome for road users. I will be demanding, but at the same time I want to be appreciative of its efforts.

Mr Holloway *rose*—

Mr Hayes: I am sure my hon. Friend shares that view and is dying to make that clear in his next intervention.

Mr Holloway: Absolutely. However, I urge the Minister to have a look—this is in my file, but I cannot find it now—at how the criteria have changed. They were originally about the capacity to rescue the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and everyone else from sitting in the traffic, but they are now about all sorts of other things, including wider economic benefits. I think that five new criteria have emerged, and that needs to be looked at because this should be a roads project.

Mr Hayes: That is a very good point. If I am right that we need to communicate effectively with constituents and others, it will also be right to do so with a settled view about priorities. We should of course be flexible enough to take account of changing circumstances of growing demand, but we cannot keep moving the goalposts. I hear what my hon. Friend says and I want to look at that closely, but I will not make any definitive comments about it now. Again, I will be happy to raise that with Highways England so that he, other Members of the House and the wider public can be sure that the criteria used are consistent, reasoned and well communicated. That is not an unreasonable request—it seems to me to be a perfectly modest one—and I will make sure that it is made.

I am rattling through my points, as you can tell, Madam Deputy Speaker, but before I bring my remarks to a conclusion, the House will expect me to say something

about the lower Thames crossing. A lot of work has been done on it, and I do not want to repeat what the House will already know. Most Members in the Chamber are very familiar with this territory, if I may say so. Let me simply emphasise that the objectives of any further crossing are plain and straightforward: affordability, both for the Government and users of the crossing; value for money, which to me is critical in any changes that are made; improving the resilience of the Thames crossings and the major road network; improving safety; minimising adverse impacts on the local community, health and the environment; and dealing with congestion.

I will, if I may, add a further element that has not been announced in this House previously, but which I think is a common-sense approach that has been given life and substance by tonight's debate: we must try to look to the long term. It is a perennial challenge for the Government to make infrastructure decisions that are sufficient and appropriate for the long term. That is not straightforward, because one is projecting and modelling sometimes for many decades ahead. When we build a new road or crossing, or invest in a major piece of infrastructure, we do so not for our generation and perhaps not for the next, but for the generations to come, because these things last decades. It is right, in any decisions we take, to take full account of the long-term trends and changes that any changes we make will have to cope with. That point was made forcefully earlier in the debate and I want to add it to the core list that I have just read.

Mr Holloway: The Minister talked about affordability, value, resilience, safety, minimum impact and capacity, and then mentioned the long term, but what is desperately needed now is capacity. Option C does not provide the capacity that is needed right now by the tens of millions of people who are suffering in traffic queues. Once we have sorted out capacity, by all means let us go for some of those other things and have a conversation about something to the east of Gravesend or wherever, but let us not confuse two things. The problem is the disaster at Dartford and it will be a complete scandal if we do not sort that out.

Mr Hayes: Of course my hon. Friend is right that we must deal with the imperative. The imperative problem, as I have described it, is one of growing congestion, growing demand, compromises therefore on the rest of the road network, inconvenience for travellers, disruption to businesses and so on. Of course, in dealing with those imperatives, not to take account of what will happen later would be a failure.

Governments, as I have said, are not always good at looking at long-term strategic decisions. That is why Governments in democratic polities tend to underinvest in infrastructure. It is quite bold and brave to think 20, 30, 50 or even 100 years hence, but when one is making big decisions about infrastructure, that is exactly what one is trying to do. It can only be based on an estimate, an understanding of the trends and a set of models. It can be based on nothing else because we cannot be certain how, why or by what means people will travel in 100 years' time, but the roads and bridges we build will certainly last that long. All the evidence of the past suggests that they do, does it not? There is no contradiction in taking decisions that deal with the imperatives while doing so in a way that looks at things for the long term.

Stephen Metcalfe *rose*—

Mr Hayes: I will give way once more and then move to my exciting peroration.

Stephen Metcalfe: It is a pleasure to have a Minister at the Dispatch Box who understands the issues so clearly—he has been in his job twice, as he points out. The figures from Highways England point out that if we were to pursue its proposed route, by 2035 the capacity at the existing Dartford crossing would again exceed 100%. We really must focus—I respectfully ask the Minister to do so—on solving the problem where it exists at the moment. If we do that, we can work towards other long-term solutions for the M25 at a later point. Let us solve the problem that we have set out to solve now.

Mr Hayes: I will not go into great detail about—

Gareth Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hayes: I do not want unnecessarily to suggest that there is antagonism in the Chamber, but given that I have already given way generously to one side of the argument, in an exercise in balance I ought to give way to the other.

Gareth Johnson: In a final intervention, may I be so bold as to give the Minister a brief history lesson? When in the 1600s it was decided that London bridge was too congested, the town planners of the day decided that they would not put another crossing right next to the existing one, but would give some resilience to London. The same situation happened again and again, so we have crossings at various locations in London. That is exactly what we need to do for the future. We must ensure that we have a separate crossing location east of Gravesend.

Mr Hayes: I wonder whether the House has heard enough about the origins of London bridge and whether my hon. Friend might apply for an Adjournment debate

on just that subject. I would be delighted to respond to that debate if I were given the opportunity to do so. We could then explore the veracity of his suggestion about the arguments that were advanced then, and why they were advanced. I have a limited knowledge of the history of that time in London and of that bridge, so I assume that everything he has said until now has been entirely accurate.

This matter has been brought before the House a number of times. It is of great concern to the Government. We went about the business, as Members will know, of consulting on the crossing of the Thames that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford strongly supports, and more than 47,000 people took part in that consultation. I said earlier that we are analysing the results, and we will say more in due course. But I emphasise again that this debate has served a useful purpose in drawing the House's attention to the balance between the pressing imperatives at Dartford, which I fully appreciate and in no way make light of, and the wider need to ensure that there is adequate capacity to deal with demand to cross the river Thames, which my hon. Friend has articulated so effectively.

The assumption sometimes affects politicians—sometimes, indeed, emasculates them—that we are merely creatures of circumstance. That is not true. In the words of Benjamin Disraeli:

“Circumstances are the creatures of men. We are free agents, and man is more powerful than matter.”

It is now for good men and women to consider these things fully and in the round, on the basis of the evidence that I described earlier, and to come to appropriate judgments. That is the job of Government. These things are not easy, for government is not easy, but we are determined to do what is right. To that end, I say again that my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham has done the House a service in drawing its attention once more to these important matters.

Question put and agreed to.

8.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 14 November 2016

[MR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

Police Dogs and Horses

4.30 pm

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Before we begin, I should warn Members that the case mentioned in the petition is currently before the courts. The House of Commons has agreed in its resolution on matters sub judice that cases that are active before the courts should not be referred to in debate. This is to avoid any possibility of what we say prejudicing a fair trial or impeding a successful prosecution. I therefore ask all Members to avoid any reference to that particular case.

David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 168678 relating to the status of police dogs and horses.

Sadly, it is not unusual to read reports in the press of police animals being seriously injured or killed, or having to be put down as a result of injuries sustained during their duties. Understandably, there is much concern among the public about animal welfare generally, but this issue hits at the very heart of compassion for animals and our responsibility to those we put in harm's way for the benefit of society.

I should make it clear that this petition relates to a specific case that is currently progressing through the legal system. I shall of course follow your guidance, Mr Crausby, and make no direct reference to that case. In a broader sense, the petition asks that police animals be given enhanced legal protection and refers to legislation that was introduced in the United States. That legislation gives animals the status of police officers, but it is unlikely that that would be considered in this country, so I will concentrate on legal recognition for service animals injured while doing their duty to help to keep us safe.

At present, there is no specific offence or penalty relating to causing harm or death to a police animal.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way so early in the debate. Our police animals—dogs and horses—are an integral part of the police service and contribute significantly to keeping us all safe. Does he agree that it is outrageous that if a police dog or horse is assaulted or injured, this is treated merely as criminal damage?

David Mackintosh: I am grateful for that intervention and I agree with the hon. Lady. At present, there is no specific offence or penalty relating to causing harm to, or the death of, a police animal. Under current legislation, such offences may be prosecuted under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 or the Criminal Damage Act 1971, which I will come to.

The petition suggests the adoption of legislation along the lines of the US Federal Law Enforcement Animal Protection Act 2000, which was introduced

following similar concerns that police animals did not receive adequate protection under the law and were vulnerable to physical harm as a result. Following the Act's introduction, it is a federal offence in the United States to maliciously harm or conspire to harm a dog or horse being used for law enforcement and carries a penalty of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

The Government point out in their response to the petition that under existing legislation and sentencing guidelines it is technically possible for someone convicted of such an offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to be imprisoned for up to 10 years.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Can we smash this myth that 10 years' imprisonment is available in almost any circumstance for assaults on police dogs and horses? For the matter to come before the Crown court with its extended sentencing powers would require the damage involved to exceed £5,000. I suggest there has never been such a case and that 10 years' imprisonment has never been available for any offender convicted of such offence.

David Mackintosh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I have done some research into sentencing for this sort of act, which proves and backs up what he said. Alongside the 2006 Act is another option, the Criminal Damage Act 1971, which, sadly, likens any attack on an animal to damage to a police car or riot van, and does not reflect the bravery of the animal. That is wrong.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Animals are sentient beings. They are capable of feelings, emotions and pain. The law currently regards animals as mere property that is capable of being destroyed or damaged under the 1971 Act. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this law must be changed so that animals are given the protection they deserve?

David Mackintosh: I am grateful for that intervention. I do believe the law should be examined and changed or a new law introduced. When looking into the issue in the run-up to this debate, I contacted or was contacted by various organisations, and their views are mixed. Organisations such as the RSPCA believe that the current legislation is adequate, but the Kennel Club feels strongly that such offences should be treated as assault or attempted murder. Clearly, there is a wide range of opinion.

As the petition demonstrates, there is a feeling among the wider public that police animals deserve greater legal protection than they currently enjoy, in recognition of the risks they face in the service of our society. In this respect, the law is definitely at odds with public opinion and that of the police, who care for their animals with exceptional compassion and humanity.

My concern is that although it may be technically possible to secure convictions with up to 10 years' imprisonment, the failure to prosecute means that has no deterrent effect. There is an argument for enhanced protection for police animals, as we have heard from colleagues here today. I note that the Government's response states that the maximum penalty for such offences is 10 years, but figures supplied by the House of Commons Library show that in 2015, the average custodial sentence for a prosecution under the Animal

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Welfare Act 2006 Act was just 3.3 months and the average fine just £244. Custodial sentences applied in just 10% of convictions. What sort of message does that send about how we treat and protect animals acting to uphold the law and who work to keep us safe?

The feeling among police officers is that prosecutions are so unlikely that assaults on animals are often not recorded, so it is hard to understand the scale of the issue. A specific offence of causing malicious harm or death to a police or service animal with clear penalties outside the 2006 Act would be a more effective deterrent and would recognise the unique risks these animals face. There is a sound argument for enhancing the current protection, but without suitable changes to the procedures for seeking and securing a prosecution, this would prove ineffective. A new offence would help to empower the police to seek a prosecution and provide clarity for the Crown Prosecution Service.

Understandably, police officers have extremely close bonds with their animals. They help the police to prevent and to fight crime and to secure convictions. The animals are placed in harm's way daily and, sadly, often suffer physical harm that sometimes results in death. We must not forget their role in protecting police officers and the public and in preventing injury and loss of life. Police officers have told me that on occasions, if it had not been for the animal and its intervention, they fear they would have been killed.

The care with which the police treat their animals and the affection they receive from the public should be echoed in the protection they receive under the law. We have a clear moral and ethical responsibility for the welfare of these animals, and I support the introduction of the sort of measures suggested in the petition. I am grateful to be able to lead this debate today.

Christina Rees: The South Wales Police Federation constables branch board chair, Steve Treharne, wrote to me recently about the safety of police officers, but he also talked about the need to give the same protections to police animals, as an extension of what he called the police family. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is time that police animals were given the same status?

David Mackintosh: The hon. Lady makes a very clear point and is backed up by a message from her constituent. It lends weight to the argument that we have heard already today: that we should be looking to introduce new protections in legislation for police animals.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I think I am right in saying that my hon. Friend does not have the right of reply to this debate, and I would like to hear his comments on this issue. I do not know whether he consulted the British Transport police, but for a brief time I was privileged to hold a warrant as a constable with the BTP, and we regularly worked with police dogs on the London underground on drug interdiction. Drug dealers are not nice people; they are quite prepared to harm anyone and anything to get their way. Is it not time that we recognise that the animal is in effect an extension of the policeman or woman, and give them the protection that they deserve?

David Mackintosh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I did not speak specifically to the British Transport police, but he makes a very salient point. It is very important that we recognise the vital job that these animals do. If they were not there to help us, the police officers would have a much more difficult job. It is also worth registering the fact that it takes a lot of effort, time and money to train the animals to do their specific jobs. By recognising their status in law, we would also be recognising the contribution they make and how much we as a society have invested in them in the first place, so it is a very credible point, and I am happy to move the motion.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Let me just say that the hon. Gentleman does have the right to reply at the end of the debate, on condition that the Minister gives him time to reply. It has been my experience sometimes that that is not the case.

4.41 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I say how pleased I am that you are chairing this important debate, Mr Crausby? I thank the Petitions Committee for allocating time to discuss this issue in Westminster Hall, and in particular the hon. Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for doing such a good job of setting out the principles underpinning the debate.

As we have heard, people all over the country have been struck by the story of police dog Finn and his handler, PC Dave Wardell, with the petition reaching more than 100,000 signatures in just 10 days. I will heed your advice, Mr Crausby, and not say any more about that case, but let me take this opportunity to wish Finn and PC Wardell all the best on their road to recovery. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

I also thank the "Finn's Law" campaign team, who have harnessed the sense of injustice about what happened to Finn and turned it into positive action, with a view to delivering the change that we would all like to see. I pay tribute to some of the senior officers in West Yorkshire police who have gone over and above what might have been expected to lend their support to the "Finn's Law" campaign. If people have not already seen the video of Chief Inspector Aidy Waugh and Chief Superintendents Tim Kingsman and Mabs Hussain trying and failing to evade a police dog, all in the name of raising awareness about Finn's law, I promise them that it is well worth a watch and even a retweet.

Spending time with West Yorkshire police in my constituency over the summer, I have met some incredibly dedicated people, yet the workload of our police forces is becoming increasingly complicated. In West Yorkshire since 2010, we have lost 1,200 police officers—a 20% reduction in the force—and increasingly officers are asked to respond to 999 calls on their own. I witnessed an incident that quickly escalated, leaving an officer surrounded following a routine attempt to stop a vehicle. With the Police Federation, I started the "Protect the Protectors" campaign and began raising police officer safety in the Chamber, but the work of the "Finn's Law" campaign reminded me that it is not just police officers but our hard-working police horses and dogs that are exposed to risk.

There are 1,900 police dogs in the UK: 781 specialist dogs and 1,119 general purpose dogs carrying out tasks that are often simply beyond their human counterparts.

In West Yorkshire fairly recently, two police cars were rammed by a vehicle and the driver ran off, evading arrest. Police dog Tia was able to track the offender and found his discarded hat; from that hat, a DNA sample was obtained and matched and the suspect identified. Police dog Ty tracked and located an elderly lady with dementia who had got lost in freezing weather. Officers were adamant that had Ty not located her, she would not have lasted much longer, exposed to the harsh weather conditions.

Police officers tell us that dogs are one of the most effective ways of managing some very difficult situations, with officers' only concern being that not enough dogs are available. Police dog Buzz, a firearms support dog, recently detained a distressed male who was threatening the public with a large knife. He was able to bring the incident to a conclusion thanks to the advanced training that police dogs go through, and thankfully with no harm to himself.

Police horses are also invaluable, yet six were injured during last year's million mask march and an irate football fan was sentenced to a year in prison in 2013 for punching West Yorkshire police horse Bud in the face before being detained by officers.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I praise the hon. Lady for her work on the "Protect the Protectors" campaign. She is giving very good examples. Police dogs and horses are an integral part of the policing team, and introducing exemplary punishments for those who show ill will and cause harm, damage and perhaps even death to police horses and dogs will give confidence to the police officers who are working as a team with their police dogs and horses.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right: offering that protection to dogs will lend further support to handlers and to their colleagues more widely.

I did not know until I was made aware by the "Finn's Law" campaign that the only mechanism for charging someone who assaults or kills a police dog or horse is in section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Conviction carries a maximum penalty of six months in prison. Alternatively, in the most serious cases, an offender can be charged with criminal damage. Kent Police Federation tweeted me yesterday and summed the position up perfectly. It said that

"the Finn's law campaign isn't about the law treating Police Dogs the same as cops, but it is about treating them better than a broken window."

I understand that a constructive meeting has already taken place between the campaign team and the Policing Minister, which is encouraging, but I think the Minister already knows my view: police officers and police animals alike deserve the full backing of the justice system, and tough sentences must play a role in deterring anyone who thinks that it is acceptable to assault either a police officer or a police animal—quite often it is both. That simply must not be tolerated.

Although I welcome the recent progress made, as with assaults on police officers it has been difficult to establish the scale of the problem of assaults on police animals because of a lack of official statistics. That is partly due to the difficulties of getting an offence to court and securing a conviction, as we have heard. The evidence

required to secure either an animal welfare or a criminal damage conviction has to clear such a high threshold that offences are, sadly, going unpunished. To prove criminal damage, it has to be shown that property—a dog or horse in this instance—has been deliberately or recklessly broken, permanently or temporarily. Bruises and cuts resulting from kicks or punches are almost impossible to demonstrate under an animal's fur. Similar challenges apply under the Animal Welfare Act: it would need to be proved that an offender inflicted "unnecessary suffering" on an animal and did so deliberately. If an offender claimed that a kick to a police dog's head was an involuntary reaction to being scared, for example, a prosecution would be difficult to secure.

The average cost of the initial training of a police dog is about £20,000, and the lifetime cost, including vets' bills, food and kennelling, is about £50,000. That is a significant investment on the part of a police force, but it makes that investment because police dogs are a highly trained asset and incredibly effective at what they do. However, precisely because of what they do, they are exposed to heightened and very different risks from other animals, and I agree with the "Finn's Law" campaign that that should be reflected in the laws that protect them.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I salute the hon. Lady on the "Protect the Protectors" campaign. This weekend, I stood among people laying remembrance wreaths. People from all different parts of the services were paying their respects to the people who gave their lives for our country. The work that we are doing today on the safety of police officers is similarly important. I served on the Policing and Crime Bill Committee, and this matter was not raised as an opportunity to support police dogs and horses. Does the hon. Lady think that this debate is an opportunity to ask the Minister whether the protection can be extended?

Holly Lynch: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that intervention. She is absolutely right, and it perhaps was a missed opportunity that we did not address the matter at that opportune moment, but hopefully not too much time has been lost and we have the ability to correct that mistake today.

I asked the Police Federation whether it had cases of assaults on police animals and details of whether convictions had been secured following those assaults, and some really troubling stories were passed on to me. In February 2013, police dog Euro was repeatedly punched around the head and kicked in what his handler described as a "violent and unpredicted" attack on the dog; Euro sustained bruising and cuts to his mouth and lip. In that instance, the offender was charged and found guilty of the offence of criminal damage to police property, but only received a community order and was ordered to pay court costs. Police dog Buzz, who I mentioned earlier, was attending a large public order incident and was kicked in the head, sustaining injuries to his tongue and the inside of his mouth. On that occasion, the offender was detained and charged under the Animal Welfare Act.

Sam, a nine-year-old German Shepherd police dog, was asked to give chase to a driver who ran from a vehicle. The man climbed on top of another car and began kicking Sam's head; when Sam managed to pull

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the offender from the roof of the car, the male then began to twist the police dog's collar, restricting his airway until he was unconscious. The dog's handler, PC Ian Head, had to draw his baton in order to get the male to let go of Sam's collar. Fortunately, Sam slowly began to regain consciousness, and a short time later got back to work assisting with the arrest of the offender. The offender in question was later charged with failing to provide a specimen on suspicion of drink-driving, which was the more serious of the charges against him. Part of the problem that needs to be addressed, which is often the case in prosecuting assaults on police officers as well as on animals, is that the circumstances leading to the assault take precedence, with the most serious charges being pursued at the expense of lesser charges. Too often, animal welfare charges, and even police assault charges, have been sidelined.

Those are some of the assaults that have been recorded and did go to court, but the feedback from dog handlers is that in the vast majority of cases the injuries sustained do not meet the evidence threshold required to secure a prosecution, so much of that information is then lost and not recorded. The "Finn's Law" team spoke to 71 serving dog handlers, 75.7% of whom said that their dog had been either kicked or punched in the line of duty. Only 8% saw charges brought, with 82% of assaults on police dogs going uncharged. Some 10% of those surveyed said that they had experienced their dogs being stabbed or seriously injured.

Other countries have successfully introduced much tougher deterrents, as the hon. Member for Northampton South said. In America, specific federal laws apply to anyone who harms an animal used in law enforcement. The law states:

"Whoever willfully and maliciously harms any police animal, or attempts or conspires to do so, shall be fined under this title and imprisoned not more than 1 year. If the offense permanently disables or disfigures the animal, or causes serious bodily injury to or the death of the animal, the maximum term of imprisonment shall be 10 years."

In this instance, "police animal" refers to

"a dog or horse employed by a Federal agency... for the principal purpose of aiding in the detection of criminal activity, enforcement of laws, or apprehension of criminal offenders."

In Canada, Quanto's law extends similar protections to all service animals used in law enforcement, the military and for individuals with disabilities or specific medical needs. Quanto was a police dog who was fatally stabbed while helping to apprehend a fleeing suspect. The federal law in his name means that jail sentences of up to five years can now be imposed on anyone who intentionally kills a police dog or service animal.

I said that I have had some horrible examples passed to me. I want to share one of the most awful, because to me it shows the risks that both police officers and police animals face and why our justice system must offer the greatest possible protection to them both. It dates back to 1998 and was recounted to me by a Federation representative.

Police officers attended a domestic incident, where dog handler PC Churms arrived with police dog Bryn. Shouting and screaming could be heard from inside the premises, so PC Churms advised other attending officers that he would deploy with Bryn. As he approached the

house, a male appeared holding a hunter's rifle with a silencer to the head of his female partner. The officers with PC Churms backed off, and he and police dog Bryn were left with the offender in the confines of a garden. The officer attempted to negotiate a successful outcome, but as he attempted to quieten Bryn he was shot in the leg causing significant injury. As the offender lifted the gun to shoot the officer again, PC Churms released Bryn in an attempt to bring the male under control and protect himself and the female. Police dog Bryn was killed with a single fatal shot to the head. The female attempted to run off and was shot in the shoulder. The offender dragged the female back and forced the barrel of the gun into the officer's mouth and said, "I will come back for you," before dragging the female away. The officer dragged himself into the street and was taken into a neighbour's house, where they barricaded themselves and the officer was tended to.

The risks faced by our front-line officers and animals alike could not be more serious. I hope that tougher sentences for those who assault police dogs will serve to keep both dogs and handlers that bit safer in the line of duty, as the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said.

I am reassured that the Minister has met with the "Finn's Law" campaign team. Once again, I thank the "Finn's Law" team for the work they have done in putting this issue on the political agenda. For me, the challenge with granting police animals the same protections as police officers is that I am still of the opinion there is much more we should be doing in relation to police officer safety, so I am hoping to keep going with the broader debate about how we protect our protectors and keep front-line officers and animals safe in the line of duty. I hope that the Minister is able to reflect on the examples from other countries, as well as on some of the tales of police animal bravery that we have heard today, and think about what more can be done to offer police animals like Finn the greatest possible protection.

4.55 pm

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I would like to put on the record my thanks to the Petitions Committee for kindly allowing this debate to take place, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for leading it and starting us off today. I also thank the "Finn's Law" campaign team, who have helped to mobilise public opinion behind the petition, and the members of the public who have signed the petition and contacted me to offer their support.

My interest in this subject was stirred by an incident in my constituency involving police dog Finn and his handler PC Dave Wardell. I understand that this matter is now sub judice, and we are not allowed to discuss the case during the debate. That is a pity, as I am sure that if I could share the details of what happened, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that our police dogs and horses need far greater protection in law than they currently have.

However, I am sure everyone will be delighted to know that both police dog Finn and his handler Dave Wardell are recovering well from their injuries. Dave is here in the Public Gallery, so I thank him for joining us today. Sadly, Finn cannot be with us but I have teased

Dave that all the people who have contacted me have shown sympathy only for Finn and not for him—he is just an afterthought. On a serious note, he is a great person and a fine example of the amazing professionals that we have in Hertfordshire police.

I was privileged to take part in the police parliamentary scheme, and one of the 20 days I did with Hertfordshire police was with the police dogs team. We raced all over Hertfordshire and on that day we tackled everything from individuals who were possibly armed, to illegal immigrants inside a truck. We tackled people who were trying to evade the police and also dealt with a burglary, where they sent the same police dog in to see what was going on in the house.

These animals work constantly and consistently, on a day to day basis, week after week. They do an amazing job to keep my constituents safe, and Hertfordshire police have ensured that Hertfordshire is one of the safest places in the country to live. That is one of the key reasons why so many people relocate to my constituency of Stevenage. The thousands of new arrivals every year make it one of the strongest and most vibrant communities, providing the engine room of Hertfordshire's economy. That is an amazing feat considering that Stevenage was this country's first new town and celebrated its 70th birthday last Friday.

Today we need to celebrate the role of the police dogs and horses that are constantly put into some of the most dangerous situations and are attacked on a weekly basis up and down the country. These animals are doing a vital job keeping us safe, and it is only fair that we return their commitment by providing them with the protection they need when they are hurt in the course of their duty.

I know that on an emotional level my constituents and I find it difficult that these animals are treated as property in law. If someone attacks a police dog, they can be charged only with criminal damage or possibly animal cruelty. However, treating a broken window or a broken garden gnome the same as a police dog hurt in the line of duty trying to disable an armed offender, or as a police horse attacked with broken bottles during a riot, seems heartless to me and my constituents.

Gareth Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that this typifies the materialistic way in which the law treats animals? We see that with dog theft and with attacks on police dogs. Does he agree that it is time we stopped treating animals like a commodity such as a laptop computer or mobile telephone?

Stephen McPartland: I agree with my hon. Friend. I understand that in 2015, France stopped treating animals as movable property and now refers to them as living beings. Perhaps that is something we can consider going forward.

I understand that there is nervousness about providing police dogs and horses with the same rights as police officers, as the petition states. We need to be talking about simply treating them better than a broken window. This is about recognising that they are not pieces of property, but are highly trained and highly intelligent animals; there has got to be somewhere in between. They are also part of a much larger family of working animals that work very hard on a daily basis to keep us safe.

The military police have dog handlers, and we have fire dogs in Hertfordshire. There are customs and excise dogs, guide dogs and hearing dogs. Imagine the impact on a blind person if their guide dog was attacked and injured! Apart from the intense vulnerability they would feel during the incident, they would suffer a loss of freedom and independence as the dog recovered from its injuries, and they might well be housebound as a result.

The Government response to the petition has been underwhelming, to say the least, but I believe we can get them to change their mind. I am delighted that the Policing Minister is with us today, because I know he is a big animal lover. He is not frightened of going up against the system and doing what is right, and I am convinced that together with him, we can get on and make a change through Finn's law. We are all looking forward to working closely with him to achieve that.

The petition response states:

"An attack on a police dog or other police support animal can be treated as causing unnecessary suffering to an animal under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The maximum penalty is 6 months' imprisonment, or an unlimited fine, or both. The financial element of the penalty was raised only last year from a maximum fine of £20,000. An attack on a police animal could be considered by the court as an aggravating factor leading to a higher sentence within the available range. Under some circumstances assaults on support animals could be treated as criminal damage which would allow for penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment.

An additional offence dealing specifically with attacks on police animals or a move to change their legal status is unnecessary in light of the maximum penalties already in place. An additional and separate offence may not result in more prosecutions, or increased sentences."

The problem with that response, and the reason why we find it so disappointing, is that it fails to recognise that the vast majority of offences cannot be charged as either criminal damage or under the Animal Welfare Act, simply because of the very high threshold for both offences. In practical terms, there are no charges for the majority of attacks on dogs and, as other Members have said, cases rarely get to the stage of prosecution in the courts.

According to my understanding, for someone to obtain a successful prosecution of an offender under the Animal Welfare Act, they need to show that the suffering was unnecessary and deliberate. If the offender says they were scared and only defending themselves or lost control, the Crown Prosecution Service will not pursue the case. The more likely scenario is that a charge for criminal damage will be pursued, thus treating a highly trained and intelligent animal the same in law as this table or chair.

The prosecution has to show deliberate or reckless damage that is permanent or temporary. Most attacks cannot be shown to be such, because bruises do not show on dogs. The dog's fur would have to be shaved to see the bruise underneath, meaning that it would be possible to prosecute offenders only when the dog has been stabbed or hurt in a different way. Veterinary evidence would also be needed to show that that action led to that result, and there would be a time lag between the incident, seeing the vet and the veterinary report.

The sad reality is that these animals are being placed in danger every single day of every week and are attacked on a regular basis, but the offenders are not prosecuted. The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) mentioned

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the survey that was generated by the “Finn’s Law” campaign. It was only up for 24 hours, so it is not scientific, but it received 71 responses from dog handlers, 75.7% of whom have experienced their dog getting kicked or punched. Of those attacks only 8% saw charges brought—so in 92% of cases, the offender got away with it completely—and 10% of handlers have experienced their dogs being seriously stabbed or seriously injured.

I will read the following handlers’ stories, which the Finn’s law campaign has collated:

“On two separate occasions my dog has been kicked at when locating suspect.

Dog got kicked by an individual at a travellers wake; dog put 18 holes in subject’s leg”—

the handler said the individual was not charged with attacking a dog, just “with affray”—

“Experienced 2 separate incidents. 1) detaining a male for dwelling burglary kicked dog in head and chest before making off over railway. 2) Punched and kicked whilst trying to detain male after a serious domestic assault. No charges brought...as not enough evidence.

During a warranted by court eviction in North London, we assisted a team of bailiffs to remove squatters. The male was hiding behind a door and when confronted by the dog he began kicking and punching him. The dog defended himself and me with a full mouth bite to the leg. Thankfully he was a hard headed, strong dog and it didn’t phase him”—

but no charges were brought due to a “lack of bruising”.

Holly Lynch: When we are thinking through the thresholds required for evidence to secure prosecutions, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the prevalence of body-worn video for police officers might be part of the package for how we secure more evidence to get convictions when the charges come to court?

Stephen McPartland: I agree with the hon. Lady, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said, a monetary value is placed on the damage. It has to be shown to be worth £5,000, so even with a police officer’s body camera, it would have to be demonstrated that the kicking and punching caused £5,000-worth of damage for the case to be eligible to go to Crown court to seek the maximum sentence. To me the situation seems inappropriate, and that is because the dog is treated the same as this table and these chairs. That is unfortunate.

Let me give another quick example from the survey:

“Drink driver decamped following”—

a road traffic collision.

“Dog tracked and located offender in bushes. Offender decided to kick dog numerous times and was duly bitten on the leg and pulled from bushes. Arrested and charged with drink-drive and traffic offences only.”

We are a nation of animal lovers, but our laws do not really protect all animals when they are put at risk of serious harm in the course of their duty. Our laws are also behind other countries, as the hon. Member for Halifax mentioned. The Bill that became the US Federal Law Enforcement Animal Protection Act 2000 was introduced in response to the fact that eight police dogs were killed in the States between 1998 and 1999. Before that, as in the UK, the animals were regarded as

a piece of equipment such as a computer, and offenders were prosecuted for property damage. The Act includes any animal that is employed by a federal agency.

The American law states:

“Whoever willfully and maliciously harms any police animal, or attempts or conspires to do so, shall be fined under this title and imprisoned not more than 1 year. If the offense permanently disables or disfigures the animal, or causes serious bodily injury or the death of the animal, the maximum term of imprisonment shall be 10 years...In this section, the term ‘police animal’ means a dog or horse employed by a Federal agency (whether in the executive, legislative, or judicial branch) for the principal purpose of aiding in the detection of criminal activity, enforcement of laws, or apprehension of criminal offenders.”

I am sorry that the incident that inspired the petition took place in my constituency, but I am proud to stand alongside the campaigners to support a change in the law so that these amazing animals are treated as more than a broken window when they are hurt in the course of their duty.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): It is very warm in here, so I am happy for Members to remove their jackets if they want to. I call Sir Roger Gale.

5.6 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I apologise to you, Mr Crausby, for the fact that I did not indicate in advance that I intended to participate; I was moved by the moment.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for introducing the debate. I want to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) that I am not remotely surprised that public sympathy was overwhelmingly for Finn rather than Finn’s handler. I do not disparage in any way the work of the constabulary, but having worn that uniform myself, I can honestly say that at no time has anybody of either sex come up to me and tickled me behind the ears.

On a more serious note, I know that Finn’s handler will also have expressed his prime concern for the animal. The bond between the police dog handlers—male and female—and their animals is very special indeed, and we should not ever underestimate the service that those animals do for the general public.

I say to the Minister that if there are not 650 Members of Parliament in this place all willing to support a change to the law, then there ought to be. He and I know that every day that the House sits, police dogs go into our Chamber and sweep it—not for drugs, but for bombs. They do that advisedly because, within my living memory, one of our colleagues was blown up and killed in this House, although not in the Chamber. We owe the police a huge debt; if we owe them that debt, we owe their dogs that debt and we should look after them.

I hope and believe that when push comes to shove—and it just has—we will change the law to give precisely the same protection to police animals that we give to the constables themselves. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South, they are an extension of that constable’s right arm and an injury to the animal is an injury to the officer. It should be prosecuted and punished as such.

The one area that we have touched on only lightly is that of police horses, which should not be overlooked either. Those of us who are slightly long in the tooth,

who sadly on occasions, have found ourselves embroiled in disturbances at football matches, will know only too well the value of those police horses and the officers riding them. The police horse and its rider offer a vantage point and, therefore, an ability to control simply not available to the eyes and ears on the ground, which are too low down.

We have all heard of—and in some cases, sadly, witnessed—instances of police horses being stabbed with knives, punched, kicked and treated vilely, very often by people under the influence of alcohol, but that makes it no better. That is why it is right that we place on the record our appreciation of the service of the police horses, and the men and women who ride them, as well as of our dogs and the people who handle them. I hope very much that when the Minister replies, he will say that the law will be changed as soon as possible.

5.10 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I suppose I should thank you, Mr Crausby, for your injunction at the beginning not to mention the court case that has triggered the debate. I have now lost a third of my speech because I cannot talk about what went on—but that is entirely my own fault, as I should have thought about it earlier. However, I wish PC Wardell and Finn all the very best for a speedy recovery.

I thank the 120,000 people who signed the petition that triggered the debate, the hon. Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for an excellent introduction, and the Petitions Committee for giving us the opportunity to have this discussion. It is a really good example of the e-petitions system working to concentrate minds here in Parliament and to bring issues the attention that they merit.

I declare an interest. I am not just the shadow Policing Minister; I am an unapologetic animal lover. A membership card for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds sits alongside my party membership card in my purse. As some in the House will know, one of my best friends in the world is my beautiful but rather wilful Yorkie, Cara. She certainly does not think that I own her; in fact, it is quite the other way around. They do rather leave paw prints on our hearts.

I was very upset when I read about the horrendous attack on the police dog, Finn, that sparked the debate. Unfortunately, that attack is not an isolated incident. There is so much to read about on the internet, and the research we did to prepare ourselves for this debate was rather harrowing.

I will just talk about one incident because I am not sure whether this dog has been mentioned. In 2013, Fuzz was struck with a metal bar by a robbery suspect who was wanted for stealing a moped. Despite the attack, Fuzz kept hold of the man until he was arrested. He was then rushed for veterinary treatment on his eye and face. There are so many disturbing stories out there, but I will not repeat some that have been mentioned by my hon. Friends today. I have crossed out more of my speech than I have left.

The sad truth is that some criminals think they can cruelly and brutally attack our police dogs and horses and that there will be few or no repercussions. That simply cannot be right. It is inappropriate for me to comment on the details of Finn's case, as the legal

process is still ongoing, but the charges brought for one such attack have highlighted a wider issue that many have with the legal protection afforded to animals working in the police service.

As we have heard, many charges presented to those who attack a police animal are made under the Criminal Damages Act 1971, but that legislation is designed to deal with people destroying or damaging property that belongs to another, not with animal cruelty. I know of one police and crime commissioner who has said that it is just “astonishing” that attacking a police dog who helps to uphold the law is treated the same as kicking in the door panel of a car.

The “Finn's Law” campaign has rightly said that police animals

“deserve better protection than property.”

I totally and utterly agree. Charging someone with criminal damage in such instances has the unsatisfactory implication that the victim is the property owner, rather than the animal itself. Finn, Fuzz and Bud, a police horse attacked by a Newcastle football hooligan, are not merely police property. They are not disposable objects as easily replaced as a broken window, but valued public servants and real victims. They are personalities—sentient, beautiful and often loved animals who, just like us, feel real pain when they are subjected to violence. The law should recognise them as such and give them the protection they deserve.

As has been mentioned, those who attack police animals can also be charged under section 4 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which makes it a criminal offence to subject an animal to unnecessary suffering. The Act is an important piece of legislation, but it was not passed with brutal attacks on animals in mind, and the maximum punishment is six months in prison or a fine of up to £20,000. That is much lower than the maximum penalty of 10 years available under the Criminal Damages Act 1971 or the American federal laws mentioned in the petition.

My own personal view is that there needs to be a review of the Animal Welfare Act, as I am not sure that that law is as robust as many of us would like. There are concerns from handlers that charges are not brought in most cases. There are no reliable national statistics about attacks on police animals, and I would like the Minister to look into that. As we have heard, a survey by the “Finn's Law” campaign found that 75.7% of handlers have experienced their dog being punched or kicked, but charges were brought in only 8% of those attacks.

The Government have produced an official response to the petition, arguing that

“An additional offence dealing specifically with attacks on police animals or a move to change their legal status is unnecessary in light of the maximum penalties already in place. An additional and separate offence may not result in more prosecutions, or increased sentences.”

I get that and I respect the Government's position; I also recognise that it is good practice to avoid duplicating laws on the statute book. However, I would like the Minister to address some of the concerns we have raised today.

Can the Minister assure us that he will write to the Sentencing Council and express the view of this House that police animals suffer greatly from some attacks and

[Lyn Brown]

are valued members of our law enforcement teams? Attacks on them should not be treated the same as attacks on property and should carry an appropriately severe penalty. Although the Criminal Damages Act 1971 carries potentially severe penalties, it has the unsatisfactory implication of treating police animals as property and, as we have heard, it is not fit for purpose when dealing with crimes against our serving animals—or, indeed, animals per se. Will the Minister, who has received very warm plaudits from his hon. Friends, commit to working with his phalanx of civil servants to bring forward an alternative proposal that would not treat such attacks as we treat the kicking of a door panel on a police car?

Today we can make a difference to these loyal and brave animals. It is not too late for the Government to amend the Policing and Crime Bill in the Lords to that effect. I am sure that if the Minister did so, he would receive cross-party support, and I might even join in with some of those warm plaudits. Will he commit to reviewing how often charges are brought when police animals are punched or kicked? In order for the Government to do that, they will have to start collecting proper statistics on the number of attacks on police animals, just as we argued they need to with regard to attacks on police officers a fortnight ago. It is not beyond the Government's ken to do so. With the IT available, it should not be a burden and would take a matter of moments.

Police animals such as Finn, Fuzz and Bud work tirelessly to help our police tackle crime. When they are attacked, they feel real pain and suffering, which in turn breaks the hearts of their handlers such as PC Dave Wardell. They deserve the full protection of the law. The Minister needs to recognise that many of those who work with police animals think the law is currently failing to offer that protection. They and I would like to know what he will do to address those serious and warranted concerns.

5.20 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) for sponsoring the debate, and I thank all Members who have contributed on an issue that is close to many of our hearts.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) said, I am a dog lover. I have two dogs, and I never thought I would see the names of Oz and Buzz in *Hansard*, but they will be in there now—my followers on Instagram and Twitter will know who Oz and Buzz are. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) is right that our pets are part of our family. I am a hardcore dog lover. My current dogs are both Labradors, but I have also experienced the joy of being a basset hound owner, which got a lot easier when I realised that bassets do not have owners—they have staff. Life got a lot easier after Bertie and I worked that out.

I will slightly reverse how these debates normally work. I will address some of the issues, but I will outline the journey of travel as I see it and what I think we can and should be doing, before touching on the challenge of doing that and outlining where we are. As we have a

couple of hours, I will leave time for my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South to respond, should he wish.

The petition response outlines the current position. As I will outline over the next few minutes, this afternoon's conversation has highlighted some of the challenges in how we address the situation and just how far we want to go. I have huge sympathy for those who are trying to do something, but this is not the simplest thing in the world. I will explain exactly why in a moment.

Before I come to that, I congratulate and thank the campaigners, whom I met last week to discuss some of the issues. They have been conducting the "Finn's Law" campaign in a positive, constructive way to get to a result, and they understand the mechanisms within which we work. They also appreciate, as do a large number of people in the police force—I met the Hertfordshire police and crime commissioner this morning to discuss this issue, as Finn is a member of that force—that the available sentencing powers, if used correctly, are as severe as we see elsewhere. The powers are not as severe as we would like, but it is about how they come across, whether they are used and the context in which they are used. I will return to that point.

I express my horror and disgust at the attack on PC Wardell and police dog Finn in Stevenage in October. Without touching on the case, I will say that the photographs taken of Finn after the operation are deeply distressing. I understand the public outrage that has followed the media coverage of the attack and its aftermath. That response is entirely human and expectable. The extent of the public support not just for Finn but more widely is clear.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. I ask the Minister not to refer to the court case, as I indicated at the beginning.

Brandon Lewis: Absolutely. I have been very careful not to do that.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): You are getting quite close. I want to help you.

Brandon Lewis: I appreciate that. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), I have received a huge amount of emails and correspondence on this issue, none of which, I am sorry to say, asked about the welfare of PC Wardell—it was all concerned about Finn, which highlights just how much the public and we care about animals. I am pleased that both are recovering well.

As I said earlier this month, when we twice debated officer safety at length, any kind of assault on a police officer, or on the animals and people who work with them, is completely unacceptable, so I am grateful for this opportunity not only to reiterate that message but to restate my personal commitment to moving forward on this issue.

The particular abilities of dogs make them a vital part of the police team, and indeed the police family. Part of the complication, as one of my hon. Friends mentioned, is that the issue is wider than police dogs. We also have police horses and fire dogs—I met Reqs from Hertfordshire, and he is a fine specimen of a Labrador—and there are other service dogs too. Anyone

who thinks it is appropriate, excusable or acceptable to mistreat, abuse or attack a guide dog or a hearing dog also needs to understand the severity of the crime they are committing. If we move forward on this issue, it is important that we encapsulate the kinds of dogs that serve our community and are extensions of the community that they serve.

Dogs provide important support in many areas of our public services. I have met Reqs, a fire and rescue dog, but there are other dogs working within our military or working to keep our borders safe. We often ask such animals to take on dangerous roles that we either would not ask humans to do or that it would simply not be practical for humans to do. These animals play a hugely important part in ensuring our safety and security.

Police dogs, for example, make a fantastic contribution in searches for suspects, vulnerable people and evidence, in specialist searches for drugs, explosives, firearms and bodies, in crime scene work and, of course, in tracking suspects. The pictures of Finn after the attack remind us of the specific dangers faced more widely by police dogs that are working in pursuit and public order situations. They and their handlers show incredible bravery and go about their work with dedication and courage to keep us safe and fight crime. They show remarkable courage and discipline.

Another police dog, PD Ghost of Merseyside police, lost his life last week while carrying out his duties. He was hit by a car in a tragic accident. The media coverage of his illustrious career—chasing and holding dangerous criminals to keep the local community safe—shows just how much we have lost with his passing. I offer my condolences to his handler, PC Dave Bartley, too.

Much of today's debate has understandably focused on dogs, but it is important to remember that horses are also an important part of the police family. As well as making a contribution to local policing in our rural communities, police horses are often called on to perform their duties in the face of danger, including in serious public order situations. It is hugely upsetting to read stories such as those reported in the media following the million-mask march in London last year, when people looked to bring down a police horse and its rider, which is a cowardly and dangerous act. The images are still clear in my mind of a football match that I attended when I was young: police horses were brought in to ensure safety and security, and some fans decided to throw darts at the police horses. That is simply not acceptable.

On Friday afternoon I saw the preparation for the safety and security of the visitors and spectators at the England-Scotland football match. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet said, the vision of a police horse rider goes beyond anything that somebody at ground level can see. They therefore play an important role in ensuring that the policing is conducted and structured in the right way. More generally, we should all seek to encourage the Police Federation to consider adding a category at the police bravery awards to recognise the bravery shown by police animals.

The language used to describe attacks on police assault animals goes to the core of how we move this debate forward. I absolutely understand that the language used in the charging of assaults can be completely unpalatable. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) made that point directly. We do not

simply see these brave and important members of our policing family as property. They are more than property. They are a living, breathing thing, but a charge of criminal damage can suggest that they are nothing more than property. I appreciate how that can be upsetting and can seem wrong. I see how for many it can be the crux of the issue, and I agree with them.

The issue is complicated, because it goes more widely than police dogs. None of us thinks of police animals as just equipment. They are an important part of the job, but they are not just equipment. That does not seem to me to convey properly the respect and gratitude that we rightly feel for those animals, for their contribution to law enforcement and public safety more widely. That is why I have written to my ministerial colleagues at the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to explore whether we can do more in law to offer appropriate protection to working animals.

I appreciate Members' earlier calls about the Policing and Crime Bill, but I think it unlikely that we will do something in that Bill, partly because the Bill is at Report stage in the House of Lords and is likely to receive Royal Assent at the turn of the year. We need to do some work with the Sentencing Council. I will come to penalties in a moment; the point made about them was fair. There is work to do on ensuring that the penalties—which are severe and match those elsewhere in the world—that are linked to the Criminal Damage Act 1971 apply to animals in a way that is appropriate and correct in language, as well as on ensuring the ability to prosecute.

We must also consider using the law not just for police dogs and horses, but more widely for service and working dogs—that might cover guide dogs and potentially those used by the fire and rescue service and others. It is important that we do that piece of work. Other work is going on—I will come to it in a moment; it touches on some of the points the hon. Member for West Ham made about assessing—that means that we might not be able to put something in the Policing and Crime Bill, but if there is a need for legislative change, I will consider opportunities to do so in 2017.

Lyn Brown: I am grateful to the Minister for that assurance. I think he is an honourable man who will keep his word, and I accept that sometimes when we legislate in haste, we legislate badly, and it would be better to do this well. Has he thought of any forthcoming Bills from the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice or DEFRA that he might be able to tag this on to? I always think that a date is a better way to hold the Government to account. It is something tangible and concrete to hang it on.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Lady for ensuring that she does her best to hold me to account, as well as to tempt me into pre-judging what Bills might be introduced in the next Session. I hope she will understand if I resist, but I will say that if we see while working through the issue that a legislative change is required—Sentencing Council changes might not require it—I will seek to do something in 2017, which is not that far away.

We expect a huge amount from our police support animals, in terms of their training, temperament and performance in their various roles and the dangerous situations in which we ask them to perform. The scale of support for the petition shows that the public hugely

[*Brandon Lewis*]

appreciate their work. It is only fair that police dogs and horses receive the best possible protection as they go about their duties.

As has been outlined in this debate by Members and in the response to the petition, significant penalties are already in place that can be issued to those who attack animals that support the police. I recognise that this e-petition debate is about more than just penalties. I hope I have covered some of that already, but I will go further. I am glad that the penalties currently available reflect the seriousness of the offence; the issue is how and where they are used to prosecute successfully. As has been said, an attack on a police dog or other police support animal can be treated as causing unnecessary suffering to an animal under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The maximum penalty is six months' imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. An attack on a police animal can be considered by the court as an aggravating factor, leading to a higher sentence within the range of six months' custody.

Under some circumstances, assaults on support animals can be treated as criminal damage. I appreciate that that use of language can seem inappropriate, but it is important to note that that charge carries a much wider sentencing range, allowing for penalties of up to 10 years' imprisonment. I appreciate the comments that my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford made about the valuations required, but we must also bear in mind that the valuation of a police dog, with its training, would be well in excess of the figures involved. Finn's attacker has been charged with this offence, given the seriousness of the assault.

The petition calls for protection in line with that afforded to police support animals by the US Federal Law Enforcement Animal Protection Act 2000, as the hon. Member for West Ham said. Under that legislation, causing harm to a police animal in the US carries a maximum tariff of one year in prison. Where the offence is more serious, the maximum penalty can be as high as 10 years, so the maximum penalties available there, if used, are about the same as the maximum penalties here in England and Wales. The issue is whether they are being used and presented in the right way. I agree that the framework within which the offence is held, prosecuted and used is crucial; at the moment, many people feel that it is not ideal. That is why I have outlined that I will work with colleagues from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Ministry of Justice, as well as campaigners and colleagues throughout this House, to consider how we can take the issue forward in a positive way.

Sir Roger Gale: I ask the Minister to take on board the fact that this is not really a DEFRA issue; it is a criminal justice issue. We are talking about police officers, albeit four-legged ones, who give great service, as do the dogs of the armed forces. They are not the same as assistance dogs, however highly assistance dogs are also held in esteem. It is time that the Ministry of Justice is compelled to understand that we are dealing with law enforcement personnel, and to treat them accordingly.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend highlights the complication. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 is part of DEFRA's portfolio, but as I said, I will also be working

with colleagues at the Ministry of Justice. There is a wider issue, which people have raised with me, about how we define this. Is it an issue involving police animals, police and military animals, animals in the fire service and guide dogs? That is why I say that it is not as straightforward as we might like. I want to ensure that we get it absolutely right, so that we cover the right animals in the right way and get any legislation right. As I have said, the penalties elsewhere in the world that people want to be applied are available here; it is about whether they are in the right context and framework. I am determined that we will do what we can to ensure that we get it right. I take my hon. Friend's point absolutely on board.

That is why it is important that we ensure that the right sentences are handed down when such offences come to light. The Sentencing Council recently consulted on revised guidelines for sentencing in the magistrates courts, including for animal cruelty offences. Throughout the development of the guidelines, the council has worked closely with the RSPCA. It is now reviewing consultation responses and developing definitive new guidelines, which it intends to implement in May next year. I am writing to raise the issue of attacks on police animals to ensure that it can be considered as part of the council's consultation review.

I want us to do everything we can to ensure that assaults on police animals are taken seriously: that they are reported, that the police respond effectively and that the right sentences are handed down to those who think they can commit such crimes. My officials have been consulting police leads in the area, who are best placed to advise on this issue, and they agree that the penalties for attacking police animals are severe enough; it is the framework and how and when prosecutions are brought that we need to consider.

I know that police leaders are committed to the ethical and effective management, training and handling of police dogs. The current national police lead for dogs, Chief Constable Wilson of Suffolk police, chairs the police dog working group. To respond to one of the specific points raised in this debate, I am pleased to be able to tell the House that, with the support of the College of Policing, the working group is currently updating practice guidance addressing the deployment, safety and welfare of police dogs to further professionalise the discipline. At the heart of the guidance is the welfare of all police dogs. The House may wish to note that both dogs and mounted policing will be brought together soon under one national police lead, Deputy Chief Constable Rod Hansen of Gloucestershire police, who currently holds the lead on mounted policing.

National statistics on the number of assaults on police animals are not collated, as was rightly said earlier, but I can inform the House that the national working group will consult police forces on the issue over the next few months to get a better idea of the extent, so that we can get the reporting correct. I am confident that police and crime commissioners will also play their part in saying quite clearly on behalf of local communities that attacks on police animals are abhorrent and unacceptable. The day after the attack, the PCC for Hertfordshire, David Lloyd, praised PC Wardell and PD Finn for their quick thinking and bravery. He subsequently issued a statement applauding the petition's success. I met David this morning to discuss the issue; I welcome his helpful intervention

and his positive contributions, which highlight how PCCs can play a lead role in expressing the public's view on how we should see police animals.

We must strive to protect all members of the policing family: police dogs and their handlers, police horses and their riders, police officers, staff and volunteers. I know that chief constables are signing up to a pledge to support officers and staff who are victims of assault. For our part, the Government could not be clearer about the great value and respect in which we hold the police and the need to support them in their work. To enable chief officers to understand the scale of the issue, it is important that we have accurate data to capture the number of assaults, so we have sought to improve the collection of such data. As I outlined to the House in an Opposition day debate in October, we will ask all forces to include the number of assaults with injury on a police officer as part of their recorded crime data from April next year. Combined with the measures that I have announced today to address assaults on animals, that represents a significant step towards building a much better picture of assaults against the police family, so that local police leaders are in a better position to fully support their workforce of all types.

I thank again those who launched and signed the petition for the way in which they have conducted their campaign, which has allowed people throughout the country to get their voices heard. Those voices are being heard very clearly; all the Members who spoke today highlighted that. The Government and our police partners will work together to look at assaults on the police family—I use that word carefully—in the round and to send the firmest possible message that such assaults cannot, should not and must not be tolerated.

5.42 pm

David Mackintosh: I welcome all the speeches and interventions from the right hon. and hon. Members who took part in this wide-ranging debate, which has covered a number of issues.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her input. She gave some real, specific examples, particularly of brave police dogs, reminding us that they help not only to fight crime but to protect vulnerable people and catch criminals. We also heard from her that the legal threshold is too high, so it is hard to bring about prosecutions. Given her work with the commendable “Protect the Protectors” campaign, she is well qualified to point that out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) suggested an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill, which the Minister dealt with in his response and which I will come back to. My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland) reminded us that the attack on police dog Finn prompted this petition and that we should wish him and his handler, PC Dave Wardell, all the best. We treat these brave dogs and horses like a broken window. We need to do much better than that. My hon. Friend referred to a survey of handlers that indicated that after 92% of incidents, no charge was brought; only 8% of incidents resulted in a charge.

The hon. Member for Halifax suggested that the use of body cameras could help to bring about better prosecutions in the future. I ask the Minister to look at that. My hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage referred to laws in other countries, and I hope the Government will seriously look at those. My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) reminded us that as MPs we all owe a personal debt of gratitude to the police dogs that sweep the Palace of Westminster daily. He also reminded us that police horses should not be forgotten.

The shadow Policing Minister, the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), rightly thanked the 120,000 people who signed the petition and she reminded us that the attack on police dog Finn and PC Wardell was not an isolated incident. She asked the Minister to write to the Sentencing Council, to make it aware of the views of the House. I commend that suggestion; we must ensure it happens. She also pointed out that legislation does not adequately recognise the bravery of police animals.

In his response, the Policing Minister told us that he is a dog lover, which I am sure we all welcome. He also discussed the direction of travel and the challenges involved in looking at this issue. He questioned whether sentencing is being used effectively. He said that the guidelines are adequate but we are not sure whether they are being effectively implemented. I am pleased that he recognises why the term “criminal damage” is so inappropriate and why it affects so many people when it is used. I am also pleased to hear that he has written to the Ministry of Justice and to DEFRA to see what extra legislative support we can put in place to help service animals. I welcome that; I will also write to those Departments and to the Minister after the debate, and I hope we will see something about this in the Queen's Speech next year.

The Minister also said that he had written to the Sentencing Council. The cost of training and investing in service animals amounts to more than the £5,000 threshold required by law. I hope he will ensure that that is pointed out to the Sentencing Council and to the Crown Prosecution Service.

I welcome the Minister's comment about collecting data. If we improve data collection, we will be better able to identify the issue and have more accurate statistics. I ask that that point is passed on and filtered down to the individual dog handlers, many of whom feel that the threshold is so high that they do not report any attack because they do not feel the report will go anywhere.

I am grateful that the Government have pledged to look at the issue, which I will be following up with the Minister and other members of the Government. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who spoke in this debate and I thank you, Mr Crausby, for chairing it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 168678 relating to the status of police dogs and horses.

5.46 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 14 November 2016

TREASURY

Off-payroll Review 2014-15

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):

The Treasury has concluded its annual evaluation of Departments' compliance with the rules governing off-payroll appointments in central Government for 2014-15. Specific rules implemented in 2012 require Departments' most senior staff to be on payroll, and Departments now have stronger powers to seek assurance in relation to the tax arrangements of their long-term, high-paid contractors who are off-payroll. These rules do not cover other off-payroll engagements, which will include a broader category of staff and public sector organisations.

Below board-level off-payroll engagements

These rules apply where a new off-payroll engagement is for more than six months with a daily rate above £220. All engagements from 23 August 2012 meeting these criteria must include contractual provisions that allow the Department to seek assurance that the worker is either not a disguised employee, or, if they are, that they are paying the right amount of tax and national insurance contributions. If assurance is not provided the contract must be terminated. For any individuals where their engagement has either been terminated, ended as a result of the assurance process, or ended after assurance was sought but before it was received, Departments have been asked to provide personal details of the worker to HMRC for further investigation.

In accordance with the guidance, Departments adopt a risk-based approach in deciding which contractors to seek formal assurance from. In 2014-15, Departments sought assurance on the tax affairs of 3,034 of their contractors and informed the Treasury that they received satisfactory assurances from 2,530 of these engagements. In the remaining 504 cases, contracts were either terminated or came to an end before assurance was received. Referrals to HMRC occurred in all relevant cases across Government.

The review found that not all relevant contracts contained the clause required to allow Departments to seek assurance. At the time of the review period the rules had been in place for over two years, and it is reasonable to expect Departments to have these clauses in place. Departments can expect to be fined if breaches of this nature are found in the next review.

Board-level and senior appointments

The rules also specify that board-level appointments and those with significant financial responsibility should be on the payroll of the Department or other employing body, unless there are genuinely exceptional circumstances. Any such exceptions should not exist for longer than six months.

The review has uncovered two cases where there have been breaches of these rules. The Ministry of Defence and Department for Communities and Local Government

have brought to my attention instances where a board member or senior official with significant financial responsibility at their arm's length bodies remained off-payroll for longer than six months. Steps have been taken to resolve these breaches and, as the value of the salaries in question was considerably below the £58,200 annual rate at which Treasury monitors non-board level appointments, I have decided not to impose sanctions this time.

As in previous years, the review found instances where off-payroll workers at board level or with significant financial responsibility have been seconded to the Department from another organisation. Where the full value of payments from the Department to the individual are put through the payroll of the seconding organisation this has not been treated as a breach of the Treasury rules.

Next steps

The Treasury will continue to monitor Department's compliance with these rules and will conduct a similar review for the 2015-16 financial year. The Treasury is keen to increase compliance both with the Treasury rules, and also with the 'intermediaries legislation'—the tax rules for disguised employees.

While not directly covered by this review, the 'intermediaries legislation' will apply to some of the engagements covered by the Treasury rules, and the Government's overall assessment is that compliance with this legislation, across the contractor population as a whole, is only one in 10. A separate consultation published on 26 May 2016 proposed moving the responsibility and liability for applying the intermediaries rules from the individual to the public sector engager or agency. The government will announce the outcome of that consultation shortly.

The statement and attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-11-14/HCWS252/>.

[HCWS252]

HMRC Contract: Concentrix

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has concluded discussions with Concentrix regarding the negotiated early exit of its contract to investigate fraud and error in the tax credits system.

As previously announced to the House, HMRC acted quickly to address the unacceptable level of customer service that tax credits claimants faced when contacting Concentrix and as a result, HMRC took back a significant number of cases. All 181,000 cases HMRC took back from Concentrix have been finalised. As of 13 November HMRC has completed around 28,500 of the approximately 32,500 requests for review of Concentrix decisions (known as mandatory reconsiderations) and will continue to handle any new cases as they arise.

On 14 September, the House was informed that HMRC would not be extending its contract with Concentrix beyond its scheduled expiry date in May 2017. On 26 October, the House was further updated that HMRC had entered into discussions with Concentrix on a

negotiated early exit from the contract. Those discussions have now concluded and the chief executive and permanent secretary of HMRC has decided to bring the contract to an early close.

As a result of the contract ending, around 250 Concentrix staff have transferred to HMRC following completion of appropriate checks and HMRC has put in place a programme of induction and training. All these new staff are to receive formal training and support from team members, their managers and from subject experts. Managers will also receive bespoke management training to assist them in supporting teams.

The latest estimated saving to the Exchequer from reducing fraud and error as a result of this contract is £193 million. The amount paid to Concentrix over the life of the contract is approximately £32.5 million.

The £32.5 million overall cost of the contract includes the following:

HMRC has paid approximately £15.3 million in 2016-17 with respect to work completed or work in progress at the end of the contract.

As part of this, HMRC has applied the provisions of the contract that allow for reductions in payment when Concentrix has not achieved the required levels of performance against the indicators. For 2016-17, HMRC reduced payments to Concentrix by £1.9 million, and over the lifetime of the contract payments to Concentrix were reduced by a total of £3.5 million.

HMRC has paid approximately £500,000 towards some of Concentrix's exit costs from its subcontracts.

Tackling error and fraud in the tax credits system remains a priority for the Government, and HMRC will continue to bear down on this. However HMRC recognises that the service provided to tax credit claimants deteriorated in recent months, which is why HMRC has negotiated an early exit from this contract. The National Audit Office has announced a wider examination of the contract, and HMRC will be working with them on their report.

[HCWS251]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: November 2016

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council (GAC) on Tuesday 15 November is expected to focus on: preparation for the December European Council; October European Council follow-up: the mid-term; review of the EU's multiannual financial framework

(MFF); the Commission work programme 2017 and a joint institutional declaration on legislative programming for the coming year; rule of law; and the roadmap for the European semester 2017.

Preparation for the December European Council

The annotated agenda for the December European Council has been issued and will cover: migration, security, economic and social development—youth, and external relations. In line with the PI's commitment, the UK will play a full and constructive role at the December European Council and in discussions at the GAC to prepare it.

October European Council follow-up

The presidency will present an update on the implementation of the October 2016 European Council conclusions on migration, trade, Russia and other global and economic issues.

Mid-term review of the EU's multiannual financial framework (MFF)

Following initial discussions in September and October, there will be a further discussion on the Commission's proposals regarding the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework.

Commission Work Programme 2017

Commission first vice-president Frans Timmermans will present the Commission work programme (CWP) 2017. The CWP is adopted annually by the European Commission. It contains a list of the legislative and non-legislative priorities that the Commission intends to bring forward in the course of the following calendar year.

Inter-institutional agreement on 'better law-making'

The Council, Commission and Parliament are to agree a 'joint declaration' on the priorities for the EU for the year ahead, based on the Commission work programme 2017 which was published on 25 October. The presidency will update on progress at the GAC.

Rule of law

The Slovak presidency will present a paper, based on written returns from member states, assessing the effectiveness of the annual rule of law discussions among member states.

European Semester 2017

The presidency will present the timetable for the 2017 round of economic coordination with member states, otherwise known as the European semester.

[HCWS250]

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