

Tuesday
20 December 2016

Volume 618
No. 85



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 20 December 2016

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Clinical Leadership

1. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What plans he has made to improve the quality of clinical leadership in the NHS. [907972]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As we wish each other a merry Christmas, the whole House will also this morning remember the people of Berlin as they face up to yesterday's horrific suspected terrorist attack. Germany and its capital Berlin have been beacons of freedom and tolerance in modern times, and all our thoughts and prayers are with them today.

Evidence from all over the world suggests that higher standards of care for patients relate directly to the quality of clinical leadership, which was why last month I announced a number of measures to increase the number of doctors and nurses in leadership roles in the NHS.

Lucy Allan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response. Clinicians in Telford have been showing real leadership by rejecting a proposal to close a brand new women and children's unit, and elements of our emergency services. The quango responsible for this idea has spent £3 million and taken three years to come up with the proposal, which has been rejected by local people and clinicians. Will my right hon. Friend meet me and my local colleagues to bring an end to this farce, and to ensure that we do not continue in limbo any longer?

Mr Hunt: I recognise the extent of my hon. Friend's campaigning on this issue in Telford, and that she expresses the concerns of many of her constituents. As she knows, service changes must be driven locally and must have the support of local GP commissioners. She will also know that the actual situation, very frustratingly, has not led to consensus between clinicians in different parts of Telford and Shropshire. I agree that the process has taken much too long, and I am more than happy to meet her and to try to bring this situation to a close as quickly as possible.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): In a year when the Health Secretary has spent quite a lot of time knocking clinicians, it is good to hear him speak so positively about them. After four years in the job, what responsibility does he accept for the lack of suitably qualified individuals—not just clinicians—who are prepared to take on the top jobs in the NHS on a permanent basis?

Mr Hunt: I will tell the hon. Lady what I take responsibility for: more doctors, more nurses and more funding than ever before in the history of the NHS. We know that the highest standards are often achieved when there is strong clinical leadership. Only 54% of managers in this country are clinicians, compared with 74% in Canada and 94% in Sweden. That is why it is right that we do everything we can to encourage more clinicians into leadership roles.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the clinical leadership involved in the Getting It Right First Time initiative is important, not only because it will save £1.5 billion, which could be put back into patient care, but because patients will be in less pain and will end up having fewer revision operations, and some will even survive treatment that they would not otherwise have survived?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank him for bringing Professor Tim Briggs to see me to explain just how superb this programme is. Infection rates for orthopaedic surgery vary between one in 20 patients in some trusts to one in 500 in others. Getting this right can transform care for patients and save money at the same time.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's comments about Berlin, my one-time home.

Does the Secretary of State accept that we have the best clinical leaders anywhere in the world? The challenge facing the NHS is not one of clinical leadership, or the dedication or skill of staff, but one of chronic underfunding by this Conservative Government.

Mr Hunt: We do indeed have superb clinical leaders, such as Marianne Griffiths at Worthing, which was recently given an outstanding rating. We also have superb non-clinical leaders, such as David Dalton at Salford Royal. I would gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that if he is worried about funding, why did he stand in the election on a platform that would have seen the NHS have £1.3 billion less this year?

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will the Secretary of State ensure that clinical leaders are able to apply important techniques from other disciplines, such as lean production, which can drive up productivity?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Clinical leadership is important, but so is openness to the skills of other industries—particularly engineering skills, with which he is very familiar—that can help us to get processes right so that we improve care and safety for patients.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that if the board of Doncaster and Bassetlaw Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust agrees to establish a teaching hospital today, that will enable the trust to train its doctors of tomorrow so that they are more able to move into clinical leadership roles as quickly as possible?

Mr Hunt: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and welcome Doncaster hospital's aspirations and ambitions. Any final decision will obviously be a matter for the NHS and Health Education England, but it is very encouraging that it is reaching for the stars in this way. Yes, we do need to train more doctors, and I hope that the hospital can make a good contribution.

Mr Speaker: The constituency of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) was just mentioned and he came in on cue. Unfortunately, he was not within the curtilage of the Chamber at the material time. No doubt we will hear from him at a later date, to which we look forward with eager anticipation.

Evidence-based Medicine

2. **David Tredinnick** (Bosworth) (Con): What his Department's definition is of evidence-based medicine; and if he will make a statement. [907973]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): Evidence-based medicine is about using high-quality research to guide clinical practice and to achieve optimal results for all patients. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence plays an important role in supporting evidence-based medicine by translating research into authoritative guidance for healthcare professionals on best practice.

David Tredinnick: Is the Minister aware that the author of "Evidence-based Medicine" in 1992, Professor David Sackett, said that it is

"about integrating individual clinical experience and the best external evidence, not just internal evidence"?

Is she further aware that in respect of the interpretation of evidence-based medicine, I have reported the so-called Good Thinking Society to the Charity Commission for the abuse of its charitable status through its use of legal threats to force the Department and health providers to change the law on healthcare?

Nicola Blackwood: NICE obviously considers complementary and alternative medicines when developing its guidance, where there is evidence, and it has been able to recommend some therapies, such as acupuncture for tension headaches and a range of complementary medicines for multiple sclerosis. We expect healthcare professionals to take that guidance into account when designing local services, but they must use their best understanding when treating the individual patients in front of them.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The evidence is very clear that eating more sugar increases the risk of diabetes. Apart from introducing the sugar tax, what further evidence-based research can be used by the Government to reduce the risk of diabetes?

Nicola Blackwood: The right hon. Gentleman is a great proponent of tackling the risk of diabetes. He knows that the Government take tackling and preventing diabetes extremely seriously. That is why we have introduced the world's first national diabetes prevention programme, which we have piloted and are rolling out across the country. It includes not only education programmes but testing, and we are making sure that we use the evidence from the programme to bring about improvement and that we are rolling it out effectively.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We are all in favour of evidence-based medicine. We are also in favour of decent resources for the national health service but, in the case of Huddersfield and Calderdale hospitals, what we want is good, high-quality management, rather than GPs being promoted to a managerial position that they cannot handle.

Mr Speaker: In relation to evidence-based medicine.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman is a great advocate of evidence-based medicine and I am pleased to hear about his support for it. He will be pleased that the national leadership programme is one of the evidence-based programmes that we are rolling out to improve the leadership of the NHS across the country.

Antimicrobial Resistance

3. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): How the Government plan to show global leadership in tackling antimicrobial resistance. [907974]

12. **Mrs Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): How the Government plan to show global leadership in tackling antimicrobial resistance. [907983]

14. **Chris Green** (Bolton West) (Con): How the Government plan to show global leadership in tackling antimicrobial resistance. [907986]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): The UK is already a global leader in the fight against AMR. This Government's leadership has secured a UN declaration on AMR and a commitment from the G20 to drive the development of new antimicrobials. We will continue to deliver international programmes to tackle AMR, including the Fleming fund and the Global AMR innovation fund, which represent more than £300 million of investment over the next five years.

Kevin Hollinrake: One of the 10 key recommendations of the O'Neill review was to improve the data and surveillance underlying antimicrobial resistance. What plans does the Minister have to routinely test all NHS patients for antibiotic resistance?

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that it is essential that we improve diagnostics if we are to tackle this national threat. A routine part of the clinical management of patients showing symptoms of infections is to take a blood sample. When an infection is identified, those samples are indeed tested for resistance. Part of our AMR strategy is to improve diagnostics and to fund innovation in this area.

Mrs Villiers: Will the Government commit themselves to ensuring that their strategy will include discouraging the use of intensive farming, given its overuse of antibiotics which contributes to antimicrobial-resistant problems?

Nicola Blackwood: I agree that we must focus on that as well, but we are currently focusing on reducing the need for antibiotics by minimising disease risk in animals through good animal husbandry and on-farm biosecurity. At present, antibiotics provide the only effective means of treatment for a number of animal diseases, and are therefore essential to ensuring the health and welfare of animals. However, we are also working on the matter in an international context with the World Organisation for Animal Health, and we will continue to drive forward the agenda.

Chris Green: What measures are the Government introducing to support the uptake of point-of-care C-reactive protein testing throughout the United Kingdom, given that it is a proven and cost-effective means of reducing levels of inappropriate antibiotic prescribing in primary care?

Nicola Blackwood: As my hon. Friend says, we must focus on innovation and better diagnostic tests, particularly bedside tests. The Government are actively reviewing evidence of the benefits of CRP tests. Pilot studies in the United Kingdom are contributing to that, and will be evaluated so that we can see how best to build on what can be shown to be working well.

20. [907992] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Given that 480,000 people develop multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis each year and that drug resistance is starting to complicate the fight against HIV and malaria, what steps has the Secretary of State taken to increase awareness in GP surgeries and to provide alternative treatments that can be equally effective, and what co-operation has taken place with devolved Assemblies?

Nicola Blackwood: I am grateful for that immediate promotion from the hon. Gentleman.

We have made considerable progress in establishing the building blocks of our domestic AMR strategy, including better data, guidance for primary care, and a strengthening of the framework for antimicrobial stewardship, which involves introducing incentives for the NHS to improve the prescribing of antibiotics. That has led, in the last quarter, to the first reduction in such prescribing, which I think we can take as an encouraging sign.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): One of the 10 recommendations of the O'Neill review on antimicrobial resistance was for a massive global public awareness campaign. Given that 700,000 people die each year as a result of AMR, and given the review's estimate that that figure will rise to 10 million a year by 2050, what assurances can the Minister give that she is behind that awareness campaign?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady is right to identify the scale of the challenge, which is why we have put AMR on our national risk register, and she is also right to point out that no one country can tackle AMR alone. The United Kingdom has played a global leadership

role. We co-sponsored the World Health Organisation's 2015 global health plan and created the £265 million Fleming fund so that we could specifically help poor countries to tackle drug resistance, and we will continue to play that global leadership role.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The O'Neill report was published some six months ago and included recommendations for national Governments. What practical progress have the Government made so far?

Nicola Blackwood: On 19 September we published our comprehensive response to the report, which describes a range of actions that we will take on each of Lord O'Neill's recommendations. The most practical progress that I can report is the fact that the prescribing of antibiotics has fallen for the first time since records began. I think that we can all be proud of that progress.

Leaving the EU: NHS Workforce

4. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK's decision to leave the EU on the NHS workforce. [907975]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): There are currently 127,000 staff from the EU doing a vital job for patients in the NHS and social care system. In this year of Brexit, we salute their excellent work and remain confident that we will be able to negotiate for them to continue it in the future.

Gavin Newlands: There are more than 50,000 EU nationals working as nurses and doctors throughout the United Kingdom, along with 80,000 in the social care sector. The NHS already faces extensive rota gaps owing to a shortage of senior and junior doctors. Will the Secretary of State join our First Minister in demanding an unequivocal guarantee that EU nationals who are already living here will have the right to remain?

Mr Hunt: That is exactly what we intend to achieve through negotiations, but we must remember the British citizens, including people from Scotland, who are living in the EU and whose rights we also wish to protect. That is why the Prime Minister has made a big point of saying that she wishes to negotiate the issue at an early stage in order to give certainty to those people.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We are not going to leave the EU for two and a half years, but I want the Secretary of State to grip GP services in Lincolnshire now and to start training more doctors. The Pottergate surgery in Gainsborough is closing, potentially throwing hundreds of people out without a GP, and there is a shortage of 80 GPs against a target of 915 in Lincolnshire, and only six out of 30 training places were taken up recently. Will the Secretary of State now grip the GP services in Lincolnshire for the sake of our people?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has rather cheekily brushed aside the part of the question that does not suit his purposes. Only to focus on half a question is very cheeky; we will allow him to get away with it on this one occasion only.

Mr Hunt: I hope that I can reassure my hon. Friend about this because the reality is that we increased the number of GPs by 5% in the previous Parliament, and in this Parliament we are planning an increase of another 5,000, which will be the biggest increase in GPs in the history of the NHS, and will go along with considerable extra resources.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I will focus on the half of the question that the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) missed out. The other day I had a meeting with some constituents who told me that they were so pleased that we were leaving the European Union because it meant that the extra £350 million could be used to reopen the A&E department at Bishop Auckland. Has the Secretary of State found that £350 million yet?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady might have noticed that I personally did not talk very much about that £350 million. Whatever resources we have post-Brexit will have to be set in the overall economic context, but of course the great thing is that, post-Brexit, that will be a decision for this Parliament.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Many members of the NHS workforce across Bedford and Kempston come from the EU, but many others come from Caribbean countries, the Philippines, India and many countries in Africa. Will my right hon. Friend make sure that, in the future, people from those countries are given equal access to work in our NHS as that for EU nationals?

Mr Hunt: The benefit of Brexit will be that we can take precisely such decisions in this Parliament, because we will get back control of our borders. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the very important work done by people from outside the EU in the NHS. Because I happened to meet the Philippines ambassador last week, I want to pay credit particularly to the Filipino workers in the NHS and the social care system, who do a fantastic job.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): May I start by extending my party's sympathies to the victims of the Berlin attack?

Much of what we have heard today is about keeping those who are already here, but BMA Scotland has said that insecurity is stopping EU nationals from taking up posts that really need to be filled. This is an urgent problem, so does the Secretary of State agree that it is time to create some certainty for EU nationals and to avoid a self-made workforce crisis?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is why it is extremely frustrating that the current signals from the EU are that it is unwilling to bring forward negotiations about the status of EU nationals here, and indeed that of British nationals in the EU. No one from either side of the Brexit debate has ever said that there will be no immigration post-Brexit; they have simply said that we will control that immigration ourselves through this House and through decisions made by the British people at general elections.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On behalf of the official Opposition, may I echo the words of the Secretary of State in relation to the tragic events in Berlin and send our condolences to the people there?

The Institute for Employment Studies has today warned that Brexit could make nursing shortages even worse. That follows *The Times* reporting that

“applications for nursing, midwifery and allied health courses were down by about 20%”

and that in some institutions applications had halved. The decision to scrap nurse bursaries is having the consequences that every expert predicted it would. With the uncertainty of Brexit looming over our workforce, now is not the time to be taking a massive gamble with our nurses so, in the light of the evidence, will the Secretary of State now agree to scrap that disastrous policy?

Mr Hunt: I simply say to the hon. Gentleman that the purpose of that policy was to allow us to train more nurses; in fact, we will be training 40,000 more nurses during this Parliament. We have more than 11,000 more nurses in our NHS wards, and at Countess of Chester hospital—the hon. Gentleman's own hospital—there are 172 more nurses than in 2010.

Hospitals in Special Measures

6. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What progress he has made on improving hospitals in special measures. [907977]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): We want the NHS to offer the safest, highest quality care anywhere in the world, so we are now tackling unacceptable performance. That is in contrast to the Labour party, which ignored failures for so long. Since introducing the rigorous special measures inspection regime, 31 provider trusts have gone into Care Quality Commission special measures, of which 15 have been turned around as a result of significant quality improvements. I congratulate again the staff of Sherwood Forest, Wye Valley, Norfolk, and Suffolk trusts, all of which have come out of special measures in recent months.

Rehman Chishti: Medway Maritime Hospital has made significant improvements since it was put into special measures: mortality rates and length of patient stay are down; leadership is excellent; and there has been extensive investment in the A&E. Does the Minister agree that it is the right time for the hospital to come out of special measures? Will he join me in paying tribute to the excellent work of the hospital's staff?

Mr Dunne: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his role in championing Medway Maritime Hospital, which I visited earlier this autumn. The CQC is in the process of re-inspecting Medway and will publish its findings in the new year. I congratulate the trust on its improvements thus far that were highlighted by my hon. Friend, which include reducing its average length of stay on admission wards from 11 days to only 3 days.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): A recent damning report on maternity care from the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust care referred to appalling neglect that lead to the avoidable deaths of mothers and babies. The trust has implemented an improvement plan, but plans for maternity services under the Making It Better scheme were based on a predicted birth rate of 3,500 a year, and the reality is that the trust deals with 10,000 deliveries a year. What action will the Minister take to address that situation?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising some of the issues at the Pennine trust. We are well aware that it needs improvement, which is why we have buddied it up with the outstanding Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust next door. The Salford trust is led by Sir David Dalton and the Secretary of State referred to it earlier. I will take up the matter raised by the hon. Lady directly with Sir David.

Community Pharmacies

7. **Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to work with community pharmacies to reduce (a) waste and (b) the cost of medicines. [907978]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): NHS England has a range of initiatives for waste and medicine cost reduction. We estimate that there is a prize of up £150 million a year to be realised across the system on waste. Community pharmacies have a significant role to play in that, partly through their existing duty to review prescriptions when repeat dispensing and partly through the separately commissioned medicine use reviews.

Lyn Brown: The Minister is absolutely right to say that community pharmacies have an important role to play. On 17 October, he told the House:

“We do not believe that any community pharmacies will necessarily close as a result of these cuts.”—[*Official Report*, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 597.]

However, the impact assessment published by his Department just two days later described a possible scenario in which 1,000 pharmacies close. Will the Minister confirm that nobody in Britain will have to travel further to get to a chemist as a result of his cuts?

David Mowat: The impact assessment set out an upper range, which we do not believe represents an accurate reflection of what will happen. The facts of the matter are that we need our community pharmacy network to move towards services and away from dispensing. Paying every community pharmacy in the country, or 91% of them, £25,000 just for having an establishment does not achieve—[*Interruption*.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) should not chunter from a sedentary position in an attempt to hector the Minister, who should glide seamlessly above the attempted provocation. Minister, continue.

David Mowat: The Minister has finished.

Mr Speaker: He has finished his answer. Very well; I call Alistair Burt.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): To ensure not only that unnecessary costs are reduced, but that the best community pharmacy services are provided, will the Minister do all that he can to make sure that clinical commissioning groups engage as effectively as possible with pharmacies? Preferably, that would be by getting more people on CCG boards to ensure that the crucial connection between the provision of health services and pharmacy is absolutely at the heart of what we do.

David Mowat: My right hon. Friend is right; CCGs are variable in the extent to which they commission pharmacy services. However, we have set out the minor ailments scheme, it will be rolled out nationally by April 2018 and we expect every CCG to take a part in it.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on pharmacy, I have seen many examples of drugs that have been prescribed and not used, as I am sure we all have. Should we not renegotiate the national contract, which currently pays community pharmacies more than 90% of their income through prescribing? Surely we can do things differently.

David Mowat: The right hon. Gentleman rightly says that we must change the contract to move away from 90% of the income coming from dispensing. Far more must come from services, which are separately commissioned by CCGs and others. The Murray review, which he will be aware of from his work on the all-party group, sets out a road map for that, and NHS England is determined to implement it.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): May I pay tribute to the excellent work of pharmacies in my constituency? Last night, “Look East” demonstrated the pressure that urgent care centres in the east are under because of extra patient footfall. Will the Minister give me an undertaking that he will put in place guidelines to CCGs to encourage them to work much more closely with pharmacies to reduce that footfall?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he is right to say that we must move the community pharmacy network away from just dispensing and into services, which will include minor ailments and repeat prescriptions. I will be encouraging CCGs to do that.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Community pharmacies, which were developed in Scotland 10 years ago, are there for minor ailment, chronic medication and public health services. Although the Minister has expressed admiration for the Scottish system, does he not recognise the need to work with the pharmacy profession to develop the full potential within community services?

David Mowat: I have mentioned on previous occasions that Scotland has, in some respects, gone further and faster than we have in England so far on community pharmacies. The £300 million that we have set aside in the integration fund for the rest of this Parliament is going to be used to do just the things that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, in terms of minor ailments and repeat prescriptions. We are determined to make that happen.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Over the festive period, in every town and city in the UK, community pharmacies will be open to dispense emergency prescriptions, and to provide specialist services and professional advice. Does the Minister appreciate that service, which not only helps the public, but takes pressure off other parts of the NHS? Will he join me in thanking community pharmacies and their staff for the work they do? Will he commit to reconsider budget cuts that will lead to a

reduction of this valuable service, and instead meet the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and the National Pharmacy Association to discuss extending the role of community pharmacies, to deliver savings for the NHS?

David Mowat: I have met the royal college of pharmacies on a number of occasions, and indeed it has worked with us on the Murray review, which is an essential road map that sets out how we are going to move the community pharmacy network away from a remuneration model based just on dispensing and on to services as well. I agree with the hon. Lady that the 11,000 community pharmacies across the country all provide excellent services, and we expect that to continue.

NHS Services: Winter

8. **Conor McGinn** (St Helens North) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help the NHS deal with pressures on services in winter 2016-17. [907979]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last year, the number of excess winter deaths was 45% lower than in the previous year, and contingency planning for this winter is well under way, with £400 million allocated to local health systems for winter preparedness.

Conor McGinn: This time last year, St Helens CCG told me it needed to postpone elective operations and referrals in order to get through winter. Six months later, it was £12.5 million in deficit and proposing to cancel all non-urgent surgery indefinitely. What the Health Secretary is proposing does not make the problems go away—it stores them up. When will the Government give local trusts and clinicians the funding they require? Stop passing the buck and start passing the bucks!

Mr Hunt: With the greatest respect, I do not think it is passing the buck to put £1.3 billion more into the NHS this year than the hon. Gentleman was proposing at the last election. A lot of actions are being taken in Cheshire and Merseyside; a local accident and emergency delivery board was set up, which is doing very important work, and the emergency care improvement programme is working very well at his local trust.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): There is great pressure on emergency services throughout Staffordshire at the moment. There would be even more without the accident and emergency centres in Stafford and Burton, yet the sustainability and transformation plan proposes to reduce one of them, so there will only be two left in the county. Will the Secretary of State speak to the authors of the STP to make it clear that this is totally unacceptable given the current situation?

Mr Hunt: No one fights harder and more eloquently than my hon. Friend for the needs of the people of Stafford. I always look with concern at proposals to change emergency services given the huge pressures that exist, so I shall happily look at the plan as he suggests.

21. [907994] **Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): The problem is not just winter pressures but pressures all year round. The Secretary of State will no doubt tell me that the Government have now allowed councils to increase the precept to allow councils to fund it better, but the fact is

that that is not enough money. There is no strategy. Does anyone outside the Department—those in the Department might not either—believe that the Government has a strategy for social care?

Mr Hunt: All I would do is urge the hon. Gentleman to listen to what the Prime Minister said at this Dispatch Box last week. She said that we recognise the short-term pressures—indeed, the Communities Secretary came up with a package of £900 million extra over the next couple of years—but that we also need a long-term sustainable solution, on which the Government are working hard.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the pressures of winter that needs improving is inappropriate admissions to A&E? Does he accept that the proposals by the Essex success regime to ensure that the three hospitals concerned will retain their A&E departments but that there will be a specialist centre for cardiothoracic care and for burns and plastic surgery care are the right way forward to improve and enhance the care for those suffering from accidents and emergencies?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend understands these matters extremely well from his time as a very distinguished Health Minister. He is absolutely right; the truth is that we want widespread availability of A&Es but we do not serve patients best by offering identical services everywhere. That is why in the past three or four years one of the things we are most proud of is the setting up of a national network of 26 trauma centres, which has had a dramatic impact on mortality rates for the most serious cases.

Mr Speaker: I have just been advised by a very sagacious source that in supplementary questions and answers to this question some reference to winter is desirable.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks about Berlin. I wish everyone in the House a merry Christmas and I extend my best wishes for a very peaceful and joyful Christmas and new year to all NHS staff, especially those working over Christmas.

Pressures on the NHS this winter are such and the underfunding is so severe that hospitals have been ordered to close operating theatres for elective surgery over Christmas. Is this what the Secretary of State means by a seven-day NHS?

Mr Hunt: Let me wish the shadow Health Secretary a merry Christmas and say that despite his rhetoric I see that Santa has been quite generous to him. His local trust in Leicester has 254 more nurses and 306 more doctors than in 2010. Next year, we will have a new £43 million emergency floor at the Leicester royal infirmary. We need to ensure that there is sufficient bed capacity in our hospitals over winter—that is a very important part of winter planning—but we are also doing 5,000 more elective operations every day than when Labour was in office.

Jonathan Ashworth: I am delighted that the Secretary of State has done his research on Leicester, but is closing operating theatres for a month this Christmas

not, in reality, a short-term fix? The truth is that when the pause ends and hospitals fill up again above the 85% occupancy recommendations, patients will be left with a simple choice: get stuck on a waiting list while hospitals try to reduce occupancy rates to safe levels, or risk going into a hospital when it is at full capacity and potentially unsafe and be exposed to higher infection risks. Which option would the Secretary of State choose?

Mr Hunt: May I gently urge the hon. Gentleman to be careful with his rhetoric? We are not closing operating theatres for a month over Christmas. We need to be very careful what we say in this place, because people outside are listening. The answer is to ensure that we increase capacity in the NHS, and that is why we have 11,000 more doctors and 11,000 more hospital nurses than we had six years ago. We are training 15,000 more doctors every year from 2018-19 to ensure that we can avoid these problems in the future.

NHS: Financial Recovery

9. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What progress the Government are making on recovering money from overseas visitors and other chargeable NHS patients. [907980]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The NHS is a national, not an international, service. This Government were the first to introduce tough measures to clamp down on visitors accessing free NHS care, including introducing the immigration health surcharge. The steps we have taken have meant that income raised from visitors and migrants has risen threefold in three years, from £97 million in 2013-14 to £289 million in 2015-16.

Andrew Bridgen: I thank the Minister for that answer, but does he agree that recovering more money from chargeable patients requires a culture change among NHS staff? Does he therefore share my dismay that the leader of the doctors union dismisses the need even to address this issue, while calling for additional investment in our NHS?

Mr Dunne: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need increased awareness and appropriate participation by all NHS staff in achieving this policy, but I also agree with one thing that Dr Mark Porter said—that sick and vulnerable patients must not be put off seeking necessary treatment, as this may be bad for their health and for that of the public in general. This has always been a clear feature of our policy, so to be clear, this policy does not withhold immediately necessary or urgent treatment, but it makes sure that the NHS is fairly reimbursed by those who are not entitled to free care.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know, the Public Accounts Committee has looked in detail at this issue, and we were rather shocked to discover that the Government themselves are woeful at collecting money from EU citizens who use our hospitals and for whom the Government are then responsible for getting the money from their home Government. When will the Government get their act together to make sure that this money comes into our NHS?

Mr Dunne: I am always grateful for advice from the Public Accounts Committee, which looks into areas where the Government can recover moneys to which they are entitled. There was an article in today's *Times* which referred to outstanding sums, and we are taking steps to try to increase recovery rates in the years ahead.

Sustainability and Transformation Plan: South-west London

10. **Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the implementation of the sustainability and transformation plan for south-west London on the provision of health services in that area. [907981]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): The sustainability and transformation plan for south-west London sets out how the area will implement the NHS's five year forward view. The local NHS is looking to strengthen primary care and ensure closer working across NHS bodies, with more sustainable acute services, developing centres of expertise to ensure high-quality service, as well as closer co-ordination with social care providers.

Tom Brake: The Epsom and St Helier Trust is a high-performing trust, hitting A&E and cancer treatment referral targets. It is confident that it can deliver sustainable and transformed care services, but will struggle to do so in St Helier hospital, built in the 1930s. The trust has previously secured a commitment from two Governments that funding would be available. Will the Minister give the same undertaking and confirm that once the STP process is complete, funding will be available to the trust to enable it to continue delivering excellent sustainable services from a new hospital?

Mr Dunne: I am aware of the right hon. Gentleman's campaign on this matter. It would be wrong for me to pre-empt the work that is being done in reviewing both the STP process and the policy priorities of NHS England. Once those plans have been put forward to Ministers, we will be able to consider which we can prioritise.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): The STP for south-west London includes mental health crisis needs, but there is a current crisis of lack of in-patient facilities for mental health patients. Will the Minister look into extra immediate funding to increase the number of in-patient mental health beds?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend is well aware, given her experience in this area, mental health is a priority of the Government and of the STP process. I will take away what she says in relation to in-patient beds.

Capita

11. **Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): If the Government will make a recommendation to NHS England not to renew its primary care support contract with Capita. [907982]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): It is too early to speculate on the renewal of this contract, but it will ultimately be for

NHS England to determine the selection criteria for the future procurement of services provided by it. My focus right now is on raising the quality of the existing contract, and I have been clear that the standard of Capita's work under the contract has not been acceptable and it must improve. I continue to meet regularly with Capita and NHS England as they work to improve the performance of the service.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank the Minister for that response. Several GP practices in my constituency have reported serious delays in the transfer of medical records. In some cases the records have gone missing altogether, with serious implications for patient safety. I would like a clear response from the Minister about the assurances she can give to my constituents that the Government—not just NHS England, but the Government—take seriously the safe delivery of their confidential medical records.

Nicola Blackwood: I take this issue extremely seriously, which is why I am personally meeting NHS England and Capita fortnightly and ensuring that detailed rectification plans are in place for each service delivery programme. The improvements should happen between January and April next year. I shall be happy to write to the hon. Lady in more detail if she would like to be able to reassure her GPs, optometrists and dentists on those issues.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This question is about England, rather than Scotland or Wales.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Will the Minister advise GP practices in my constituency, who have been massively inconvenienced by the chaos of the Capita contract, that full compensation will be available for the inconvenience they have been put through?

Nicola Blackwood: At the moment, NHS England and Capita are focusing very hard on improving service delivery, which I think must be the top priority, but we are also looking into exactly what inconvenience and costs GPs have suffered, along with dentists and optometrists, and that will be considered and discussed with GPs.

Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust: Delayed Discharges

13. **Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab):** How many patient days of delayed discharge attributable to the levels of suitable social care available at the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust there were in (a) 2010 and (b) 2016. [907985]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Directly comparable figures are not available, but it is clear that in the past two years there has been a substantial increase in delayed discharge figures attributable to social care at the trust, which this year were among the worst currently being recorded across the NHS.

Rob Marris: Sadly, those figures are no surprise, despite the well-managed New Cross hospital, because central Government have cut Wolverhampton City

Council's total income by almost 50% in the past six years. The primary care vertical integration pilot in Wolverhampton is a redesign of services so that a single organisation—the hospital trust—deals with patients from initial contact to ongoing management and end-of-life care. What steps is the Department of Health taking to support vertical integration as one potential way to improve care and lessen hospital admissions and delayed discharges?

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman is right that budgets are part of the issue, which is why last week's announcement about increased funding is important. However, funding alone does not explain the delayed transfers in Wolverhampton, which are five times worse than those of Telford, which is just down the road; twice as bad as Sandwell, which is very close; and, indeed, 30 times worse than the best performing councils, such as Newcastle, Knowsley and St Helens. With regard to his specific point about the vertically integrated pilot, this is a very exciting project and I commend the people of Wolverhampton for doing it. It is based on a model from Spain that has produced big results. We are watching it carefully and will support it as required.

Unhealthy Food

15. **Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind):** What assessment he has made of the potential effectiveness of introducing (a) a ban on price-cutting promotions on unhealthy food in supermarkets and (b) restrictions on advertising of unhealthy food during family television programmes in reducing childhood obesity. [907987]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): In developing the childhood obesity plan, we considered the latest research and evidence on promotions and advertising, including Public Health England's evidence package "Sugar reduction: the evidence for action". We have made no secret of the fact that we considered a range of policies before finally settling on those set out in the childhood obesity plan. The plan includes the soft drinks industry levy and taking 20% of sugar out of certain products. We concluded that our plan is the right approach to secure the future health of our children.

Natalie McGarry: I associate myself with the Secretary of State's words of sympathy for the people of Berlin, and I also add my thoughts for the people of Aleppo, Yemen, Gaza, Mosul and all the forgotten conflicts of the world.

Public health experts have dismissed the Government's obesity strategy as a weak approach and a wasted opportunity. The Government say that they are committed to evidence-based policy making, but they have failed to acknowledge that relying on voluntary food action without tackling cost and availability is inherently flawed. Will the Minister commit the Government to getting a grip and bringing forward a ban or restrictions on advertising and price-cutting promotions on junk food?

Nicola Blackwood: I am happy to reassure the hon. Lady that current restrictions on advertising in the UK are already among the toughest in the world. For example, there is a total ban on the advertising of less healthy food during children's television programmes. Those

have been shown to be very effective. However, we also welcome action that has been taken by forward-thinking retailers on promotions elsewhere. In particular, Sainsbury's has committed to removing multi-buy promotions across its full range of branded and own-brand soft drinks, confectionery, biscuits and crisps, removing more than 50% of its multi-buy promotions from its grocery business while lowering regular prices for products. It should be congratulated on leading the way.

Mr Speaker: We now feel considerably better informed.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Advertising agencies and industry bodies can play a key role in ensuring that adverts are appropriate. Will the Minister continue working with the industry to tackle child obesity?

Nicola Blackwood: Yes.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Certain supermarkets persist in placing less healthy foods on promotion near the entrances to their stores, where they are unavoidable. Does the Minister agree that it is not just at checkouts that healthy options should be promoted, and that retailers should exercise more responsibility?

Nicola Blackwood: I absolutely agree that putting healthier options near checkouts and helping people to make healthier choices are part of retailers' responsibilities. What has been notable in my discussions with retailers is that the penny is starting to drop that this is the direction of travel and what the public want, and I think we are going to start seeing a real sea change in the way retailers are advertising.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the sound of Shipley—Mr Philip Davies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I urge the Minister not to go down this ridiculous nanny-state route—which one would not expect from a Conservative Government—of setting up an unhealthy food police to go round telling people what they should be eating and what they should not be eating? No food eaten as part of a balanced diet is in itself particularly unhealthy. If the Government are so concerned about families that are just about managing, why on earth would they even contemplate increasing costs for working families?

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend flatters me by saying he thinks I am a nanny—it is really quite a disturbing thought. However, what we have here is an obesity plan that balances the need to cut the sugar in young people's diets, as a way to make sure they get a healthy diet, and individual choice, which we know is absolutely a Conservative ideal.

Topical Questions

T2. [907963] **Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As we enter the challenging winter period, I want, on behalf of the whole country, to thank the 2.7 million people working in the health and care system—particularly those giving up all or part of their own Christmas day

to look after patients. We are in their debt, and we wish them a merry Christmas, whenever they get the chance to celebrate it with their families.

Chris Green: Bolton A&E is employing new measures to cope with the staggering demand on its service. What are the Government doing to educate people that A&E is for serious and life-threatening conditions only, so that staff and resources can go where they are needed most?

Mr Hunt: That is an excellent question. We are doing a number of things. First, we have the Stay Well this Winter campaign, which has a lot of advice to go out to his constituents and all our constituents about how to avoid things that can lead to their having to go to A&E. However, we also urge the public to remember that accident and emergency departments are for precisely that.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): There was no new money from the Government for social care in the local government settlement—just a recycling of money from the new homes bonus to social care, and that is for 2017-18 only. Fifty-seven councils will actually lose funding owing to this recycling. Salford, which was recently praised by the Prime Minister for its integration of social care, will lose £2.3 million due to this inept settlement. Is it not time for the Secretary of State to accept that social care is in crisis and that his Government cannot just dump the issue of funding it on councils and council tax payers?

Mr Hunt: I do listen carefully to what the hon. Lady says, because she has campaigned long and hard for social care. However, with respect, I would say to her that she is ignoring one simple fact: there is more money going into social care now than would have been the case if we had followed her advice at the last election. What the Communities Secretary announced was £900 million of additional help over the next two years.

Barbara Keeley: The Government's plans for funding social care look inept because they have tied care funding, which is related to need, to council tax and to deductions from the new homes bonus. Last week's settlement was a pathetic attempt to deal with a funding gap of £2 billion for social care by recycling £240 million within budgets. The chief executive of the British Red Cross has described the social care crisis as

“a humanitarian crisis that needs urgent action.”

When is the Secretary of State going to take that crisis seriously?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady talks about council tax, but she does not call out Labour councils like Hillingdon, Hounslow, Merton and Stoke which complain about pressures in the social care system and then refuse to introduce the social care precept that could make a difference to their residents. We are taking the situation seriously. More was done this week and more will be done in future.

T7. [907969] **Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con):** As my hon. Friend is aware, last week the Murray report was published. When is he likely to consider it, and when will he make a statement?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I thank my hon. Friend for that question and commend him for his work as a pharmacy champion. The Murray review was indeed published last week, and NHS England will respond to it in detail early in the new year. It is a very important document because it sets out in some detail how we intend to transform the community pharmacy network into a service-based profession along the lines that my hon. Friend likes.

T3. [907964] **Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Last week, a 76-year-old man with diabetes in my constituency took a fall and had to wait almost two hours for an ambulance. I then wrote to the Health Secretary after it emerged that not a single ambulance trust in England met its response time targets in October, including for the most critical of cases. Will he explain the reasons for these unacceptable ambulance delays and what he intends to do as we approach Christmas?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am aware of the case that the hon. Lady refers to. In the week of the incident, the London ambulance service received 40,433 emergency calls—an 8% increase on the previous week. We are trying to do something about this. We have recruited 2,200 more paramedics since 2010 and increased the number of paramedic training places by 60% in this year alone. The London ambulance service has recruited 107 more paramedics since September 2015 to help with this increased demand.

T8. [907970] **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): Has the public health Minister had an opportunity to consider the recent report sent to her by the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm on the shocking impact of excessive drinking by members of the public on the dedicated people who work in our emergency services? Will she meet the APPG to discuss this?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her dogged campaigning on this issue, on which she is a true champion. I have not had a chance to read the report in detail, but I have seen a number of its recommendations and we are taking action on some of them, including the publication of the chief medical officer's low risk guidelines and Public Health England's One You campaign, which runs over Christmas and the new year. We are embedding alcohol measures into the NHS health check and we have introduced a national CQUIN—Commissioning for Quality and Innovation—because evidence shows that intervention by a health professional is the most effective way of disrupting problem drinking.

T4. [907965] **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Zac from Worksop is three years old, wheelchair-bound, unable to speak and blind, and is regularly admitted on an unplanned basis to Bassetlaw Hospital's children's ward. As the people of Bassetlaw are standing with Zac in opposing the proposed overnight closure of the children's ward, which will create chaos for his small life and that of a number of other very poorly children like him, will democracy prevail, or are the Government going to pick a fight with Zac, me, and the people of Bassetlaw?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: First, I absolutely commend the hon. Gentleman for standing with his constituents and championing individual cases. I will happily look into the proposed changes and how they will affect people like Zac. I assure the hon. Gentleman that when we make these changes it is to improve the services of people and his constituents; that is why we are making them.

Mr Speaker: Alex Chalk. Where is the fella?

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): Despite some of the obvious challenges in the healthcare service, this is a wonderful time of year when hundreds of thousands of people choose to quit smoking by putting down their cancer stick and picking up an electronic vaping device. Does the Minister share my concern, however, that we must be very cautious in any implementation of the EU tobacco products directive so that it does not act as a barrier to people quitting smoking and taking up vaping?

Nicola Blackwood: The Government are very clear that vaping is significantly less harmful than continuing to smoke. Under the current regulatory regime, huge numbers of smokers are successfully using these innovative products as an effective quitting tool. We have already committed to reviewing the TPD and we will fully explore the opportunities that Brexit may provide, but until exit negotiations are concluded we remain a full member of the EU.

T5. [907966] **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): On contaminated blood, will the Government confirm that they still plan to use a private profit-making company such as Atos to administer the scheme, and if so, why?

Nicola Blackwood: I absolutely cannot confirm that. The tendering process has not even begun. Therefore, we are not considering any form of company, private or otherwise.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Health Committee has just published its interim report on preventing suicide. I thank all those who gave evidence to our inquiry and all members of the Department of Health advisory group. We support the strategy, but the clear message that we heard was that implementation needs to be strengthened. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss our report's recommendations, and will he join me in thanking members of the Samaritans and other voluntary groups around the country who will be working tirelessly over Christmas, as they do every day, to support those in crisis?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend speaks wisely. Christmas can be a very lonely time for a number of people, so we all commend the work of voluntary organisations that do so well. I would be delighted to meet her.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): More than a third of my male constituents live until they are over 80, and yet next door in Windsor and Maidenhead the same is true of well over half of the residents. In the 10 years before 2010, that gap narrowed. What is the Secretary of State doing to narrow the gap in future?

Mr Hunt: The best thing we can do to narrow the gap is make sure that we continue to invest properly in the NHS and social care system, and make good progress on public health, which often has the biggest effect on health inequalities. That is why it is good news that we have record low smoking rates.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): With acute hospital bed blocking at a record high, do Ministers agree that it is a great pity that so very few of the 40 sustainability and transformation plans now in the public domain deal directly with step-down care and, in particular, with community hospitals?

Mr Dunne: As my hon. Friend has confirmed, 44 areas are working on their STPs, all of which are charged with looking at improving integration between hospitals and social care in order to improve discharge. In order for STPs to be taken forward, they have to address that issue.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Recent figures from the Royal College of Psychiatrists show that children and adolescent mental health services are still underfunded in many parts of the country—particularly worrying for me is the fact that Bristol seems to be the 13th lowest in the country. What are Ministers doing to ensure that children across England and the rest of the UK get the health services that they need?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to highlight this issue and I agree with her. I am not happy with the service that we provide through CAMHS at the moment. It is a big area of focus for the Government. We are putting a lot of investment in, but there is lots more to be done.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My constituency has been waiting some time for the go-ahead for a new critical treatment hospital providing 24/7 care for the sickest patients, which is very much in line with Government policy. The hospital's chief executive, Mary Edwards, retires this month after 21 years of exceptional service. Will the Secretary of State give her a retirement present and help me to secure a decision from NHS England?

Mr Dunne: I join my right hon. Friend in congratulating her chief executive on her commitment to the NHS. As I said in answer to a previous question about the STP for my right hon. Friend's area, the issue is being reviewed at the moment by NHS England, and I am afraid that I am not in a position to give her any advance notice of the outcome.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The Secretary of State will be aware of the horrifying case of Fiona Hollings, a 19-year-old with anorexia who for the past four months has been nearly 400 miles away from home, in a bed in Glasgow. Her family have travelled 8,000 miles in that time to see her. The Government commit to ending this horrific practice by 2020, but do families really have to put up with it until then? How would he feel if it was his child?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: We are taking action and I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that what has happened in that case is completely unacceptable. We are currently

commissioning a record number of in-patient mental health beds, and it is a very big priority for us to eliminate the problem entirely by the end of the Parliament.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituent Marie Bingham administers a drug at home using pre-filled syringes, but she is unable to dispose of the used needles, partly because they are in 2.5 litre sharps tubs rather than 1 litre sharps tubs. It is a ludicrous situation. Is the Minister aware of the problem, and are there any steps he can take to deal with it?

David Mowat: As my hon. Friend says, pharmacies are commissioned, on such occasions, to dispose of these needles. I was not aware of the particular issue about the 2.5 litre tubs that seems to exist in Rugby. I will investigate that and revert to him.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): TB rates are currently higher in bits of Ealing than in Rwanda. Could the Government better the bilateral innovation fund to which they have committed with China and go for the O'Neill report recommendation to work towards a truly global fund, in conjunction with other nations, to fight antimicrobial resistance?

Nicola Blackwood: As I have already answered, we are a world leader on AMR. We have not only the bilateral fund with China but the £265 million Fleming fund, through which we will deliver bilateral national action plans with a number of developing nations. We are committed to going further than that through the global action plan with the UN.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): A fortnight ago, I visited the pharmacy at the Corby urgent care centre to thank the dedicated staff for all that they do all year round, and to have a flu jab as part of the ongoing campaign. Does the Minister agree that exactly that sort of proactive working is crucial in trying to tackle winter pressures?

David Mowat: I do agree with my hon. Friend. I am particularly pleased that this year, the pharmacy network has done more flu jabs so far than in the entire period last year. I had my flu jab, and it is holding up well.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information. We are greatly indebted to the Minister.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In the east midlands, the average ambulance arrival time for life-threatening cases has almost doubled in the last three years, and Nottingham's A&E waiting times are the worst in a decade. Will Ministers apologise to my constituents, including hard-working NHS staff, for their failure to fund health and social care adequately?

Mr Dunne: I would like to add my tribute to the work of ambulance staff up and down the country, particularly over the busy Christmas period ahead. As I have already said today, we have increased funding for ambulance services. We have increased the number of paramedics, both in training and employed. Earlier this month we announced that we had increased the payments to

paramedics to move them from band 5 to band 6, to help to retain and recruit more staff.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are short of time, but I am in a generous mood. We can manage only one more, so 46 years, six months and two days after his first election to the House, I call Mr Dennis Skinner.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): He is a mine of information, isn't he? He would like to contribute, really.

Does the Secretary of State not think that it is a scandal to be shutting Bolsover hospital, with 16 valuable beds that will go for ever, at a time when people are

lined up on trolleys in nearly every hospital in Britain? Why does the Secretary of State not give Bolsover a Christmas present and announce that Bolsover hospital will be saved? Come on!

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I add my congratulations to those of the Speaker on the hon. Gentleman's long service, which has included campaigning for Bolsover hospital. I simply say to him that we will look very carefully at all proposals to change the services offered. I think community hospitals have an important role in the future of the NHS, but the services they provide will change as more people want to be treated at home.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Sky: 21st Century Fox Takeover Bid

12.38 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the timetable of, and the approach of the Government to, 21st Century Fox's bid to take over Sky now that the bid has been agreed, and whether the Government plan to refer the bid to the competition authorities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): As hon. and right hon. Members know, Sky plc announced on Friday 9 December that it had received an approach from 21st Century Fox Inc. to acquire the 61% of shares in Sky plc that it does not already own. The Minister for Digital and Culture, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), made a statement on 12 December about the proposed bid and the process that would need to be followed. I recognise that this is an issue of significant interest to the public and that it has raised a lot of interest in Parliament, as well as being a significant issue for the parties concerned. It is very important I make it clear that the role I will play in this process is a quasi-judicial one. As the Secretary of State, I am able to intervene in certain media mergers on public interest grounds, as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. Government guidance on the operation of the public interest merger provisions under the Act gives an indication of how the intervention regime will operate in practice and of the approach I will aim to take. The most important concern for me is that the integrity of the process is upheld. The guidance makes it clear that I will aim to take an initial decision on whether to intervene on public interest grounds within 10 working days of formal notification of the merger to the relevant competition authority.

No such formal notification has yet been made. Unless and until a formal notification is made to the relevant competition authority, I will not be taking any decisions in relation to the bid. It is for the parties formally to notify the relevant competition authorities. It is at that point that I will need to consider whether any of the public interests specified in the legislation merit an intervention. My decision on whether or not to intervene will be a quasi-judicial one, and it is important that I am able to act independently and that the process is scrupulously fair and impartial. Given that, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on this proposed bid at this point if the integrity of the process is to be protected and everyone's interests are to be treated fairly.

What I can say is that I understand the significant public and parliamentary interest in this matter, and I do not for a minute underestimate it. This is also clearly a significant issue for the parties to the bid. It is therefore crucial that the integrity of the process is protected. I will not be making any further comment on the process or the merits of the bid today, but I can confirm that this matter is being treated with the utmost seriousness and that, should the parties formally notify the bid to the relevant competition authorities, I will act in line with the relevant legislation, the guidance and the quasi-judicial principles.

Edward Miliband: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. The urgency of the House considering this matter today is that we are going into recess until 9 January, and the bid may be notified to the Government at any time.

It is very important that the House understands the reality that in even launching this bid for 100% of Sky, the Murdochs are seeking to turn the judgment of this House, the regulator and indeed the country on its head. In 2011, this House unanimously urged the withdrawal of the bid for Sky by Rupert Murdoch. In 2012, Ofcom published a damning assessment of James Murdoch's behaviour in the running of News International. That report stopped short of declaring Sky as unfit and improper to hold a licence only on the basis that the Murdochs were a minority—not 100%—owner of Sky, and that James Murdoch was no longer playing an executive role at Sky.

Today James Murdoch is back, as chairman of Sky and chief executive of 21st Century Fox. This bid shows the Murdochs have learned nothing and think they can get away with anything. If it was wrong for the Murdochs to own 100% of Sky in 2011 and 2012, it is wrong today. We have seen the convictions of their senior employees for phone hacking and perverting the course of justice, and of police and public officials for taking payments from News International employees. We are still yet to have part 2 of Leveson, which was supposed—I am quoting its terms of reference—to examine the “corporate governance and management failures at News International”.

Why? Because this Government are seeking to ditch part 2 of Leveson. We all said across this House in 2011 that never again would we allow the Murdochs to wield unfettered power, yet here we are all over again.

May I ask the Secretary of State: first, has she read the Ofcom report of 2012 into James Murdoch, and will she tell us what she thought of its contents; secondly, will she tell us how this bid can even be considered to be in the realm of reality when part 2 of Leveson, specifically tasked with looking at the failures of News International, has not taken place; and thirdly, will she hear the message loud and clear that if the House were to return on 9 January to find the waving through of this bid, that would be totally and utterly unacceptable and fly in the face of the expressed will of the House and the country? Will she assure us today that this will not happen?

On the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister said she would stand up to the powerful. If ever there was a chance to prove it, it is today.

Karen Bradley: I do not for one second underestimate the huge public and parliamentary interest in this proposed merger, nor the importance of the issue to the parties concerned. But I must ensure, given my quasi-judicial role, that I protect the integrity of the process and ensure that, as and when a formal notification is given—if it is—it is properly considered. I will be making no further comments on the merits of the bid at this stage.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend bear in mind that, contrary to the assertion of the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) in *The Guardian*, Sky's share of the television news market is actually 5%, not 20%? Although there may well be a case for asking the regulator to look at

[Mr John Whittingdale]

this bid, does she recognise that it represents a £12 billion investment into a British company, and is a vote of confidence that Britain will remain a centre of international broadcasting after it leaves the European Union?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend has significant interest in this area, having been an exceptionally good predecessor for me, but will, I know, understand the position I am in and that I cannot comment.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): We have seen this bid before. I know that Christmas is a time for TV repeats, but this one was not a hit the first time round and is no more popular now. More than 135,000 people have already signed an online petition calling for the bid to be referred to Ofcom. The reasons for their concern are the same as those that caused the previous bid to be abandoned in 2011. Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be outrageous if the bid were pushed through over the Christmas holidays when Parliament is not sitting? Is she not even slightly embarrassed that on the one hand she is currently consulting to shelve part 2 of the Leveson inquiry, which would look at unlawful or improper conduct and management failings in parts of the Murdoch empire, and on the other is being asked to rule on whether that empire should be expanded?

Last week, the Minister for Digital and Culture told the House categorically that the Prime Minister had not discussed the bid at her recent New York meeting with Rupert Murdoch. Will the Secretary of State repeat that assurance? How does she know? Will she tell us what was discussed, because after all, Leveson recommended that those meetings be minuted?

Yesterday Rupert Murdoch wrote to *The Guardian* to say:

“I have made it a principle all my life never to ask for anything from any prime minister.”

Let us just pause to take that in for a moment. Members will recall John Major’s testimony to the Leveson inquiry, in which he recalled Rupert Murdoch asking him to change his party’s policy on Europe and warning that if the Conservatives would not change their European policies,

“his papers could not and would not support the Conservative Government.”

Does the Secretary of State believe Rupert Murdoch or the former Conservative Prime Minister, and what implication does the contradiction between them have for the application of the fit and proper person test?

Karen Bradley: I repeat that I cannot comment on the merits of the bid. I can say that, as and when a formal notification is made, there will be 10 days for me to make a decision as to whether to refer the proposed merger.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the Leveson process. I remind him that we have opened an open public consultation on that, which I hope he has responded to—I am sure he has. At the end of the consultation I will look at the responses as a separate matter.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the meeting the Prime Minister held in September. She had

a pre-arranged meeting with *Wall Street Journal* editors. Mr Murdoch dropped in to that meeting. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the proposed takeover was not discussed.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I am not entirely sure that a company controlled by Rupert Murdoch trying to buy another company largely controlled by Rupert Murdoch is of the great public interest that the Secretary of State seems to think it is. This is really all about the Labour party not liking Rupert Murdoch. If Richard Branson was in the same situation Opposition Members would not be saying a word about it. So may I ask the Secretary of State to ignore the siren voices on the Opposition Benches and not treat it with the great importance with which they think it should be treated? After all, the BBC controls huge amounts of TV news and national and local radio news, and we do not hear a peep out of the Opposition about that.

Karen Bradley: I know that my hon. Friend has strong views on these matters. I just repeat that I will not be making any comments on the merits or otherwise of the bid.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): When these matters were last discussed, the Minister of State said that the plurality rules were clearly set out and the Secretary of State would follow them very carefully if she was required to make a determination. Now that the bid has been agreed—although no formal notification has been given—can the Secretary of State throw some light on the process? Does the separation of the Murdoch print and broadcast interests change the Government’s view of plurality since the last bid? How much weight will the Secretary of State give to that separation when considering whether a public interest intervention notice should be issued?

Karen Bradley: No formal notification has been made. At this stage I will be making no comment on the merits or otherwise of the bid.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I note a hereditary interest in relation to the forces of the great Rupert Murdoch and commend my right hon. Friend for her proper even-handedness in dealing with this matter and her correct responses. May I also note that we have seen the true voice of socialist envy that, thanks to Rupert Murdoch, who risked his whole business on it in about 1990, Sky has provided incredible choice to millions of people. It is amazingly popular. Instead of decrying this wonderful achievement, we should be proud that it happened in Britain and that this huge investment is potentially coming into our nation. I hope that my right hon. Friend will bear that in mind and will not fall tempted by the siren voices of socialist ingrates.

Karen Bradley: I note my hon. Friend’s comments, but I repeat that I will not be making any comments on the merits or otherwise of the bid.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Secretary of State is quite properly saying that she will not comment on the decision itself, but that does not mean that she

cannot answer some of the questions that are being put to her today, and she should not hide behind that. So I ask her again: has she read the 2012 Ofcom report on the conduct of James Murdoch—yes or no?

Karen Bradley: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady, but I will not be making any comments on the process, its merits or otherwise.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Minister is at pains to tell us what she cannot do, and we respect that of course, but can she give us an assurance that she will use her office to ensure that there is a proper plurality of ownership of the media in this country, and that the views of this House, which have been clearly and frequently expressed, will also be respected at the end of this process?

Karen Bradley: I fully appreciate the level of interest in the matter. I am sure that the House will continue to debate these issues, and it is absolutely right that it should do so. It is equally important, as the right hon. Gentleman says, that I discharge my functions in line with the legislation and in accordance with my quasi-judicial role.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it not likely that Mr Murdoch had a point when he said—he was quoted earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) from the Front Bench—that he had never asked “for anything from any prime minister”?

Why should he? A Tory Government know what he wants and usually give it to him without any difficulty whatever.

Karen Bradley: It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the relationships that Prime Ministers of all parties over the years have had with members of the press.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Secretary of State has made it very clear that she does not feel able to comment on the content of this decision because it is a quasi-judicial decision, but does she share my anxiety that the timing is all in the hands of Murdoch? She has a responsibility to respond within 10 days. It might not be an accident that he has chosen not to notify the bid at the moment, in order to ensure that Parliament cannot take a decision before she has to. What is she going to do about that, now or in future?

Karen Bradley: At the moment there is no decision to take. This is a decision that will be taken by me as the Secretary of State. I reassure the right hon. Lady that I will not be taking a break over Christmas, whether there is a formal notification or otherwise.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) could not have struck a more wrong note with his remarks. No one on the Opposition Benches feels any envy for the Dowler family or any of the other victims of phone hacking. The Secretary of State cannot tell us what she is going to do, but the findings of Leveson part 2 may be relevant to the fit and proper person test.

When she came to the House and announced that she intended to consult on it rather than just go ahead straightforwardly, did she have any inkling that this takeover bid was going to be made?

Karen Bradley: The first I knew about the takeover bid was at the same time as everyone else in the House, when it was announced in the press.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Given the concerns that have been raised about the timing, and the fact that it could well be that the Secretary of State will have to fulfil her quasi-judicial role during the recess, if she could not answer questions about what she has previously read today, will she ensure that when she does take a decision, on which she will be questioned in the House, she will be able to answer that she did read all of that relevant material? On understanding the parliamentary and public interest, does she accept that most of it goes to those points that are in the public interest grounds in the legislation?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will fulfil my role exactly in line with the legislation and I will of course be answerable to Parliament in the decisions that I take.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I know that it is pointless to ask the Culture Secretary to give a view on the bid, but may I express to her the clear views about the bid of more than 100 constituents who have emailed me in recent days? Will she undertake to come back to the House on 9 January to give us an update?

Karen Bradley: I hear the hon. Lady’s comments about her constituents’ concerns. I will of course update the House as and when there is anything to say on the matter.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): When the original bid was abandoned in 2011, the former Prime Minister said that it was the right thing to do for the country. Does the Secretary of State disagree with him and think that the time is now right? If not, will she please refer it to Ofcom?

Karen Bradley: My apologies, but I cannot answer that question at this stage. I have a quasi-judicial role in this process; I know that the hon. Lady has a legal background and will understand that. I simply cannot make comments at this stage.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I know that this question will not be answered, but I am asking it just the same. A substantial number of my constituents have contacted me in the past week about the bid, and they are all of the same opinion—that Mr Murdoch has too much influence over our media. Many would like to see his bid referred to Ofcom for that very reason. However, does the Minister agree that at the very least, any takeover should be delayed until the Leveson part 2 inquiry takes place?

Karen Bradley: I apologise again, but I cannot make comments on the merits of the bid or the process.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): With reference to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) about the former Prime Minister David Cameron's comment that the withdrawal of the decision was the right one, what assessment has the Secretary of State made about what might have changed between then and now?

Karen Bradley: I will be making no comments on any assessments that I have made at any time. I will be going through a full process in line with the legislation. I need to ensure the integrity of that process for all concerned.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): We are all concerned that next year the leader of the free world will be a blunt-brained snake oil salesman who was elected by a prostituted press to whom truth is secondary and sometimes entirely irrelevant. Will the Secretary of State bear in mind the very strong views that we need to maintain in this country those qualities of balance and fairness that we have imposed on the BBC by statute? Will she bear in mind the grave danger of a prostituted press?

Karen Bradley: I do not think anyone is in doubt about the hon. Gentleman's views.

Christian Matheson: We are about yours.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his sedentary chunter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree that allowing the takeover might put pressure on, or take away, the diversity of our press? Is it the Government's or the Secretary of State's intention to ensure that we have a free press, not controlled by one person or one company?

Karen Bradley: I have a very specific role, which is set out in legislation. I will fulfil that role with the utmost integrity.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents have also contacted me with their concerns about the bid, in particular the threat to the valued diversity of our press. Will the Secretary of State commit to addressing this point when she comes back to the House in the first week after the recess? Will she also confirm that if she has not yet read the 2012 Ofcom report on the conduct of James Murdoch she will have done so by the time we come back, and refer to its conclusions in her response?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the House that I will update the House as and when decisions are taken. I do understand that there is the utmost interest in this matter, but I have a quasi-judicial role and I cannot make any further comment at this stage.

Points of Order

1.2 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to a recent parliamentary question on the staffing levels of the Child Poverty Unit, the Minister for Employment said:

"responsibility for child poverty policy and analysis transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions."

Given the significance of the decision to abolish the Child Poverty Unit, may I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on whether it would not have been more appropriate to have made a written ministerial statement, at the very least, informing the House of that decision?

Mr Speaker: The means by which a Minister seeks to clarify a matter that is the subject of parliamentary interest is for that Minister. Sometimes a Minister will sense that the salience of the issue or the inquisitorial appetite of the House is such that a statement, rather than simply an answer to a written parliamentary question, might be judicious, but that is a judgment for him or her to make, not the Chair.

On the closure of the Child Poverty Unit, I note that the hon. Gentleman has a Westminster Hall debate on that matter this very afternoon. It would be surprising, to say the least, if he did not raise and ventilate fully his concern, on this and related matters, on that occasion.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) *rose*—

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is so illustrious that I am going to save her up.

Chris Stephens: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are probably aware that one of my hobby horses is the Government's sneaking out of written statements rather than coming to the House. On 8 December, the Home Office announced the extension of asylum accommodation contracts. The Minister for Immigration wrote that the Government were

"committed to ensuring that destitute asylum seekers are accommodated in safe, secure and suitable accommodation".

The Scottish Refugee Council was advised yesterday that there have been changes to the sharing criteria in that contract, which include: allowing siblings of the same sex to room-share until the age of 20, no longer 16; allowing siblings of the opposite sex to room-share until the age of 16, no longer 10; allowing willing mothers to return to shared accommodation; and allowing children up to the age of 16 to share with their parents.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I very gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I do not think the House requires the full details of the statement that he is clearly very keen to share with us? The matter to which he alludes is certainly important, but it did not require rehearsal in the Chamber today. That is why it is not being aired today in the way that, for example, another matter has been aired very fully.

I say to the hon. Gentleman that various vehicles are open to him to pursue the issue. Knowing him as I do, I

feel certain that he possesses the ingenuity to use one or other of those vehicles. I shall be looking with great interest to see how he does so, after he has had a brief break over the Christmas period.

Ms Eagle: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many of us who have been Ministers know only too well that quasi-judicial processes have to be very carefully handled in this Chamber, but I wonder whether you could assist us. We had a statement from the Secretary of State on the Sky bid, but she refused to answer a range of other questions, such as whether she had read a 2012 Ofcom report that is published and in the public domain. Surely she refused to answer that question not because she was in a quasi-judicial process, but simply because she did not want to tell us whether she had read it or not.

Mr Speaker: I would not want to impute any particular motive to any Member of the House, including the Secretary of State. What I would say to the hon. Lady is that I understand her irritation—I was going to say “frustration”—on this matter. The Secretary of State has interpreted her responsibility, in the way she described to the House, very narrowly, which she is entitled to do. Colleagues on either side of the argument can make their own assessments of how the Secretary of State responded to the various inquiries put to her. I feel sure that significant numbers of Members will want to return to this matter in the new year.

HOUSE OF LORDS (EXCLUSION OF HEREDITARY PEERS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr David Hanson presented a Bill to amend the House of Lords Act 1999 to remove the by-election system for the election of hereditary peers; to provide for the exclusion of hereditary peers from the House of Lords over time; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read the Second time Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 116).

Rail Ombudsman

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

Mr Speaker: We now come to the ten-minute rule motion. I say that with a degree of interest, because it means that the hon. Gentleman has up to 10 minutes only in which to articulate his case. I feel sure he will do so with an eloquence worthy of Demosthenes.

1.8 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a Rail Ombudsman to scrutinise performance and complaints and represent the interests of passengers; to make provision for the Ombudsman to levy fines on train operating companies for late running and cancellation of trains and about the use of such fines; and for connected purposes.

How on earth I will be able to do all that in 10 minutes, given the shambles of Govia Thameslink Railway, is a wonder. The GTR franchise, which covers Southern Rail, is not working. Notwithstanding the current problems with industrial action, incompetent management and Department for Transport failings, which have been aired all too frequently in this House, the system for pursuing complaints and achieving financial or other redress is simply not fit for purpose.

My Bill would apply to the whole UK rail network. While not intended as a silver bullet to resolve the problems of Southern, it would go some way to disincentivising complacency over consistent failure to operate a decent service when some form of normality returns to our rail service—oh for those happy days of some form of normality in the Southern region! The truth is that when things go wrong on the railways, train operating companies can actually benefit.

There are two types of compensation payments at present. The first is the so-called schedule 8 payment from Network Rail to the train operators, when something goes wrong with the infrastructure—points failures, for example, or the notorious signal box fire at Penge in Reggie Perrin’s day. It is designed to compensate train operators for the impact of poor performance on their revenue and helps to reduce the risk premium factored into franchise bids.

Extraordinarily, the train companies are not required to pass on the compensation they receive in this way to the passengers who actually suffer the inconvenience and loss. It has been estimated that some 60% of rail compensation comes in this form. The Social Market Foundation calculated last year that the train operators raised £107 million from Network Rail for delays, while passengers received just £26 million of that, meaning that the train-operating companies profited by some £81 million.

The second form of compensation is that directly paid out by the train operators to the passenger when they are liable for delays and cancellations caused by staffing problems, rolling stock breakdown and so forth. The problem is that it depends specifically on passengers lodging a claim, which can be very bureaucratic and is often rejected on technicalities. The take-up rate for claims is very low. While recent events on Southern have changed that a fair bit, it comes from a low base.

[Tim Loughton]

In 2014, the Office of Rail and Road calculated that only 11% of passengers always or usually claim compensation. Subsequently, that has increased to around 35%, but it is still a minority. So passengers do not claim, and the train operators such as GTR benefit. On strike days, when salaries and energy costs are less, they are able to profiteer as well.

GTR's turnover is around £1.3 billion, over £1 billion of which comes from the central Government to run the train service. Yet in an answer to a parliamentary question earlier this year, the then rail Minister stated that just £2 million has been levied against GTR in respect of cancellation and short formation performance benchmarks, while some £2.2 million was paid out to passengers under the passenger's charter and delay repay compensation. That is a total of just 0.4% of turnover, which is hardly an incentive—and that is before netting off the payments to GTR from Network Rail. Added to that, all train operators have different schemes and methods of compensating, and there is no industry benchmark. That is hardly an incentive to run an efficient service. There must be a better way of doing it.

Given that 47 million passenger journeys were cancelled or significantly late last year, this is a big problem that affects many regular travellers—our constituents. We need a much more effective awareness programme, alerting frustrated passengers to what their rights actually are. There is certainly no sign of that from the train operators themselves. The current problem is that the passenger can like it or lump it. The complaints procedure largely relies on the good will of the train-operating company beyond the minimum delay repay obligations, if it accepts the application at all. As the consumer champion Which? has put it,

“The current complaint handling landscape in the rail sector is inadequate. There are major gaps in the provision of alternative dispute resolution...with no effective route for redress and escalation of complaints if a train company does not resolve a complaint. Transport Focus, which handles some complaints informally, has no ability to impose binding decisions, no power to resolve complaint appeals, and is not an appropriate body to deliver alternative dispute resolution. Which? believes the Government should establish a transport ombudsman”.

That is what I am proposing.

Frankly, it is extraordinary that there is currently no ombudsman system for rail complaints. That could and should have been introduced when the Consumer Rights Act 2015 was extended to rail companies, giving passengers the same legal protection they receive when paying for any other service or goods, improving their ability to obtain redress beyond the current delay thresholds and receiving that redress specifically in cash rather than travel vouchers.

What will my Bill do, Mr Speaker? I know you are desperate to know. First, it will overhaul the compensation scheme, creating a much tougher financial impact on train operating companies and a fairer and easier way of compensating passengers, with a more reliable reflection of the inconvenience and costs they have suffered. Every time a train is late beyond an agreed threshold, is cancelled altogether in advance or at short notice, or overruns a station, a penalty fine will be paid into a central pot independent of the train operator and before

affected passengers have to claim. Passengers would then be able to claim directly from that pot, but in a much more centrifuged way.

Last week, I met a company that has devised the technology through which regular passengers can download an app, track arrival at stations, automatically lodge a compensation claim where appropriate and then get compensation paid directly into a bank account without any paperwork having to be lodged. The app goes live in January. By automating an unwieldy claims process, it will also reduce administration charges for the train operators. The Office of Rail and Road super-complaint response report gave a range of estimates for the manual processing of claims: between £1.80 and £39 per claim, which is extraordinary. I know that the Minister has promised automated refunds to a payment card, but that is still some years away and is fraught with verification problems, whereas this technology is available now.

Secondly, the penalty pot will be used to help fund a new beefed-up rail ombudsman, which I shall come on to in a few moments. Thirdly, any remaining funds will be used to offset fare rises, thereby giving a further payback to inconvenienced and hassled passengers. Although the new scheme is no silver bullet alone, it would recalibrate the balance of power back to aggrieved passengers, incentivise the train operator to stop running a shoddy service and instil a sense of urgency in operators to get problems sorted out.

The second part of my Bill will establish a new rail ombudsman with real teeth and proper statutory powers. This is based on practical proposals discussed with Ombudsman Services, which have now been endorsed by the consumer watchdog Which?. Yesterday, it said:

“The Government must introduce a new ombudsman that all train companies have to sign up to so that passenger complaints are properly heard and resolved.”

Which? supports my Bill.

The rail ombudsman would be based on the energy ombudsman model, which is already in operation and could be adapted for the rail sector to deal with both the train-operating companies and Network Rail, helping to clarify responsibility for passenger problems in any given instance. The introduction of a rail ombudsman would help level the playing field between passengers and rail operators by establishing a strong independent second tier of redress. A rail ombudsman would not only greatly enhance the level of redress available to passengers, but help to improve confidence in the rail sector—something that is currently sorely lacking in the Southern region in particular.

The rail ombudsman would take up and resolve individual complaints and direct compensation, while overseeing the operation and thresholds to the penalty pot that I have described. It would lead to the awarding of compensation based on realistic levels of actual loss suffered by passengers. Typically under Direct Repay 15, passengers can currently claim just 25% of the cost of single fares. Of course the Minister recently announced one-month compensation for long-suffering passengers, but a one-month refund on a season ticket does not go far when people have to pay to stay in London or for a taxi back late at night from Three Bridges to the Sussex coast when they find themselves stranded.

The ombudsman would collect and analyse data to identify frequent and common problems of individual operators and be able to direct them to make remedies

or suffer forfeits. The rail ombudsman would identify longer-term problems within the sector as a whole, and work with the Government to recommend action to mitigate any impact before it causes further detriment to passengers.

As I said at the outset, these proposals alone do not represent an immediate solution to the mess that the GTR franchise is in at the moment. I believe, however, that they represent a practical way forward to change the dynamics within the rail industry when something goes wrong and our train-travelling constituents lose out first, last and most. Above all, I appreciate that most of our constituents are primarily concerned with being able to use a reliable rail service that gets them to work, school, college, hospital appointments and home again at roughly the times that they anticipated.

Compensation for an unreliable service is secondary. Our constituents may not be terribly interested in apportioning blame for current problems; they just need a service that works when they need it to work. I do not think those two things are mutually exclusive, and I believe that the measures in my Bill are long overdue and will help to achieve both objectives. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Tim Loughton, Sir Nicholas Soames, Sir Peter Bottomley, Ms Harriet Harman, Maria Caulfield, Nusrat Ghani, Peter Kyle, Huw Merriman, Chris Philp, Henry Smith, Caroline Ansell and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

Tim Loughton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2017, and to be printed (Bill 117).

Backbench Business

Leasehold and Commonhold Reform

1.19 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered leasehold and commonhold reform.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for accepting the bid for the debate from the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold reform. I co-chair the group with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who I am happy to see is present. More than 50 Members of both Houses have joined the APPG since our inaugural meeting, which took place only a short time ago. I want to record the group's thanks to Martin Boyd of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and Sebastian O'Kelly of the Campaign Against Retirement Leasehold Exploitation—Carlex—who act as our secretariat and advisers.

This debate is overdue. The front page of a library briefing makes the fundamental point. It states:

“Despite a good deal of legislative activity in this area, dissatisfaction remains.”

I am sure that, were this not the last day before the Christmas recess, many more Members would be present, because the issue affects millions of homeowners. Under the heading “The extent of leasehold ownership”, the briefing states:

“DCLG published a technical paper...in August 2014...to produce a new estimate of 4.1 million leasehold dwellings in England in 2012-13...The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership...estimated that there were around 5.37 million leasehold properties...at the end of 2013.”

On commonhold, the briefing states:

“Commonhold tenure is viewed as offering several advantages over the leasehold system. It does not remove the obligation on residents to contribute to management/maintenance and major works, but it is argued to be a more transparent system.”

Describing the advantages, it states:

“Commonhold will address the problem of lessees being beholden to an absentee landlord who cannot be bothered to carry out building maintenance and management, or who is more interested in trying to make a profit at their expense.”

I shall say much more about that later. The briefing continues:

“Commonhold will also remove the problem of leasehold property being a wasting asset. Commonholders will each have a perpetual interest, effectively akin to a freehold, in their individual unit. Standardised commonhold constitutional documents should be of general benefit.”

In my constituency, as in many, there is a mix of leaseholders: those who have bought former council properties under right-to-buy legislation—perhaps second, third or even fourth purchasers—and/or those who have either bought new properties built in east London as part of its regeneration, or bought into converted warehouses and the like which have been transformed into homes. The constituency contains the second highest number of leasehold properties in England, after Cities of London and Westminster.

Common issues affecting both types of property, new private sector and former public sector, include the length of leases, service charges, insurance fees,

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

refurbishment costs, recognition rights, ground rents and dispute resolution procedures. I shall deal with all those briefly, but I shall not cover event fees, forfeiture or retirement homes, because I am much less familiar with those problems and I know that other Members intend to raise them.

The length of leases varies from 99 to 999 years. Many people who buy their homes under leasehold believe that they are purchasing their property, but they are not; they are leasing it. Because some ground rents double every 10 years, mortgages can be more difficult to secure later in the lease for resale. As for service charges, in the former public sector there have been improvements in recent years, with more transparency of costs and detail to show reasonableness of charges. Previously, constituents of mine have been charged for lifts in blocks with no lifts, and for garden upkeep in places with no gardens. Despite the improvements, however, there are still anomalies. The HomeOwners Alliance writes:

“Many new build freehold houses...on new housing estates are being sold by developers subject to a requirement for the owners to pay maintenance/service charge for common areas on the estate...freeholders in this situation (unlike leaseholders) are unable to bring claims to the Property Tribunal if they feel these charges are unreasonable.”

My wife and I own such a freehold property.

Also in the private sector, I have tried to help residents on two large sites in my constituency, Canary Riverside and West India Quay. Both are controlled by a gentleman—well, I would rather say a person—called John Christodoulou, under the Yianis group. LKP has been very involved in assisting the residents. Both sites have tried to work constructively with the landlord’s managing agents over many years, but have suffered from very poor management. Both had not had accounts for years, regardless of what the legislation may say is required. Only when the Canary Riverside site took its latest action through the tribunal process, to replace the landlord’s agent through fault, did the accounts emerge, and what they showed was a far from pretty picture. In the decision, the tribunal was highly critical of many aspects of the landlord’s management, including the fact that it had not had a professional planned maintenance programme and then, having obtained one, had failed to implement it.

Since the court’s appointment of a new manager, which began in October this year, the landlord’s solicitor, a Mr David Marsden of Trowers & Hamblins, appears to have bombarded the court-appointed manager with a huge number of emails: 22 in October, 29 in November, and 37 so far this month. It strikes me as very important that when the landlord’s management is removed through fault, as happened in this case, the tribunal should act to protect the court-appointed manager from what appears to be little short of harassment. The residents at Canary Riverside wrote to me yesterday, saying:

“In addition to bombarding our Tribunal-appointed Manager with emails, the Manager is being ground down by the continuous litigation being brought by the landlord in an attempt to undermine the FTT’s”—

first-tier tribunal’s—

“decision and frustrate the new management.

There is a real risk that Canary riverside lessees could find themselves in a worse position than if we had never taken the Section 24 action: i.e., back under the management of a landlord who knows the law does not protect lessees in large mixed-use developments.

The FTT-appointed Manager is increasingly finding himself in an untenable position, forced to spend more time dealing with the landlord’s demands and injunctions than resolving the estate management issues he was appointed to remedy.

Section 24 appears only to work if the landlord agrees, even if a decision is unequivocally in lessees’ favour.

Christodoulou is currently seeking a Judicial Review in an attempt to undo the FTT’s decision (having had three appeals fail at the FTT and Upper Tribunal).

He is also taking every opportunity to apply to the High Court to chip away at the Manager’s powers. On Friday he obtained an injunction that effectively granted him and his staff unfettered access to the Canary Riverside estate. An estate he no longer manages.

The lessees at Canary Riverside spent over two years securing the FTT’s decision—at a considerable cost, both financially and in respect of the time and energy needed to pursue legal action. It has been a huge endeavour.

But it seems the...hearing was just the beginning of our legal battle. The landlord’s fees were £335,000 for the FTT hearing. Since then there have been three appeals, a Judicial Review pending, and several High Court injunction hearings. Legal fees could easily top £500,000, and our (billionaire) landlord knows that the more legal resources he throws at winning, the more likely he is to win.

Section 24”—

and I say this to the Minister—

“is not fit for purpose, and we”—

the residents—

“will end up over £500,000 poorer”—

half a million pounds worse off—

“and with nowhere else to turn.

None of this impacts the value of Christodoulou’s investment—the only people damaged by poor estate management and high service charges is the lessees.”

I should welcome the Minister’s comments on that.

Over at West India Quay, Christmas eve will mark a new and dismal milestone: the sixth year of accounts will become overdue. The residents have had none since 2010, and more than £10 million of their cash is unaccounted for. In its 14 years of occupation, their building has never been subject to a planned preventive maintenance report. I ask the Minister, “How can that be allowed?” In fact, it can be allowed because there is no enforcement action for the residents to try to ensure that the property managing agents and owners do something about it.

Those are two examples of the problems faced by residents who are up against powerful, uncaring and unscrupulous landlords.

In 2012, the consumer organisation Which? estimated that £700 million was being overcharged in service charges each year. That was when everyone thought that there were between 2 million and 2.5 million leasehold homes. Given the size of the sector as we now know it to be, that suggests that £1.4 billion may be being overcharged each year. That cannot be right either.

Freeholders in one block in my constituency were asked for £78,000 to insure a building containing about 32 flats. Several of them worked in the sector, and they were sure that £15,000 would have been a more appropriate charge. They settled for £22,000 after negotiation.

Refurbishment costs mostly affect former council blocks, and leaseholders are almost at the mercy of councils or housing associations. Trying to secure detailed bills or tenders, guarantees on completion of work being undertaken and assurances of the quality of the work being undertaken has proved very difficult and unreasonable, especially from public sector organisations. Fortunately, this is changing, but progress is very slow.

Recognition rights is a source of much consternation in both the private and the public sectors. I have one group of residents in Campbell Road who won the first-tier tribunal for recognition of their residents association, but their social landlord, Tower Hamlets Homes, is appealing against the ruling. There is an inbuilt sense of reverse snobbery and prejudice against leaseholders among some in the social housing sector.

There is recognition resistance in the private sector, too. One of my first such cases, nearly 20 years ago, was from residents in the Cascades block, the first high-rise private residential block on the Isle of Dogs in docklands. The freeholder was harassing them in an attempt to frustrate their efforts to set up a residents association to represent them on service and maintenance charges.

On dispute resolution procedures, I have mentioned the problems at Canary Riverside and West India Quay, but the costs of high-powered barristers defending freeholders at tribunal is now a disgrace. The procedures were originally supposed to be relatively informal. That has totally changed. A constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), Paddy McHugh, has written to me saying:

“Any lessee who files a case at tribunal can expect to face a Barrister acting for the landlord. The costs in issue can outweigh paying for legal representation while a landlord is usually free to put his legal costs onto the service charge even against lessees not party to the case, whether or not the landlord is the respondent.”

This surely cannot be right either. Where is the justice in a system that favours billionaires protecting their profits over ordinary working people trying to protect their homes?

Ground rents have been the subject of a number of articles in the press and media reports recently.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing a debate on this important topic, which was raised with me by the Charter Quay residents association in Kingston—and since he raises the point, I should say that I am a barrister, although thankfully not in the landlord and tenant sector. Does he agree that many people entering these leaseholds are entirely unaware that the landlords have the power to make huge increases in ground rents, and if this practice is deemed acceptable, at the very least tenants going into these agreements should have very clear information about what the landlords can do, and what their rights are as tenants and how they can challenge the landlord?

Jim Fitzpatrick: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. As has been evident at a number of meetings that the hon. Member for Worthing West and I have had with legal and property experts and individual constituents from across the country, many people do not recognise the significance of this issue, including many lawyers. People are keen to get their hands on their first home or their new property and

therefore will take the advice of lawyers who may not be fully conversant with the implications in this regard.

There is, to an extent, some relatively good news. After the outcry in a number of media reports, several of the large developers have announced that their policy of doubling ground rents every 10 years, which is the equivalent of 7% interest rates in perpetuity, is untenable and they are returning to the retail prices index. I am sure that the hon. Member for Worthing West, who is my hon. Friend for the purposes of this debate, will be raising that more extensively later. This is a success that the campaigning charities, residents associations and others have had. A number of the developers are backtracking, but that is not happening right across the piece. The question to the Minister is how we protect everybody from the rogues who will not do the right thing and prevent them from being subject to this abuse.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has brought this subject up. My calculation is that if a £250,000 house has a £250 ground rent that doubles every 10 years, over 60 years the successive leaseholders will have paid £157,500. For that still to be 1% of the value, the house will have to be worth £80 million; that is in the first 60 years of a lease.

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman emphasises the absurdity of this situation and the abuse. It is a big issue, as he knows; he has been campaigning on it and the all-party group will continue to campaign on it. We have had a modicum of success so far. I think there is an opportunity to drive this issue into reverse and deal with this charge, which should have been peppercorn or tokenistic, but which is now a much more difficult issue for purchasers. There is an opportunity to take it back into the realms of where it should have been or to abolish it altogether.

The aims of the all-party group are relatively simple: to reduce the opportunities for exploitation; to alleviate the distress and hardship of leaseholders, particularly the elderly; to do away with the high costs of the property tribunal; to examine incidences of lease forfeiture; to examine the value of retirement leasehold properties; to unearth and publicise scandalous behaviour of professionals involved in the leasehold sector; to examine insurance commissions and matters where leaseholders pay but are not party to the contract; and to ensure that the right-to-manage legislation acts as intended.

We have had a number of successes so far, including the growth of the all-party group. It has been well attended, with many professionals at the round tables organised by LKP and us, helped by Miss Katherine O’Riordan from the hon. Gentleman’s office, to make sure that the meetings are successful. We have had significant media interest, and interest from Ministers and shadow Ministers; I am pleased both the Minister for Housing and Planning and his shadow Minister are in their places today. We look forward to hearing what they have to say on these issues. We have had interest, too, from senior civil servants at the Department for Communities and Local Government, which we are grateful for because it demonstrates that both Government and Opposition are taking this matter seriously. There is a recognition that everything is not quite well here and things need to be examined. We also have today’s debate in which to raise the issue.

[*Jim Fitzpatrick*]

Some matters are easier to resolve than others, and some will require legislation, but it is not all bad news. The industry is also trying to clean up the sector, with the Association of Residential Management Agents, led by Dr Nigel Glen, introducing ARMA-Q, its code of practice for property management companies, and the appointment of a regulator for the sector to oversee and assist in dispute resolution procedures. Many decent professional organisations have joined, and even a number outside ARMA are decent companies too, but sadly there are still too many bullies, cowboys and crooks in the sector. For the Government to feel comfortable with the legislation as it stands is unacceptable. We need not only better regulation, better protection and advice, but legislation. Millions of citizens are looking to their politicians of whichever party to remedy their distress.

In conclusion, I return to my original comment from the Library:

“Despite a good deal of legislative activity in this area, dissatisfaction remains.”

This problem goes back to the '90s. Governments of both main parties have tried to resolve it and have been unsuccessful, so in some senses it is not a party political issue. But until a Government recognise the unfairness, the robbery and the dissatisfaction, many good people are condemned to suffer. Politically, for me this is a vote winner for whichever party pledges action, and all parties should.

1.38 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—my hon. Friend—referred to things going wrong on purpose, and things sometimes going wrong by mistake.

To avoid something going wrong by mistake, I ask the Government, and particularly the Ministry of Justice, to abandon the opportunity of winning a forfeiture order on a residential home over a smallish debt. By all means, in extremis, an asset might have to be ordered to be sold, but the surplus value should certainly go to the leaseholder and should not be forfeited to the freeholder.

One of the worst cases is that of Plantation Wharf in Battersea. Two elderly people applied to challenge management costs of about £9,000. The leasehold valuation tribunal—the lower property tribunal—agreed with them in large part and struck off about £7,000. There were then applications for costs. One of the leaseholders had read on the Government website that the cost of going to the leasehold valuation tribunal was £500 and therefore assumed that there was nothing in the cost application. By inattention, he ended up bouncing between various courts and owing over £70,000. A forfeiture order was granted, with even the mortgage lender not realising that its part of the asset would be forfeited as well.

When the insurance company that provided the mortgage woke up at the last moment—at the prompting of the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, to which I pay tribute—the debt was settled and the man was able to go off to his new home with the bulk of his equity. He should never have been forced to pay anything, because if someone wins £5,000 out of £7,000, for example, or £7,000 out of £9,000, that should be regarded as a win, not a score draw. At it happens, the freeholder in that case was not an avaricious crook, but people who were

more used to commercial dealings and thought that everyone was professionally advised and could afford to pay costs.

I have a challenge to everybody in the field: do not assume that other people are as clever, wily or crooked as you are. Whether this was criminal or not is not for me to judge, but one crook is Martin Paine—pain with an e on the end—who has taken “lease” beyond sleaze, almost by adding a letter at the beginning, and into an art form. He owns a number of short leases, and anyone who wants to sell them has to get an extension. My understanding is that he offers legally valid, informal extensions. Under a formal extension, the ground rent reverts to virtually nothing.

Martin Paine’s informal leases contain a provision that doubles the ground rent every 10 years or so, but that is written into the lease in such a way that even experienced solicitors fail to find the wording or to connect the clauses together. A person, who may be a first-time buyer of a low-value flat, may then discover that they are asked for enormously high ground rents, and they are enormously high because Martin Paine has written the provision back to the first granting of the lease, not from the time of the extension. A flat might therefore be worth £150,000, but the leaseholder will be asked for thousands of pounds a year in ground rent, with the prospect of that going up. When the leaseholder complains, Mr Paine’s practice, as I understand it, is to say, “Sue your solicitor.” I therefore recommend that providers of indemnity insurance for solicitors get together, which I think they can do without being a cartel, and ask, “What pattern of claims have we had from those we insure?” to see whether this crookedness can be stopped.

Martin Paine will then occasionally buy back the flat at a low price and remarket it with the same terms. To do that once could be regarded as incompetence; to do it twice on the same property is deserving of the word “crooked.” Every single auctioneer should do what we had to recommend to one respectable auction house: look at the leases. It turned out, of course, that Martin Paine had not actually supplied the lease to the auctioneers early on—it was withdrawn.

We should not have to rely on the chance action of a campaigning charity such as LKP or Carlex—the Campaign Against Retirement Leasehold Exploitation—or a passing Member of Parliament, to get things put right.

I ought to declare an interest in that I own the lease on a flat in a freehold building in Worthing. We had a good landlord and a good managing agent, which has now been succeeded by another good managing agent. The freeholder decided that he was going to retire and suggested to the six leaseholders that we might like to buy the freehold from him—and we did. We have not had any problems at any point. Together, we are a good association, and we had our most recent meeting on Friday. However, that is not the experience of all others.

I come now to one of the latest manifestations of things going wrong. Over the past 20 years, some house builders have returned to selling houses on leasehold terms. I have it by communication from one house builder that the price it can get for selling a house leasehold is within 1% of selling it freehold. What is the reason for selling it leasehold? Some argue that the tradition in the north-west is different—it should not

be—and some say that if someone can get away with something, others will copy. There are now examples in north London of builders producing roughly the same kind of home on either side of the street, with some freehold and some leasehold.

If a leasehold contains a provision that doubles the ground rent every 10 years, the example that I provided earlier on applies. I might have got the maths wrong because I was doing this late at night, but it is wrong to argue that an ordinary home that started at £250,000 needs to be worth £80 million in 60 years' time to justify a ground rent that doubles every 10 years—by the rule of 72, we know that that means that it is going up by over 7% a year. I ask the corporate responsibility experts who occasionally go to the annual general meetings of quoted companies to start raising that with the house builders. I would also like the Home Builders Federation to talk about how the practice is justifiable. Its representatives might say that it is just a commercial deal by some of its members and nothing to do with them, but I say that it is to do with them.

I see that the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) is in the Chamber. The people who established and ran Cadbury were the sort of people who did not need Members of Parliament to remind them of how to behave; they knew in their bones, their blood and their heart that people should be treated properly.

I own some shares in Persimmon and some in Taylor Wimpey, and I might buy some shares in other builders. If necessary, I shall go to their AGMs, giving notice in advance, to ask what they will do to unwind the problems that they created in the past. Taylor Wimpey says that it was unaware of what was going on before it came together, because it is an amalgamation of many businesses, but it knows now. The problem comes with putting things right.

If a building firm—I am not focusing on Taylor Wimpey, because I think it has realised that there are issues to investigate—sells the freeholds, it prevents itself from being able to treat its leaseholders properly.

Many leaseholders buy a flat through solicitors who work for the seller, and those solicitors will probably have attendance notes and perhaps some letters that point out the provisions of the ground rent. That may or may not be the case. What I doubt—I asked one solicitor, but have not yet received the evidence—is whether the attendance note and the letters point out that if someone were to buy their freehold in the first three years, they might be able to get it very cheaply, perhaps at a multiple of 10 times the ground rent, but that if they wait and the first freeholder sells to another, the new freeholder may say, “Actually, because interest rates have gone down, the value of the ground rent has gone up, and you have to buy it at the new multiple of the value of the ground rent.” Why do the Government not just agree a straightforward graph to show what the purchase price for a freehold ought to be at various stages?

I interrupt myself now to say that I was going speak for a long section on hedonic regression and *Sloane Stanley Estate v. Mundy*. As part of that case, Wellcome Trust interests managed to persuade an upper property tribunal of two people to make a change in the valuation of short leases, which probably lifted the apparent cost of extending leases by about 40%.

It is good for the Wellcome Trust to get good publicity for saying that it will give £1 billion to good causes—mostly medical research—this year. I do not mind its chief investment person being paid £3 million if they have lifted the capital value of the assets by 18% in the last year.

If £1 billion of those assets involves the estate that was bought from the Henry Smith Charity, which was established to help children and others with its income, and if the Wellcome Trust bought that estate because it managed to persuade people, without a public interest representative present, that the cost of enfranchisement or extension should go up so enormously, something is seriously wrong. It will take people in government and their advisers to work out what that is.

If there is an appeal against that Mundy case, I hope that the Government will associate themselves with it and try to make sure that, on the hedonic regression, the calculations go back to before the Leasehold Reform, Housing and Urban Development Act 1993, because after that Act the values were affected by what it said. I think that James Wyatt and Parthenia Valuation are more likely to be right. I hope that the appeal succeeds, and that the Government will make sure that if it does not, the decision in the Mundy case will be reversed by statute.

I return to the issue of smaller leaseholders. If I were a small leaseholder applying either for an extension or to buy my freehold, I would find that the freeholder's costs has could be put back on to the leaseholders, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse. But what about the costs to me? I have to go to surveyors and lawyers. I am new to this and I am dealing with freeholders who do this multiple times a week or a year. They are very experienced and they are often very rich.

Perhaps the Government could bring in simple graphs to cover most cases where people could ask, “Where do I stand on the graph? What is the length of the lease? What are the terms?” The Government could say, “By the way, there is going to be a cap on ground rents, so you can't go monetising those and making the leaseholder buy them out on some prospective multiple just because the bank reference rate is very low and the apparent cost of buying them out becomes very high.”

Jim Fitzpatrick: I apologise for interrupting as the hon. Gentleman is making a good point. When the dispute resolution procedure was originally designed, was it not supposed to create a relatively informal arrangement whereby residents could go to a tribunal to argue their case? That has been completely distorted by some of these unscrupulous freeholder landlords bringing in high-powered barristers and then charging their fees to the residents, whether they win or lose.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree completely. Moreover, that reminds me that the Government have had a review of LEASE—the leasehold advisory service—and I fear that the decision for it to try to make itself sustaining within the next four years is wrong. LEASE is chaired by Roger Southam, and he and his wife know quite a bit about leasehold property. His predecessor was Deep Sagar, during whose time LEASE would hold fundraising conferences where it would take the surplus, and the people who paid to come would listen to experts explaining how they could gain extra income from leaseholders.

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

For example, someone might have stood up there and said, “Do you know, the freeholder gets the managing agent to arrange the insurance, it is paid for by the leaseholders and the commission can stick with the freeholder end?” My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colville) may address the issue of insurance later. So if the commission happened to be 40% or 50%, a leaseholder would be paying twice as much as they should.

What happens when the leaseholders want to get together? Again, that will be a point of law for the Government to consider. I do not think that anyone expects the Minister to be able to answer all the points raised today, but we will want to see early in the new year a proposed programme of action, which can then develop into reducing the abuse and improving the happiness.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) for all their work on this incredibly important subject. Given all the complexity that the hon. Gentleman is describing, and the scope for manipulation and exploitation, is anything resembling the current pattern of leasehold tenure actually just not fit for purpose? Do we not need to move to a system that has either freehold vested in resident-controlled management companies, or a form of commonhold that works properly?

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that.

We are talking about a number of issues that do not always come together. The first is that commonhold was recommended by the Law Commission 20 or 30 years ago, and Parliament and government thought they have made legal provision for it to come in, but it does not work. We understand that by 2009, within seven years of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002, officials in the Ministry of Justice and perhaps Ministers, too, knew it was not working. Some who are not very knowledgeable say that it cannot work. Others who have been outside the country know that no other country—no other significant country, as far as I know—has kept the system that we developed 100 or 200 years ago.

Besides the flat in Worthing, I have a home around the corner from here. It was built in about the 1720s and it had a 99-year lease, on the basis that in that time it would either fall down or burn down; people were not expecting houses to go on lasting forever. I pay tribute to George Thomas, now Lord Tonybandy, who, in his firebrand days, campaigned to get leasehold reform and rent Acts in place so that the people in south Wales could be saved from bad landlords and freeholders.

I have in my hand the record of the debate on 8 March 1991, when Dudley Fishburn, then the MP for Kensington, paid tribute to his predecessor, Brandon Rhys Williams, who was one of the early people to start campaigning on leasehold. In a remarkable contribution, Terry Lewis, the then MP for Worsley, made reference to a number of the abuses that existed then. This was a non-party issue then, as it is now. Nearly all the scandals that Dudley Fishburn was talking about apply now, especially to the shorter-term leases.

Commonhold works, perhaps under different titles, in parts of Australia, particularly in New South Wales, with strata holdings. People from there have come before our all-party group and our forums to talk about this. The problems we have are not found in Canada, New Zealand or South Africa, or in France and Germany. Let us consider what happens when we give people interest in the maintenance of their flats. At the moment, if someone has a leasehold and improves their property, the value goes eventually to the freeholder. If they can get rid of the freeholder, not only is the abuse stopped, but people are encouraged to invest in things that matter to them. I strongly recommend that 1991 debate to hon. Members, and I was going to go through it at greater length.

What I will do is talk about some of the abuses. Benjamin Mire, a well-known surveyor and leasehold property manager, was going to be removed by the Ministry of Justice as a person not fit for judicial office, but by the time the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office had concluded its investigations, he had retired or resigned days before he would have been dismissed. Had he not done this, the full report would have come out into the open, but as he jumped before he was pushed it did not. He is not fit for judicial office and he is not fit to go on being a registered member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. The problem is that his clever lawyers, and perhaps a display of not enormous competence by RICS, have left the details of the charges against him by RICS not fully out in the open. There were 35 cases where he or his company, Trust Property Management, were appearing at the property tribunal. There were failings by almost everyone involved.

The problem with the tribunal is that it does not have the power to fine for repeat offences. If it did, Mr Benjamin Mire would have been fined significantly. Everyone is entitled to a fair hearing, but let me give an example of a finding in one case where the trust acted as a property manager. It was stated:

“The landlords have had scant regard to the law and the RICS Management Code in respect of the costs of the proposed interior decorations.”

How can a self-regulation system that does not consider such court findings as warranting even an admonition retain the confidence of the general public? The Government have argued for years that there is no need for statutory regulation, but can anyone name a group that supports that position? Even the main managing agents trade body, the Association of Residential Managing Agents—ARMA—has been asking the Government to regulate the sector.

Leasehold is the only part of the housing market where an unregulated person can hold huge amounts of leaseholder funds and yet has no obligation to act in the leaseholder’s interests. Let me remind the House of something: when the freeholder appoints a managing agent, who does the managing agent work for? It is the freeholder.

I ask Ministers please to establish a legal position so that the leaseholder has an interest in everything that happens either with their money or in the block where they own the lease.

In the CBRE report—the most recent I have seen is from 2013—there are references to “soft income”. We still have too many examples of landlords, sometimes

those who even own their own agents, skimming on huge insurance commissions. That was reported by the Financial Conduct Authority as recently as two years ago, when it said—this backs up what I said earlier—that it was not uncommon to charge commissions of more than 40%. The worst situations are those in which the landlords' own managing agents provide contracts through companies they own, which can result in poor services and high costs. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport might remind the House later of whether there was such a link between the freeholder and the managing agent in Plymouth.

I cannot distinguish between one Tchenguiz brother and the other, or between them and the Tchenguiz trusts, so I will talk about Tchenguiz interests and those who know can pick up on whether they are involved or affected. There are two points on which I criticise them. One was when they controlled Peverel, property managing agents who owned a business called Cirrus—as in the cloud. When some of the company's large number of freehold blocks were said to have needed the call system replaced, there was a competition between the very big firm, Cirrus, and two little minnows. So, if we think that 99.9% was Cirrus and 0.1% was those two little minnows, there was collusive tendering. Sadly, the economic crime unit of the police, the Financial Conduct Authority and the Serious Fraud Office did not manage to get together at the same time to work out how to deal with this rip-off of millions of pounds from leaseholders.

When Peverel/Cirrus discovered that the game was up, they declared that they had been involved in collusive cartel bidding. We know from the Virgin-BA case that the first to declare that they have been involved in a cartel is penalty free. The fact is that the size of Cirrus compared with the size of the minnows made that an absurd judgment. If the police, the fraud office and the FCA had been together, they would have stopped it, but they did not, so those involved got off scot-free.

The other Tchenguiz interest was in Charter Quay in Richmond upon Thames—

James Berry: Kingston.

Sir Peter Bottomley: In Kingston. The numbers might be wrong, but they are illustrative. Imagine the Tchenguiz interest buying the freehold of Charter Quay for £750,000 and then, in the same year, writing the value up to £2 million, £3 million or £4 million, before borrowing, say, £2 million against it. When the leaseholders eventually get together, they discover on the accounts that the Tchenguiz interest—or someone—has been running an office phone through the lift phone in the block of flats to get a good deal from the telephone providers.

The leaseholders then get control of management and apply for the freehold, only for the freehold block to be estimated not at £750,000, and not £2 million, £3 million or £4 million, but at just under £1 million. It came down to about a third of the valuation that the new owners had put on it. In that case, I think, there was a settlement before the thing was finally determined by the court, but the figures are there.

The freehold went from £750,000 to £900,000, having gone to £2 million, £3 million or £4 million in between. I ask the professional regulators for the bankers involved in the loan, the surveyors who went along with the

valuation and the accountants who did the accounts to ask how they explain this. I think that there was professional incompetence or collusion, and that is not what professionals are supposed to do. I hope that it is not happening again now.

James Berry: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for mentioning Charter Quay in my constituency, as well as the fantastic campaigning work done by the residents association to overturn a situation caused by the skulduggery of the Tchenguiz operation. I should point out that I have a property that I rent out—not in Charter Quay or anywhere in the constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that a lot of people living in leasehold properties are older people who have downsized and can ill afford the additional and inflated costs and expenses associated with such properties?

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

If a leaseholder wants to exercise their rights under the law or to stop being abused because someone is trying to assert rights that they do not have, they have to know 22 Acts of Parliament, regulations and codes. Tribunals, whether in property or employment, ought not to allow some clever QC to come along and say that there is one thing that they have not been aware of that means that the rest of the case falls away; they should ask whether most of the case has been established, in which case the precise details of law—so long as what the tribunal decides is not unlawful—should carry through. The presumption should be that if there is trickery—legal or economic—or unfair pressure, the small person's voice should come out on top.

Even during the publicity over the past two or three days, people who have spoken up about the abuse they have experienced because of the ground rent scandal have received lawyer's letters on behalf of other lawyers saying, "You shouldn't be saying that." What is this place supposed to be like if we cannot hear our constituents say what their experiences are? I asked those lawyers to respond to me by 10.30 today, so perhaps the email has come in while I have been speaking, but I think that people ought to start asking whether these are sensible letters to be sending. We should be saying that part of being a lawyer is trying to make sure that everyone has their voice heard properly.

Lord Faulks said on behalf of the coalition Government in 2014 that he did not plan to review the commonhold/leasehold format. I think he should—not him, it is not personal, but the Government certainly should. It ought to be possible with the help of good lawyers. Guy Fetherstonhaugh QC, who presented a paper that is in the notes of the all-party group, has given good advice on how that could happen. I give strong commendation to Philip Rainey QC, who addressed our meeting last week and gave various proposals for what could work and could do so quite fast. That does not solve all problems easily, but it makes most difficult problems become easier and makes easy ones go away.

It is tempting to go on for rather longer than the House would wish, but I have one recommendation. Going back to LEASE, the advisory service, I do not think that it has ever had a leasehold representative as a member of its board. If we are to have six members on the board, I would have at least two with leaseholder

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

interests—one who is a leaseholder and one who is part of the campaigning groups and charities that try to help to represent leaseholders. I would certainly ask those who appoint the chairman of LEASE to consult broadly—not just with people like me—about the experience, ability, talents and attitude we want the chairman to have to give guidance to Anthony Essien, the chief executive, against whom I make no critical comment as he has always been responsive, helpful and straight. If the appointment of a new chairman is coming up, I ask the Government to consult as there is some expertise around and in every other field I have known people get consulted if there is a serious basis for that.

I turn briefly now, if I may, to park homes. In my constituency and the constituencies beside it, Bognor Regis and Littlehampton and Arundel and South Downs, some park homes have recently been developed in a way I would regard as a shocking example of misused legal knowledge. The person involved takes a park home, says that it is a holiday home, and that it is not, and tries to fit it between the two, charging enormously high rents. I ought perhaps to apply for an Adjournment debate on the case I have. The Minister should invite Members to send in constituency cases of park home problems and people using the law in ways that are not justified. I encourage the experts in Arun District Council, who have been doing the best they can, to send in their cases to the Minister, because I think action could quite easily be taken there.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am about to take the chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on park homes, so my hon. Friend's comments immediately interest me. The problem is not just the rent that unscrupulous people charge. It is usually elderly people who live in park homes and they are charged a fortune for utilities. They pay double the rate for electricity, water, sewerage and so on.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. If he will sign me up as a member, I would be happy to join the group. I will ask Arun to send the information to him.

I had not realised how much work I had been drawn into on this topic. I looked at the files this morning and they are enormous, most of the material generated by people more expert than I am. I came into it because some elderly, frail, poor leaseholders were being abused. Because that intervention worked, I was more drawn in. I would prefer to have spoken in the later debate about other cases of injustice that affect individuals, but the leasehold/commonhold area is so big and, as we explained to the Backbench Business Committee last week when it kindly heard the application by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse, there are issues of structure of government.

The motion suggests that leasehold and commonhold issues have been considered. They have not been properly considered as a whole since 1991 and they need a great deal more attention. I have been involved in a number of campaigns in my parliamentary life. Not one has brought in so many cases from other people's constituencies, so this debate will help to raise awareness among other Members of Parliament. I thank the House for listening to me at greater length than I would normally speak.

Given that there are 5 million to 6 million leaseholders in the country, far more than public estimates, the Office for National Statistics should be able to work out the trends and numbers as national statistics and clarify the situation so that we can see what good is being done and what more good needs to be done, and so that we can also find a way of making the property tribunals work at the lowest possible cost with the smallest number of cases.

I strongly recommend to my hon. Friend the Minister discussing whether he can get graphs which show what the cost of extending or purchasing freeholds should be, which will eliminate a lot of the work for the good professionals and abolish all the opportunities for the bad professionals, the bad freeholders and the crooked managing agents to go on treading over poor people who ought to have the chance to live in their homes at peace.

2.12 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What we are discussing today is nothing short of a national scandal. It is the payment protection insurance of the house building industry. Every now and again a sharp practice comes to light which is totally unconscionable and of which every reasonable person would say, "We cannot allow this to continue. Parliament must act." This is one such occasion.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing this important debate and on their excellent contributions today. They should also be commended for their work on the all-party parliamentary group and for shining a light on a situation that is a national disgrace. As we have heard, there is a huge range of issues underneath the misleadingly simple title "leasehold", and I hope that today's debate will bring about progress in resolving some of the huge injustices that I, too, propose to speak about. I echo the tribute paid to the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership for the excellent professional assistance that it has provided to us and to the many homeowners affected by the issues discussed today.

Thousands of people around the country who bought new homes in good faith are the victims of what can only be described as a racket by some of the country's best-known developers, who between them have received millions of pounds from taxpayers to provide affordable homes and have also been the recipients of generous subsidies as a result of policies such as the Help to Buy scheme. As we know, the practice that has developed is to sell new homes on a long-term lease, with a misleadingly low ground rent and buy-out price. This practice has become common in my constituency over the past few years and, contrary to what is asserted by some developers, it is not a tradition in my constituency. It now seems to be part of the business model of a great many developers. It is a clever way of selling more units, by dropping the asking price a little to reflect the fact the property is leasehold, but failing to make it clear that in the long run the homeowner will pay far, far more than they would have done if the property had been freehold.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when ground rent or other charges double, it would be usual to expect double the service? As this is not the case, it goes against natural justice.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that his constituency is affected by the issue. I have yet to see any evidence that higher ground rents result in any kind of service, particularly for the properties that I am talking about. Obviously, leasehold flats are a slightly different matter. I remember when it was common, if there was a leasehold, for the rent to be described as a peppercorn rent. The implication was that that was nothing other than a symbolic exchange.

Sir Peter Bottomley: A service charge or maintenance charge is one thing; the ground produces nothing. I meant to pay tribute to Bob Bessell of Retirement Security who, when asked at the all-party meeting what the ground rent was for, said that it does not produce anything of value so he goes for only a peppercorn. It seems to me that if he can say that openly, others should as well.

Justin Madders: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is spot-on. The notional figures that we are used to seeing as ground or peppercorn rents ought to come back. We have seen a drip-feed of figures coming in, relatively modest to start with—more than a peppercorn, but still modest—and the ratcheting up of those figures in some leases is my main concern today.

When people buy their home, they like to know who they are buying it from, but leaseholds are often sold on to third parties who can then vary the agreed terms of the leasehold, at which point—this is a scandal—developers claim that it is no longer anything to do with them. This is an issue affecting my constituency. I have been contacted by a number of constituents affected by it. One, Beverley O'Malley, bought a Taylor Wimpey property. That company provided her with a letter at the point of sale stating that she would have first refusal to buy the leasehold at 15 times the ground rent, plus £199 for legal costs. That lease has been sold on without any option to purchase at this time, and she has now been informed that the letter provided by Taylor Wimpey is not worth the paper it is written on.

Another constituent of mine bought her property from Bellway in 2010 with a lease of 150 years and a ground rent of £125 per annum. In July 2015 a quote of £3,750 to purchase the freehold was provided, which equated to 30 times the ground rent. However, in March 2016, when attempting to purchase the freehold, my constituent was informed that the lease had been sold to a company called Adriatic, with Homeground acting as the management company, although quite what it is managing remains to be seen. Following this transfer, my constituent received a new quote to purchase the freehold at £12,750. That is more than 100 times the ground rent. No explanation was provided as to why the price had gone up so much, but counter-offers for purchasing the freehold were made by my constituent's solicitors, which resulted in a revised quote of £6,750.

The quadrupling of the buy-out price for the ground rent, then the halving of it after negotiations started, as well as information given to me that the prices quoted can vary significantly for almost identical properties, suggests that the buy-out costs are calculated on nothing more than what the investors think they can get away with. The same constituent recently obtained planning permission to extend her home, but was told that she needed to obtain consent from Homeground in order to

proceed, for which she was charged a fee of £333. However, following payment of that amount, an additional £2,440 was requested for the same purpose. This amounts to nothing less than racketeering and it should be stamped out.

Possibly the most alarming case that I have heard is that of my constituent Lindsay Lloyd, who bought a Taylor Wimpey property in 2009 on a long-term lease. She was reassured that such leases were common practice and that she would be able to purchase the freehold in future for £2,600. She received that advice from solicitors who were recommended to her by Taylor Wimpey, and she felt under some pressure to appoint them. She was advised that the lease did not impose an unduly onerous or prejudicial burden.

I wonder whether whoever was advising Ms Lloyd had even read the lease. I have, and it states that the ground rent will double every 10 years, so next year, for example, it will rise from £175 to £350 a year, which is a big increase. I can accept that £350 a year for ground rent does not sound too bad, but in 50 years' time it will be over £11,000, in 100 years' time it will be over £350,000, and in 200 years' time—I hope the houses last that long—it will be a staggering £367 million a year. Nobody expects to be around in 200 years' time, but anyone who wants to buy the house will think twice once they realise that they would be agreeing to a contract that commits them to an annual payment of millions of pounds. What that means in practice, of course, is that nobody would purchase the property, so where does that leave existing owners? I really want to hear about that from the Minister today.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The solicitor's advice is a critical part of this. If the solicitor does not tell the first purchaser that this is a penal clause, what advice would they give to a prospective buyer six years later, who would be facing a doubling of the ground rent in four years' time? It seems to me that the advice ought to be the same, but I bet it would not be.

Justin Madders: As a former practising solicitor—not in this area, I hasten to add—I think it is fair to say that some solicitors are now probably more alive to the traps that can be found in leases. I have looked at my constituent's lease, and to say that it is not set out very clearly would be an understatement, but it still should have been picked up on.

Bob Stewart: Following what my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has just said, surely it is the responsibility of a solicitor helping someone to buy a house to point these things out, because they are professionally qualified and they should know very well what is happening. I cannot understand why that does not happen.

Justin Madders: I think that individual solicitors have to answer for what they have done. From my knowledge of the profession, I think that over the years we have seen a much more streamlined process for advising people on their purchases and sales and lots of standard documentation, which I think is why some of these things have been allowed to happen. I suppose the real question is this: why would a developer want to put such an onerous clause in a sales document, knowing

[Justin Madders]

that if word of it got out people would think very carefully about whether they wanted to buy the property? As we know, they are selling these leases on to third parties, so actually there is no benefit to them. That is the heart of it. I do not think that the legal profession comes out of this with any great plaudits, but clearly the fault for having the clauses in the first place lies with the developers, and I have yet to hear any reasonable explanation for why they are there in the first place.

My constituents feel that they have been duped by Taylor Wimpey. The reservation form that they signed stated that the ground rent was £175 a year, and there was no mention of it doubling every 10 years. I understand that Taylor Wimpey has now decided not to sell any new properties on a leasehold basis, which is good news—

Sir Peter Bottomley: Any new houses.

Justin Madders: Yes, any new houses. But that does not help my constituents, who believe that they have been comprehensively stitched up. That is why this place has to take action.

At the moment there is no way out of this for my constituent. She recently inquired about purchasing the lease and discovered that it has been sold to a company called E&J Estates, which is now quoting her a price of £32,000 to purchase it. No wonder it quoted a price over 10 times what she had originally been offered, given what it could rake in over the years. However, having already made significant commitments to purchase the property in the first place, my constituent was simply unable to stump up such a significant amount.

As disappointing as the response from E&J Estates was, it was a struggle even to get a response from it at all. It initially refused to speak to my constituent about her circumstances, stating that it had a “long-term interest in the property.” Well, so does she: it is her home. And it is a home that has been saddled with an obligation so onerous, so outrageous, that nobody with an ounce of decency in their body would not say that this place had better do something about it.

It is not enough to say that leasehold valuation tribunals are there to resolve these issues, because these companies are going out of their way to obstruct and delay the process. I do not know whether anybody here has taken the time to read one of the tribunals’ decisions, but I suspect that very few people would feel comfortable going into one of them without a lawyer, and probably also a surveyor. Certainly the freeholders seem to do that, and from what I have seen they also put the cost of their representation back on to the homeowners as well, rubbing salt into an already very expensive wound.

Although I have named Bellway and Taylor Wimpey, the practice of selling new builds on a leasehold basis appears to be commonplace across the majority of new build estates in my constituency. I should make it clear that the examples I have given of how my constituents are adversely affected do not apply to every developer selling leasehold properties, although every developer I have contacted has indicated that they intend to sell on their interest in the leasehold at some point. That really is where things go wrong, because once they sell them

on, the new owners have no interest in anything other than extracting the maximum amount of profit from their asset.

Of course I accept that some properties by their nature lend themselves to being leasehold, but that does not apply to the vast majority of the properties being built in my constituency, which are detached or semi-detached family homes. There really is no reason for those properties to be sold as leasehold. It is a cynical business decision, which will in the long run damage the reputation of those involved.

It is also disappointing that the newest development in my constituency, currently being constructed by Redrow Homes, is also being sold on a leasehold basis. Redrow tells me that this fact is made known to purchasers before they reserve their property, although I note that on its website the promotion of that particular development makes no mention of it. What is particularly disappointing is that Redrow, despite my asking twice why it feels the need to sell large detached family homes on a leasehold basis, offers no justification whatsoever.

It is quite clear that this situation needs to be addressed. I have several questions for the Minister. My first is very simple: are the Government happy with this state of affairs? If not, will he set out today, or in the very near future, exactly what he will do to stop these scandalous practices? Does he agree that developers should be prohibited from recommending a particular solicitor to purchasers because of the clear potential for a conflict of interest and the clear failure, as we have seen here, to provide the best advice?

Will the Government consider legislating to prevent ground rents being doubled every 10 years? Will they intervene to give some hope to those now saddled with the eye-watering commitments that nobody—not the developers, not the lawyers and not the Government—warned them about? Will the Minister consider withdrawing and recouping taxpayer subsidies to any development found to be ripping off householders in this way? Will the Government ensure that there is greater transparency at every stage of the process, with purchasers receiving clear information about the arrangements they are entering into?

Finally, I would like to pass on the following message to anyone listening today. If you are looking to buy a new home built by Taylor Wimpey, Bellway or any other developer, look very carefully at the terms that are offered and ensure that you receive independent legal advice. My message to the developers themselves is to act transparently and offer leasehold only where it is strictly necessary.

2.28 pm

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): My interest in this important topic stems from two long-running cases in my constituency. They relate to two right-to-manage properties housing mainly elderly and retired residents: Elim Court and Regent Court. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who is also interested in the matter, has given me an enormous amount of advice, for which I am grateful. I also want to thank Rebecca Cattermole and Martin Boyd for all their help in preparing me for today’s debate; I have no doubt they will mark me out of 10 when I have concluded.

I should declare an interest. I still have an interest in a company I set up, which gives property developers advice on how to manage public consultation. I also own a leasehold in my constituency, and I am delighted to say that the other leaseholders and I own the management company. I think we manage the whole thing very well indeed.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West on securing this incredibly important debate. I also thank them for their stewardship of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform.

The Elim Court case has attracted national attention to right-to-manage law. Elim Court's RTM company, which was established for this purpose, made an application to acquire the right to manage a block of flats at Elim Terrace in Plymouth under part 2 of the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002. The Act created a no-fault right to manage, under which, on satisfaction of some preconditions, a qualifying majority of tenants of a building containing leasehold flats can establish an RTM company to take over management of the building from their landlord. The no-fault part of the Act meant they did not have to show fault in the way the building was managed.

Elim's landlord declined to participate in the RTM process and opposed it through the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal—now more commonly known as the first-tier tribunal—which accepted his arguments on a technicality. On appeal, the decision was upheld, and the case thrown out. My constituents in Elim Court have been battling for years for the right to manage their property. The legal system that was put in place in 2002, while welcome, is in desperate need of vast improvement.

This really is the tip of the iceberg. Since its inception in 2002, the right to manage has proved popular with leaseholders who want to take control of badly managed blocks. However, it is an over-complicated scheme, riven with pitfalls and technicalities that are difficult to overcome without sound legal advice. I have been told that gaping holes have emerged in the 2002 legislation that need to be addressed urgently due to the increase in RTM applications and to landlords refusing to release their tight grasp on highly lucrative management arrangements, while finding every possible loophole to thwart applications by leaseholders and residents. That is an abhorrent way to treat anyone, let alone the retired and the elderly.

A further issue that Elim Court and Regent Court have encountered is the high costs involved in tribunals and appeals, which have, indeed, become something of a cash cow for lawyers. The fact that RTM is so plagued by loopholes means that the no-fault basis on which leaseholders can obtain the right to manage is proving costly. Currently, Elim Court is awaiting a hearing at the Court of Appeal—as I explained earlier, the process has been highly expensive. If the residents were to walk away now, they would be set to lose between £25,000 and £30,000—a very large amount.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Through my hon. Friend, may I suggest that the Law Officers look to see whether they can take over the case and carry it forward at public expense? If this is a question of justice and law, it is about time Justice Ministers got involved.

Oliver Colvile: I thoroughly agree, and I thank my hon. Friend for giving such clear advice, as he generally does.

I would now like to go into further detail about the Regent Court case. In 2012, during severe storms in Plymouth, the roof blew off the building. No insurance claim was paid, leaving the leaseholder with a staggering £114,000 bill. The insurance company, AXA, claimed that the condition of the roof previously would have voided the policy, prompting the landlord to seek to recover £140,000 from the leaseholders—more than the bill for the roof repairs.

After much investigation, the ombudsman has only just reached its wholly unsatisfactory decision, declining to investigate whether there was a fault in the claims-handling process, because the insurance company had asked it not to. It remains unclear whether the landlord withdrew the claim or it was withdrawn because it was disputed. What I have learned recently is that the loss adjuster's report may have missed key information that would have meant that the claim should have been paid out to the leaseholders.

The case illustrates that leaseholders have few rights if the insurance company and the freeholder do not want a matter investigated. Again, elderly residents are being treated in this way. Regent Court is a particularly shocking case, as the landlord has not had an interest in managing the building since the second half of 2013, when the leaseholders took control via their RTM company.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The House is following this case keenly. Is my hon. Friend telling the House that the freeholder had the responsibility to make sure the roof was maintained, but did not, and that he had the responsibility to deal with the insurance, but it was apparently not valid or he was not going to claim on it? The leaseholder therefore failed doubly—in terms of the cost of the roof and the cost of the insurance.

Oliver Colvile: That is exactly the position, and it certainly needs to be looked at.

The ombudsman's decision highlights the fact that millions of leaseholders face the same position across the country. Some landlords also happen to own an insurance broker, as we heard earlier, creating loopholes and conflicts of interest across the board. The Financial Conduct Authority is fully aware that leasehold building insurance is a problem and has reported that high commissions—up to 40%—have been paid on insurance. In 2014, the Competition and Markets Authority investigated leasehold property management, and one of its specific recommendations was that the FCA should look into the matter.

I would like to see a more flexible, more transparent and less complicated system for RTM, insurance issues and service charges for leasehold properties. The current system has been picked apart by lawyers, and the original Act is not fit for purpose. I urge the Government to relook at leasehold and commonhold reform and to sit up and realise that possibly millions of people across the country face very real blockades, when all they want to do is manage their own property—a right this Parliament gave them almost 15 years ago.

[*Oliver Colvile*]

To conclude, it seems almost unfathomable that we expect pensioners to cope with some of our most complex legislation. If we in Parliament do not understand the process, and officials do not understand the process, why on earth should we expect these elderly consumers to? It may be too late for the residents of Elim Court and Regent Court, although I am keen to pursue those issues, but we owe it to future leaseholders to ensure that they are not swindled out of hundreds of thousands of pounds by greedy landlords and cowboy insurance companies.

2.39 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Before I start, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like, on behalf of the Opposition Front Bench, to wish you, your staff and all the staff of the House all the very best for Christmas and a very happy new year.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) on securing this important debate, and thank them for their work with the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold reform. I thank the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership and the House of Commons Library for the work they have done in supporting me and other Members in preparing for this debate.

The majority of people in this country aspire to own their own home, and for those lucky enough already to own a home or to be able to buy, a leasehold property often suits their needs better than a freehold house. Long leaseholders are in a landlord-tenant relationship with the freeholder. The rights and obligations of the two parties are governed by the terms of the lease agreement, which is supplemented by statutory provision. When it works, leasehold is fine—the hon. Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) and for Worthing West spoke of their personal experiences—because there are transparent charges, well-itemised and properly justified service charges, appropriate resale values, and so on.

Homeowners want and deserve security and safety, but this debate shows that for far too many, their dreams of home ownership have turned into a nightmare. When one has worked hard to save up to buy a home, and budgeted to pay for servicing any loan and other costs that one reasonably expects, one should expect security and then to be able to plan for one's future.

Probably all MPs represent leaseholders of one category or another. As we have heard, many MPs have examples from their casework of issues that have been brought to this debate. Too often,

“leasehold property sells buyers short at every step.”

Those are not my words; they were in an excellent article in a paper I do not usually read—the *Daily Mail*—in September 2015. Leaseholders are finding problems they had not expected when they bought their home. I think that “duped” was the word used by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). These are some of the examples that we have heard about: managing agents imposing arbitrary and multiple charges; lack of transparency of service charges that are way overpriced; estate owners such as

those mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse having no right to a tribunal on charges; unexplained and unforeseen increases year on year—sadly, in my experience in Brentford, housing associations are sometimes among the worst culprits; and the cost of extending leases when they drop below the 70-year, or even 60-year, period. I was pleased to learn a bit more about hedonic regression from the hon. Member for Worthing West; I thank him for that.

We have heard about exorbitant charges for capital works on common parts, with little advice on how to pay. Too often, sadly, local authority landlords are some of the worst culprits in this regard.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise to the House for being unable to be here for the start of the debate. May I offer my hon. Friend another example that demonstrates why the leasehold system needs reform? The residents of Platinum House, owned by Luke and Brian Comer, in my constituency have sought to secure the right to manage, yet the owners have used a whole series of tricks to delay the exercise of that right. Does she think that is a further example of the need for reform?

Ruth Cadbury: I thank my hon. Friend for that excellent additional example where the right to manage has been proved not to be as simple and straightforward as it should be. Too many people who want to manage their property collectively with their neighbours are finding it too difficult and costly with too many hurdles.

We have seen many complicated hurdles put in the way of leaseholders exercising their right to manage or the right to enfranchise. Dispute resolution procedures are complicated and costly. Lessees are having to pay the landlord's legal costs. Resale charges are up to 20%, which then suppresses resale values. I ought to declare an interest in that this happens particularly in the retirement sector, and my mother has just bought a flat in a retirement community. There are the questionable tie-ups between freeholders and managing agents, and the solicitors they recommend, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston. There is the scandal of lease forfeiture, again brought to the debate by the hon. Member for Worthing West. New homes on their own plots are being sold by volume housebuilders on 999-year leases when they could be freeholdings. Despite advice given to many first-time buyers in these instances, I must say that no, 999-year leases and freeholds are not one and the same thing.

Sir Peter Bottomley: Another illustration of this issue comes from a CBRE report of 2013 saying that some people who are developing property with leaseholds are now selling the freehold in advance so that they escape the responsibility of offering it to the leaseholders after two years.

Ruth Cadbury: That is yet another example of poor practice—and that would be a generous term.

We have heard about the difficulties of people who buy park homes. They often do that because they cannot afford bricks and mortar, and park homes look, on the surface, to be an affordable option. We have heard about the charges on owner-occupiers for the “privilege” of modifying their own home, even if they

have planning permission. We have heard about buyers who want to purchase the freehold finding it incredibly difficult to do so; some big-name volume housebuilders such as Taylor Wimpey and Bellway have been mentioned. The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) raised that matter.

Finally, and perhaps most shocking of all, there is the scandal of what I call the ground rent scam whereby a new asset class has been created as ground rents rise and rise, and properties are being treated as a marketable commodity over the heads of the owner-occupiers. Several hon. Members have mentioned this shocking situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston described this national scandal as the PPI of the housebuilding industry.

I am looking forward to the Minister's response. Before he thinks of saying that the examples brought here today from Members across the House are exceptions that prove the rule, I want to say that they are all too common. The APPG is a new group that has a large membership. A recent survey by LEASE, the Government's agent, showed that 53% of leaseholders regret their purchase. If there are 4 million leaseholders in this country, and that is probably an underestimate, then 53% of 4 million represents an awful lot of people. Legislation has been changed to benefit far fewer than 2 million people.

Before the Minister thinks of talking about weighing up the relevant benefits to different parties as an excuse to delay radical change and review, I have to ask him whether it is right that people can buy and sell freehold interests and ground rents as a lucrative tradeable asset. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership suggests that developers alone are now earning an additional £300 million to £500 million a year from ground rent reversionary sales of their head leases and freeholds—and that does not include the buyers and sellers of ground rent funds, such as Ground Rents Income Fund plc, whose website I visited earlier today. This asset class is one of the highest-performing investments for canny investors. I think that following this debate we know why.

Yet hard-working people—those who are doing the right thing by investing their hard-earned cash into buying a home—are being ripped off left, right and centre. The Government must act urgently to stop this gross exploitation of hard-working homeowners who are finding that they cannot sell their homes. In fact, the Government must do more than that. The Labour Government introduced commonhold in the Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Act 2002. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who is here, was a key player in that. Commonhold works in the rest of the world—for example, in Ireland and in most of our ex-colonies—and it could work in the UK. Labour introduced the Act, but we accept that it is unfinished business. The Government should review it, consider amending it, and implement the necessary changes.

We call on the Government immediately to stop the scandal of exploding ground rents, which is the biggest legitimate scam in Britain. They should review how commonhold works and make it work, and also end leasehold tenure. We strongly argue that we need to update, consolidate and simplify all the legislation, not just add another Bill and yet more complexity. The Government should consider revising the law on replacing

leasehold forfeiture, as the Law Commission has recommended. We ask the Government to consider proper regulation of managing agents and to simplify the right to manage, so that residents are able jointly to take control of the block in which they live.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We need to make it much easier for any individual leaseholder to have access to the contact details of every other leaseholder, not just tenants, so that they can apply for their rights. At the moment, for all sorts of bad reasons, they are blocked from being able to do that. I hope that the Government hear what the hon. Lady is saying and that they will work out practical ways to make things easy.

Ruth Cadbury: The Government need to look at that detailed and critical issue. We look forward to not just an acknowledgement of the issues, but a solid commitment from the Minister to look at them. To date, the Government have shown no sense of urgency, just half-hearted promises to end the problem.

Reform of leasehold law is “unfinished business”, in the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne. There are too many loopholes in too many pieces of legislation, and the balance of power remains with the freeholder and their agents.

A Labour Government would give leaseholders security against rip-off ground rents and end the routine use of leasehold ownership in new developments. Will this Government do that? Labour will cap ground rent charges and set out a plan to end their routine use. We need a clear commitment from the Government. We all owe that to the millions of leaseholders in this country, for now and for the future.

2.52 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this really important debate. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting their request. Both hon. Members have shown over the years a real dedication to leasehold reform, and I appreciate their advocacy not only for their constituents, but for prospective and existing leaseholders across the country.

As we have heard, there are more than 4 million leasehold homes in England. That figure represents an important and significant proportion of the housing market. It is also a growing proportion of the housing market: 43% of all new build registrations in England and Wales in 2016 were leasehold.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I apologise for intervening on the Minister so early in his speech; we look forward to hearing what he has to say. May I remind him that it was campaigning by LKP and others that got the DCLG to review the figure and change it from 2.1 million to 4.1 million? The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) has already called for a statistical review, because LKP thinks that the figure is closer to 5.5 million and might even be higher. The number to which the Minister refers, which is a significant part of the housing market, may be even bigger.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman makes his point forcefully. Whatever the actual figure—clearly, the work that was done resulted in the increase to which he refers—I think we can all agree that it is a significant part of the housing market, particularly in Greater London, which he and I have the privilege of representing.

Leasehold legislation has been amended on many occasions over the past 50 years to improve leaseholder rights, including the right to extend their lease, appoint a new manager, challenge unreasonable service charges and purchase the freehold. All of that legislation has helped, but it clearly has not solved the problem, which is probably a lesson for all of us. Why has it not solved the problem? I think that we can point to two clear things. First, the legislation is seen by many as complex, as a number of hon. Members have said, and that can cause problems for leaseholders and freeholders alike. Secondly—the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who spoke on behalf of the Opposition, referred to this—the 2016 national leasehold survey showed that 57% of leaseholders either somewhat or strongly agree with the statement:

“I regret buying a leasehold property”.

That is a pretty sobering statistic.

We should accept at the outset that, whatever changes we make to the law, and whatever system we have for managing properties where a number of people have an interest in the land, some tension is inevitable. Even in those countries that have a commonhold system, some people in a particular block of flats might be keen for further improvements to be made, while others, who might be more financially challenged, might be more nervous about their service charge bills.

The hon. Lady said that she was concerned that I was going to respond by saying that the concerns that we have heard are just exceptions that do not represent the real problem. I assure her that the leasehold survey shows that they are not exceptions and that there is a widespread problem that needs to be addressed. I was asked directly whether I felt comfortable with the current situation. I assure hon. Members that I most certainly do not feel comfortable with the level of concern right across the country. Indeed, I am very keen to explore how we can promote greater transparency and fairness, and to work with all interested parties to improve leaseholders’ experience of home ownership.

This is a timely debate because it has highlighted concerns that others have raised, including the Law Commission as part of its consultation on the 13th programme of law reform. We are working closely with the commission and will use the examples raised today in our discussions with it.

I want to consider the issue of houses being sold as leasehold, which my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) have mentioned. Leasehold has been a part of the housing market in this country for decades, even centuries. In the right circumstances, with the right safeguards, it can serve both leaseholders and freeholders well. As we have heard today, however, that is often not the case.

Analysis by LKP suggests that nearly 9,000 houses were built and sold last year as leasehold. Some have no shared services or estate management functions. In fact, they seem to exist only to create a reliable income

stream from the ground rent, permissions to alter the property, and selling on the freehold at some point in the future. Developers can maximise their return by selling the freehold interest to the leaseholder at a higher value after they have moved in, or by selling it to a third party without informing the leaseholder. That is a critical point: if a freeholder wishes to sell a leasehold flat, the leaseholder has the right of first refusal, but that right does not extend to those in leasehold houses.

Those practices are not illegal, but it seems to me, and to the Secretary of State, to be one of those cases where there is a gulf between the letter of the law and our sense of what is right. Some of the cases that we have seen in the media and heard about today have highlighted some truly appalling behaviour. The Secretary of State and I have been looking closely at the issues raised in recent weeks and we are both absolutely determined to stamp out unfair, unjust and unacceptable abuse of the leasehold system.

A number of references have been made to Taylor Wimpey’s announcement that it will address some of our concerns about its use of leasehold. I am keen to hear more about what it plans to do, not just to stop such practices in the future, but to help homeowners who are currently stuck with ground rents rising much faster than inflation. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston made that point powerfully. The leaseholder does not have to be very far into the lease in order to be stuck with that problem, which relates not necessarily to their actual payments at that point in time, but to their ability either to extend the lease or to sell the property to someone else.

Justin Madders: It is welcome that this practice is not going to continue, but my constituents are anxious to know what the Government can do to deal with the onerous conditions that exist in leases already.

Gavin Barwell: I do not have an answer for the hon. Gentleman today, but I assure him that the Secretary of State and I are looking into this issue. We are very clear that it is not just a matter of stopping this practice; we must also address the situation of hard-working people who believe that they have bought their home, but who may find themselves unable to sell that home further down the line. I give the hon. Gentleman the clear assurance that we are looking at the issue.

Sir Peter Bottomley: May I ask the Minister to consult his officials and others on whether there is scope for declaring such a condition to be an unfair term and having it written out?

Gavin Barwell: There are a number of different ways in which the issue can be addressed. It is a difficult issue, because although the clear mood in the House is that the practice is unfair, it none the less interacts with the property rights of the freeholder, and those rights have some protection under the European convention on human rights. We need to think about the right way to address the problem. I will certainly reflect on the suggestion that my hon. Friend has made, and other suggestions have been made during the debate.

We should not be under any illusions. The problem does not just concern one company; a number of our larger developers are involved in it. They would do well

to remember that they are building homes for people to live in, not investment vehicles for financial institutions. Except in a very few exceptional circumstances, I cannot think of any good reason for houses to be built on a leasehold basis. If the industry does not put a stop to the practice and help existing homeowners, we will look to see what Government can do.

Historically, ground rents were set at around one thousandth of the lease value, sometimes increasing every 25 or 33 years. They existed only to create a contract between the freeholder and the leaseholder. However, in recent years, ground rent levels for new leases have increased, as has the frequency of increases. Research by Direct Line suggested that the average ground rent is now £371 for new builds and £327 for older properties.

My immediate concern is the level and frequency of increases in ground rents. We have heard today about one developer selling a lease with a ground rent starting at just under £300 in 2011 and doubling each decade for 50 years, so that by 2061 the annual cost will reach almost £9,500. The purchaser was not made aware of the escalation by their solicitor, who was recommended by the developer. The purchaser is now unable to sell the property, and the cost of extending the lease or buying the freehold is prohibitive.

Of course, there is a degree of caveat emptor when we buy a new house, but we all know that our housing market is a seller's market at the moment and the advantage lies firmly with the developer. Just because they can sell desperate people something does not mean that they should be doing so. Institutional and other investors increasingly see ground rents as an alternative to equities and bonds, but leaseholders see no return or value in ground rents, especially when they can rise to onerous levels. Obviously, Members on both sides of the House welcome institutional investment into our housing market, but I would much rather institutional investors put their money into productive projects instead of just hoovering up ground rents because they are seen as a safe bet. Both this House and the Government want to hear more from the developers about what they are going to do to put the situation right.

I turn briefly to commonhold, although Members will probably be aware that the Ministry of Justice is the lead Department for this matter. Commonhold was intended to be a voluntary alternative to long leasehold ownership. As we heard from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth, it was introduced by the last Labour Government in 2002 with good intentions, but it has had very limited take-up. There are several explanations as to why. Developers have not favoured the model, and leaseholders have found it a complicated process. Commonhold can be created only where all the owners of the land in question agree to its creation, so it is for developers to decide whether to build commonhold, or for everyone with a shared interest in an existing block to agree to convert to commonhold and to agree their commonhold community statement.

I know that several Members have pressed strongly for commonhold and continue to do so, arguing that it is a better alternative to leasehold arrangements. Commonhold is one way forward in considering improvements for leaseholders, but we also need to look at what we can do to change the existing system. There have been calls for responsibility for commonhold to be

transferred from the Ministry of Justice to my Department. That would require a machinery of government change, and it has been agreed with Ministers that we will have a look at that in the new year.

I hope I have made it clear that the Government accept that there is a lot to do in this area. If the House will forgive me, I would like to say a few words about the things we have already done to improve matters and to ensure that there is easy access to remedies when things go wrong. In the Housing and Planning Act 2016, we introduced two important measures to help leaseholders to exercise their rights and to ensure that they are not ripped off by unscrupulous landlords. Members will probably be familiar with the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, which allows a tenants association made up of "qualifying tenants" to seek statutory recognition. Such recognition provides the tenants association with additional rights over and above those enjoyed by individual leaseholders, including, crucially, the right to be consulted about the appointment of managing agents, to be notified of works proposed by the landlord and to receive copies of estimates.

Ruth Cadbury: I am grateful to the Minister for pointing out the right to be consulted under the Housing and Planning Act 2016. Does that extend to the right to have a veto?

Gavin Barwell: The 2016 Act does not give a right to veto, but it gives improved powers to residents associations. Groups have had some difficulties in exercising those powers. If the hon. Lady will give me a second, I will try to explain what we seek to achieve.

Section 130 of the 2016 Act will make a big difference to residents associations, which are finding it difficult to obtain the number of members needed to help them to apply for statutory recognition and the additional rights that that brings. It will do so by requiring a landlord to supply to the secretary of a residents association information that would allow contact to be made with absent leaseholders for the purposes of increasing the association's membership and therefore its likelihood of achieving recognition.

Another important aspect of the Housing and Planning Act 2016, concerns a landlord's recovery of litigation costs from leaseholders as administrative charges, which the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised. He gave a pretty horrific example from his constituency of how that is being abused in a particular case. At present, where a lease allows a landlord to recover the costs of legal proceedings through the service charge, a court or tribunal can decide to restrict the amount that can be recovered in that way. Courts or tribunals do not have similar powers where recovery of the costs of proceedings as an administration charge is permitted by the lease.

Jim Fitzpatrick *indicated assent.*

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman is nodding; that is the situation in the case that he mentioned. That can lead to unfairness, because the leaseholder will have no choice but to pay the costs of proceedings as an administration charge, regardless of the proceedings. That discourages leaseholders from exercising their rights to challenge the amount of a service charge, particularly as the landlord's costs in the proceedings could well exceed

[Gavin Barwell]

the amount that is being disputed. The commencement planned early in the new year of section 131 of the Housing and Planning Act will enable the tribunal or court to consider, on application by the leaseholder, whether it is reasonable for a landlord to recover all or part of those costs.

The complicated nature of leasehold can make it challenging for people to ensure that they follow the correct legal procedures. To help leaseholders to navigate through the system, the Government provide access to free, independent legal advice and information through the leasehold advisory service, or LEASE, as it is known. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West referred to it in his speech. Last year, Government provided LEASE with more than £1 million of funding, and 850,000 people across the country benefited from free advice.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I, through the Minister, thank LEASE for all the work that it does to help my constituents, and for always being willing to attend residents' meetings to give advice when people feel all at sea about this complicated area?

Gavin Barwell: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. It is good that people are paying tribute to LEASE for the important work that it does, and which I know is very much valued by people right across the country.

I want to reassure the House that the Government remain committed to ensuring leaseholders have the best professional advice available to them. Given its increasingly important role, I want to make sure that LEASE is properly equipped to offer help to everybody who needs it. Particularly in the light of the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West, we will look again at how it works, its funding model and its membership.

In conclusion, this well-informed debate has raised important issues affecting millions of people in this country. We take all the issues raised very seriously, as I hope has been indicated by the tone of my speech. We have a strong interest in making sure that the system works as effectively as possible, and we are looking at suggestions for alternative systems, but this issue clearly needs attention. The motion states that the House "has considered" this issue, and I want to reassure my hon. Friend that it will be considered by the Government and that we will come back in the new year with proposals on how to tackle it.

3.11 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick: This has been an important debate. We have had fewer contributions than we expected when we put in a bid for this space at the Backbench

Business Committee, but it is reassuring that so many colleagues have come into the Chamber to listen to the Minister's winding-up speech. They recognise that this is an important issue, and they therefore wanted to hear what he had to say. Perhaps that will reassure him about his popularity: he did not realise it was quite as widespread as it is.

The hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) comprehensively exposed the abuses and he named names. He said this goes "beyond sleaze". My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) said this is the PPI scandal of the property sector. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) talked about the unfairness in the system. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), quoted the *Daily Mail*. She said it is not her usual read, but even the *Daily Mail* gets some things right occasionally, which is reassuring. She gave many examples of poor, shoddy and criminal practices, and on behalf of the official Opposition she made several commitments on leasehold and commonhold. We heard interventions from the hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) and for Bolton West (Chris Green), and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas), who gave examples of problems in their constituencies. I thank the Minister for his response, including his declaration that he is uncomfortable with the current situation. He said that there is "a gulf between the letter of the law and...what is right".

He indicated that he will look at this issue in the new year and do something about it, and we welcome the promises he has made on behalf of himself and of the Secretary of State.

The all-party group will continue to campaign on this issue. We look forward to engaging with the Minister and his civil servants, as we have during the past year. We intend to engage with the Government not only to examine and address the abuses and anomalies in the system, but to put the position straight. On behalf of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Worthing West and I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all colleagues, as well as all the staff of the House, a very happy Christmas and a decent break. We look forward to 2017, when leasehold and commonhold will be back on the agenda.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Thank you, and may I return the compliment of the hon. Gentleman and the House by wishing everybody a very happy Christmas and a good new year?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered leasehold and commonhold reform.

Christmas Adjournment

3.14 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

I rise to speak on behalf of the Backbench Business Committee. Unaccountably, I must apologise for the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is unable to be with us this afternoon; he is no doubt very active in his constituency, regaling his constituents with festive wishes.

The theme of my introduction is thinking about those who are less fortunate than we are. First and foremost, I want to place on the record what I believe is the view of the whole House in expressing our horror and revulsion at the events at the Berlin Christmas market. Our thoughts are not only with those who are fighting for their lives, but with the relatives of those who have sadly lost their lives. It just shows what can happen and the horrors that can ensue at a simple Christmas market where law-abiding people are going about their business. We do not yet know who was responsible or what their motives were. However, our sympathies are with the relatives of those who have lost their lives and equally with those who have been severely injured.

Secondly, let us express our thoughts, as a whole House, for the people of Aleppo, who are in a parlous condition at the hands of a brutal dictator, and a brutal army that is basically eliminating anyone and everyone that stands in its way. I trust that there will be a resolution of this terrible conflict in the new year, and that people will be able to return to their homes in peace and harmony.

Thirdly, this is the first Christmas that Jo Cox's family will experience without her. Members on both sides of the House have been touched by the brutal murder of a colleague who was just doing her job on behalf of her constituents. The best thing we can all do—even if we are not used to downloading tracks—is to download her single and help to make it the No. 1 for Christmas. That would be a fitting tribute for a late colleague whom we all mourn.

I want to move on to another set of people who are far less fortunate than we are—the homeless and rough sleepers. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know all too well that my Homelessness Reduction Bill is making its way through Parliament. I am delighted to say that it has all-party support. It had an unopposed Second Reading on 28 October, and we have pursued the Bill in Committee, where I am pleased to say that we are more than halfway through its 13 clauses. I am told that it is the longest ever private Member's Bill, and it will probably end up as the most expensive for the Government to fund.

Equally, the Bill is very important. The number of people who are homeless in this country is a disgrace, and the number of people who will sleep rough tonight is a disgrace. We owe it to them to make sure that we deliver a radical solution. First and foremost, that is about increasing the supply of housing so that people can have a decent roof over their head, but it is also about transforming local authorities to make sure that they look at the reasons why people are homeless and provide help and assistance at first hand.

I want to thank some of the people involved. I place on the record my thanks to Crisis, St Mungo's and Shelter for all the work they do to assist people who are homeless at this time of year. I also thank them for giving me tremendous support in producing the Bill, together with the National Landlords Association, which has also given me exceptional assistance.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Given that it is Christmas and that the hon. Gentleman has raised the subject of housing, will he take this opportunity to join me in praising Harrow Council for beginning to build council houses—for the first time in 28 years, there will be new council homes in Harrow—which is surely a key part of tackling the housing crisis that affects both our constituencies?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for raising that issue. It is important that affordable housing is developed right across London and right across the country. To me, the form of tenure does not matter too much; what matters most is that housing is provided for people at a price they can afford. It is good to see Harrow Council doing something right under Labour control. That is very rare—I have a whole catalogue of its errors. But in the spirit of Christmas, let us thank the council.

May I also place on the record my concern and that of more than 216 Members of Parliament about the plight of Equitable Life policyholders? It is a long-running scandal. Although the Government have now closed the compensation scheme to new applicants, the issue is far from over. The Government rightly provided £1.5 billion in compensation to people who suffered from the scam, but the former Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), made it clear that the total sum owed to those people—as a result of saving their money, as was their right, for a reasonable retirement—was £4.3 billion. More than 1 million people have received only 22% of the compensation they are due. A great deal of money still needs to be found to compensate those applicants. That is without dealing with the most frail and vulnerable—those with pre-'92 trapped annuities, who deserve help on compassionate grounds. I am glad that the new Economic Secretary has agreed to meet a cross-party delegation in the new year to discuss the next steps.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Equitable Life policyholders are getting older. It matters that we get this sorted.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. Quite clearly, in the not too distant future large numbers of those affected will want to use their pension for the comfortable life they thought they were saving for and have literally been robbed of.

This year, we have resuscitated the all-party parliamentary group on Romania. I particularly want to raise the plight of Alexander Adamescu, a journalist from Romania—originally from Germany—who is resident in the UK and is under threat from a European arrest warrant for raising issues that are slightly controversial in Romania but in this country would not be an issue. That raises

[*Bob Blackman*]

specific concerns about the relationship between Britain and Romania, and about how the European arrest warrant is used.

I also want to raise the plight of 1.5 million people displaced in Azerbaijan from the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict there has been going on for far too long. It is a forgotten conflict, and unfortunately the position with Armenia, Russia and allies has not helped the overall situation. This summer, the all-party parliamentary group on Azerbaijan went to see one of the camps that has been set up for those people. They are suffering very greatly through no fault of their own. It is time that human rights and shared values were restored to that part of the world.

There is unfinished business in Parliament on two other issues that I will raise briefly. First, we have now gone a year since the expiry of the tobacco control plan that the Government implemented. We have been waiting a year for the new plan. We have been promised on frequent occasions that it would be published soon. On today's Order Paper I see no progress on it, and I do not think the issue was aired at Health questions. It is obviously important that the Government publish the new tobacco control plan early in the new year, with far-reaching targets, so that we can set out our stall to make sure that the United Kingdom becomes a smoke-free country. It is important that the plan is set out, because without it we run the risk of going backwards on all the wonderful things that have been achieved over the past five years.

Equally, on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus I want to raise the fact that the Government have promised on several occasions to publish the consultation document on ridding ourselves of the unnecessary, ill-thought-out and divisive caste legislation. That consultation was promised by the end of the year. Today is the last day this year that we will meet in Parliament, and there has been no notification to Parliament about the publication of that consultation document. I trust that we will see the document before the end of the year, but Parliament should see it and it should be announced in Parliament before it is released to the public.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for all his work on behalf of the Hindu community, not just in Harrow but throughout the country? He and I compete as to the number of British Hindus in our constituencies, although I probably just beat him in Leicester. Does he agree that it is important that we have a debate on that document once it is published? It is not sufficient just to publish and rush it through the House. A proper debate involving the diaspora would be very helpful.

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. I have asked at the last two Women and Equalities questions for the publication of the consultation and asked at business questions for a statement to the House. We could have that debate and Members from all parties and with all interests could register their point of view. Sadly, that has yet to be the case. It is important that we have the debate before the consultation starts, so that it can frame the consultation rather than ending up responding to the document.

I will raise a couple more issues of significance before I conclude my opening speech. The first is the problems that I am sure Members in all parts of the House are experiencing with regard to the issuing of visas for weddings, religious ceremonies and educational or other particular purposes. Visas are being rejected on grounds that I consider spurious. That causes immense difficulties for people coming for religious functions, weddings and in particular funerals, where things are done at the last minute. Applications from India, Pakistan, Iran and Sri Lanka seem to be singled out in an unfair manner and are not treated properly.

I will continue to work in the new year for a two-year visitor visa to be issued for Indian citizens in the same way as the Government agreed for Chinese citizens. I have nothing against Chinese people wanting to visit—that is wonderful—but huge numbers of Indians want to come here and visit too, and I see no reason why they should suffer unfair discrimination when so many relatives are here and people want to visit and to use this country appropriately.

Local transport services are suffering. This may be a theme of other speeches in this debate. We are looking forward to Harrow-on-the-Hill station in the constituency of my honourable neighbour the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) being made step-free. I am looking forward to Stanmore station becoming step-free in the same timeframe. I trust that the solution that has been identified will go forward and will be appropriate.

The one local health issue that I want to raise is that we are seeing the rebuilding of the Royal National Orthopaedic hospital in my constituency. That is not before time. I and my predecessors have struggled to achieve that and I am delighted that it is finally happening and that we will see the development of a first-rate national hospital that suits the brilliant work that the doctors and nurses do.

I could raise a range of other issues, but I know that a huge number of colleagues are keen to update the House on what they think matters before we rise for the Adjournment. I look forward to the response of my good friend the Deputy Leader of the House to the debate in time-honoured fashion. I have no doubt that it will be appropriately challenging for him, but I know that he will respond and that colleagues will have suitable matters to raise.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish you, the Speaker, your fellow Deputy Speakers, the whole House, our colleagues, the staff and the people who keep us safe a very merry Christmas and a happy new year that I trust will be peaceful, prosperous and healthy. On behalf of the Backbench Business Committee, I open the debate and look forward to the speeches of hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If hon. Members take up to eight minutes, everyone will—*[Interruption.]* It is no use moaning about it. If you want to take extra and knock someone else out, that is up to yourselves. I am only trying to be helpful. In the Christmas spirit, let us all treat each other with equality.

3.30 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I would like to add to the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) at the beginning of his speech about the sad incident in Germany, and especially those comments in relation to the memory of our dear friend Jo Cox.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), a fellow member of the drugs, alcohol and justice parliamentary group, asked on the day of the summer Adjournment:

“Will the Leader of the House send out a search party to find the updated drugs strategy, as it has gone missing in Government?”—*[Official Report, 21 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 984.]*

The policy is still awaited, and unless we have an unexpected delivery from Father Christmas, it will not be seen in the coming months.

In September, I suggested that a debate was desperately needed on drugs policy, following a series of related reports. The Health Committee’s report on public health warned that

“cuts to public health are a false economy”

and expressed concern that drug and alcohol services “can get missed.” Then came an update from the Office for National Statistics showing drugs deaths at record levels; my area, the north-east of England, was the highest again. At the same time, Public Health England and the Local Government Association published their detailed investigation into drug deaths. This month, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has added its investigation.

Furthermore, we have seen Public Health England’s “Evidence Review of the Public Health Burden of Alcohol and the Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness of Alcohol Control Policies”, and the Department of Work and Pensions has finally released Dame Carol Black’s review of the effects of drug and alcohol addiction on employment outcomes. All this weight of expert opinion and evidence recommends that we prioritise drug and alcohol treatment. I very much hope that the Government heed the evidence and recommendations from all these reports and provide a drugs strategy and an alcohol strategy with the resources required to fulfil their objectives.

As Karen Tyrell, a regular contributor to the drugs, alcohol and justice group Addaction, said:

“We simply can’t allow another year to go by and greet further deaths with another statement of concern.”

Two other parliamentary groups to which I belong, the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group and the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, have raised the issue of school sprinklers, for which guidance is being revised. I am in favour of clear, concise guidance, but I am not in favour of children possibly losing their schools, or even their lives, for the sake of losing a few lines of text. We cannot prioritise brevity over safety. I hope that in the new year, Education Ministers will reconsider and restore the expectation that sprinklers will be installed in new school buildings. Surely, if any change must be made it would be better to replace the word “expectation” with a firm duty to install sprinklers.

Finally, I am dismayed and disappointed that the Government have allowed Spanish-owned Scottish Power to take huge concessions from the UK taxpayer yet

award the majority of its fabrication contracts to Spanish nationally owned yards and yards in the middle east. Only 200 UK jobs will be created in Northern Ireland under the contract to build jackets for the East Anglia One offshore wind farm project.

It is very worrying that Government officials omitted to stipulate reference to UK content in the subsidy documents—shame on our Government and shame on Scottish Power! A portion of those jobs would have been lifeblood for the OGN yard in my constituency, which at the height of its contracts two years ago supported 2,000 jobs. As jobs have dried up, the yard has just a handful of people to maintain it. I must praise Dennis Clark of OGN for his past success in bringing good jobs to North Tyneside and for his solid commitment to our region. Our fight will go on to ensure our yards in Tyneside have healthy order books in future.

I wish everyone who works in the House a very happy Christmas and, in particular, the most precious gift of all: good health throughout 2017.

3.36 pm

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I would like to spread some Christmas cheer by talking about the tax system, but first I would like to join others in wishing you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all right hon. and hon. Members and all staff of the House well for the Christmas period.

I want to detain the House briefly to talk about HMRC’s Making Tax Digital programme, an important issue I think we should reflect on over the Christmas period. Before doing so, I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a recipient of rental income from property.

Digitisation of the tax system—the aim of the MTD programme—is worth while, but I have genuine concerns about the proposals as they currently stand. I have been contacted by a number of constituents, including Mr Nick Danan, whose email prompted me to make this speech today. A key issue is the proposed obligation, under the programme, to send a quarterly report to the tax authorities. This is to be accompanied by so-called real-time reporting of transactions, although exactly what that will involve in practice is not yet clear.

At the moment, the obligation is planned to be imposed on all self-employed people, small businesses and buy-to-let landlords with an income or turnover above £10,000. A relatively recent concession by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is that implementation will be deferred for a year for unincorporated businesses with a turnover over the £10,000 threshold and below unspecified new thresholds. It is very welcome that HMRC has been listening and that it has made that move, but it does not address all the concerns my constituents have with the proposals.

I welcomed the chance to meet the Federation of Small Businesses when it visited Parliament on 29 November to present a report it had commissioned on the Making Tax Digital programme and to explain the changes it believes ought to be made to the programme before it is put into legislation next year. Yesterday, I met Louise McMullan and Alan Lean of Equity to talk about the problems their members in the entertainment industry would have with the programme. The FSB estimates that the current proposals will cost businesses on average

[Mrs Theresa Villiers]

£2,770 a year in addition to the £3,600 they already spend on help and advice with the tax system. Such figures are always challengeable and debatable, but I am worried about imposing this new cost on entrepreneurs who are such a fundamental part of economic success.

Treasury Ministers are very clear that they expect their MTD project to save money for businesses, but I find that hard to reconcile with real-time transaction reporting and quarterly updates. I am deliberately choosing not to call them quarterly tax returns, since Ministers are very clear that these updates will not be the same as a traditional annual tax return. However, whether they are updates, reports or returns, it seems inevitable that they will cost businesses time and money to prepare.

Now I fully accept that HMRC intends to try to ensure that compiling quarterly reports is a simple process that does not need professional advice. The problem is that the legal, financial and reputational risks of getting reports to HMRC wrong are so serious that many or most small businesses, self-employed people and landlords affected will probably ask their professional advisers to compile these new quarterly reports in the same way they do an annual tax return. That would involve significant costs. As a Government and as a party, we have a strong commitment to try to minimise the cost of tax and regulation for business, and I feel that, as it currently stands, the Making Tax Digital programme is hard to reconcile with that commitment.

I bear in mind the fact that we are already asking business, large and small, to take on significant responsibilities on a range of social, economic and environmental goals, including complex rules on employment protection, payroll, VAT, auto-enrolment for pensions, action on climate change and so forth: the list is a long one. Those are important objectives that the House should support, but they tend to come with obligations for people just trying to get by and make an honest living.

When this measure comes before us in the Finance Bill next year, we should think very carefully before we impose further burdens on people who are so crucial to job creation and general economic success. We will need to ask ourselves two questions: are these burdens necessary and proportionate; and can anything further be done to mitigate them? We should bear in mind that the £10,000 threshold will bring many millions of people within the scope of these new reporting requirements, including many of our constituents. I hope that before Ministers bring this legislation forward next year, they listen carefully to the responses to the consultation and representations made by organisations such as the Chartered Institute of Taxation, the FSB and Equity.

On the particular issue of the threshold, many feel that £10,000 is too low. There is a concern that it is disproportionate to impose these new burdens on microbusinesses or very small-scale buy-to-let landlords. I hope Ministers will consider an increase to align the MTD reporting threshold, for example, with the VAT threshold, which is currently around £83,000. After all, VAT-rated businesses already deal with regular reporting requirements, so the impact of this new scheme would be less disruptive for them. Making these new reporting obligations voluntary for businesses under the VAT threshold would seem a reasonable way forward. HMRC clearly believes its system will be successful and easy to

use, so it should not shy away from a voluntary approach. If the system is to be as user-friendly as it believes it will, people will want to use it and will not need to be compelled to do so. That approach is taken in Australia, for example.

The Chairman of the Treasury Committee pointed out the concern in his letter to the Chancellor in September. He said that the new requirements for digital recordkeeping and reporting go further than simply entering a handful of totals into an online return. In his letter, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie) described what was required as

“tantamount to prescription by HMRC, for the first time, of a particular form in which accounting records must be maintained.”

I thus hope that one key thing we will hear from Ministers when they return here next year is clarity on exactly what quarterly real-time reporting will be required by MTD. I hope that the Government will consider my constituent's proposal that it should not go beyond a simple statement of income on expenditure.

HMRC's commitment to free digital tools for the smallest businesses to help them with this new approach is welcome, but so far we have had only rather limited information on what that software will be and for how long it will remain free to use. A point raised with me by Equity yesterday is that many of its members are particularly concerned about whether the free software will enable them to report overseas earnings. I hope that we will hear from Ministers next year about their confidence in the security of HMRC systems. People will be asked to accommodate a vast amount of data, far more than at present, and I think people providing those data will want to be confident that HMRC's computer systems are stable and resilient enough to hold this vast increase.

I also hope that Ministers will be able to reassure us about how the new reporting obligations will compare with universal credit monthly reports. Many in the self-employed sector will receive universal credit and be subject to the Making Tax Digital obligations: avoiding unnecessary duplication would be very helpful. Perhaps most important of all, a longer implementation period with extensive piloting would really help to ease the transition to a genuinely digital tax system. It also makes sense to start with the larger businesses, which are probably better able to cope, rather than, as HMRC currently proposes, starting with the smallest.

The Government were very sensible to pilot the new universal credit system extensively and introduce it gradually over a period of years. Making Tax Digital will be a truly massive IT project, and taking time to get it right is both justifiable and sensible, even if that postpones some of the advantages for the Government. I fear that if HMRC presses ahead with MTD in its current form, that will require a very significant change for thousands of self-employed people who may not run digital accounts, or, in some cases, may not even use computers very much.

Of course there are clear advantages in moving such people towards a more systematic approach to their tax and accounts and away from the so-called shoebox model approach, but if HMRC is to achieve behaviour change of that magnitude, it will take some time. There can be little doubt that millions of people are due to face a radical change in how they deal with their tax affairs, and that they do not yet have a clue about what is coming down the track towards them. Allowing enough

time to enable the delivery of the programme to run smoothly would be a wise choice on the Government's part.

I believe that most people should welcome and support the goal of a digitised tax system. I have no doubt that a number of elements of HMRC's Making Tax Digital programme will make the tax system easier to use, help to reduce errors, strengthen the tax base and support the public finances. Those are all aims that the House can support, and I certainly support them, but there are still real concerns about the cost impact of the programme on self-employed people, landlords and small businesses. I believe that those problems can be resolved, but, although there is still time to sort them out, there is not a great deal of time.

I am not someone who rushes to highlight potential risks or problems with Government initiatives, but I felt that I ought to raise these concerns on behalf of the many people in my constituency who will be affected. I sincerely hope that Treasury Ministers will consider the points that I have made today as they embark on the final decisions that are needed on Making Tax Digital before presenting the Finance Bill 2017 to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The good news is that we have had two no-shows, which will allow Members to speak for up to 10 minutes. The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) must have known that already, given the length of time for which she spoke—but not to worry.

3.48 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): You will be pleased to know, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I will not require the full 10 minutes.

It is a pleasure to take part in this wide-ranging and popular general debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to do so.

Among the numerous issues to have graced my casework over recent months—perhaps one of the more interesting—is the World Health Organisation Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, sometimes referred to as the Illicit Trade Protocol, or ITP. As many Members will know, the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is the world's first and only public health treaty. However, the problem of illicit tobacco was held to be so severe that a new, subsidiary treaty under the FCTC was required, namely the ITP. It was concluded in 2012, and currently covers 24 state parties plus the European Union. Forty parties are required for the ITP to come into force. It was signed by the United Kingdom Government three years ago, but so far it has not been ratified by the UK. In recent weeks, I have raised this subject a number of times through parliamentary questions, both oral and written. I am grateful to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury for her helpful and constructive answers, which I received yesterday.

Those who have raised this important issue with me feel that the UK Government are setting a poor example and dragging their feet on ratification of the protocol on illicit tobacco and that as a consequence they are threatening public health and costing the Treasury millions

of pounds in lost revenue. The latest HMRC figures for 2015-16 estimate that the UK illicit market share for cigarettes is 13% and for hand-rolling tobacco 32%. The tobacco tax gap for this period was estimated to be £2.4 billion. Although that represents a significant improvement over the last decade or so, the issue remains a key public health concern. I say that not because illicit tobacco is necessarily more harmful than that on sale in shops, but rather because it bypasses tobacco control measures designed to increase prices and prevent tobacco sales to children.

As I have mentioned, I hope that the parliamentary questions and answers go some way towards addressing the concerns over the Government's failure to act on the ITP. I look forward to the text of the protocol being laid before Parliament as a Command Paper, and would be grateful to Ministers if we could have an indication of a likely timescale for that.

I press the point because I believe that the ITP will genuinely help to tackle the illicit trade problem. Among its measures designed to combat the illicit trade is a worldwide tracking and tracing scheme for tobacco products. The ITP explicitly requires Governments to take responsibility for control measures and not to rely on industry self-regulation, which has failed to deliver. This track-and-trace scheme is intended to prevent the tobacco industry from participating in, or turning a blind eye to, smuggling. The scheme must be independent of the industry if it is to be effective.

Earlier this year, the big tobacco companies sold Codentify, the anti-smuggling track-and-trace system, to a third party for a token 1 Swiss franc, clearly in an attempt to comply with EU and World Health Organisation rules on independence. However, it has been claimed that the new owner is merely a front company and that the system is still under the effective control of the tobacco firms. If so, this would not fulfil the requirements of the ITP for independence. Some industry insiders have also highlighted that Codentify is ineffective as a track and trace system as it uses a combination of unique encrypted codes along with other codes that are visible and easy to forge. I trust that Ministers will have that on their radar as this issue moves forward.

In conclusion, the protocol to eliminate illicit trade in tobacco products is a global solution to a global problem. It is important that we play our full part, and in the spirit of Christmas I welcome the Government's commitment to ratification. I am, however, impatient and keen to see progress. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response, although I will not envy him as he tries to sum up today's wide-ranging debate.

3.52 pm

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): At this time of Christmas and good will towards all, it seems a bit churlish to bring to the attention of the House the sad problems my constituents have had over the last three weeks when travelling by rail down from Chelmsford to Liverpool Street to work and back again. About 8,000 to 9,000 of my constituents commute to London to work each day, and others travel down to London and back up to Chelmsford during the day for a variety of other reasons. But we have been struck over the last three weeks by one problem after another that have brought the network to a grinding halt and caused so much disruption and frustration for those travelling.

[*Sir Simon Burns*]

The fact is that in my part of Essex the line is only two lines—one down to London and one up from London. There is little scope if a train breaks down or there are problems with the track except to sort the problem out immediately to get the network running again. When a problem occurs, all the trains back up and wait for a solution. If that happens during the rush hour, we can all imagine the frustration and problems, because people want to get to work; they do not want to be late, as it causes problems with their employers, and they have to put up with all of that too.

These problems have happened too much in the recent past. A track crack brought chaos, and a freight train broke down and brought everything to a standstill. Engines pulling commuter trains have broken down, with all the disturbance and problems that that causes.

Things will be considerably better in the future. I give credit to the previous Labour Government and to this Government for the investment that has been poured in to improve and upgrade the track and to replace the overhead cables from Liverpool Street to Chelmsford and beyond to Colchester and Norwich. That is bringing some improvements now, but it will bring considerable improvements when it is finished because we will have fewer faults. However, that is investment that no one ever sees. If we get new carriages, people obviously immediately notice the differences and the improvement on the previous ones. People do not notice track and infrastructure improvement because it is not in their face, but it is going on.

The franchise that was awarded to Abellio Greater Anglia in the summer is extremely good news for my constituents in so far as the commitment is there to replace all the trains with brand-new ones in 2019-20. The current engines and carriages are 30 years old, so it is no wonder that they break down. They are of a different generation and have different technology, which is old and susceptible to faults. When we get brand-new engines, we will see a significant improvement in performance. In addition, a new station will be built just to the north-east of Chelmsford's city limits near Beaulieu Park, which will help to unclog the congestion in the town that comes from people driving to the station to get their trains to work during the morning rush hour and then driving back in the afternoon and evening. By the mid-2020s, there will be a 5 km loop track to the north of Witham, allowing fast trains to overtake the slower ones, and an increase in capacity on trains to Liverpool Street.

Jam tomorrow is great, but we need more jam today because my constituents are having to put up with too much disruption. Without wanting to rub it in, they pay quite a lot of their taxed income for the pleasure—if that is the right word—of travelling down to London to work, so I want several things. There is considerable engineering work at the moment, particularly at weekends, simply due to investment in upgrading the infrastructure, but I want an end to the Network Rail inefficiencies that lead to engineering work overrunning into the Monday morning rush hour and causing considerable grief. It is totally avoidable with better planning and organisation. In addition, I want service providers to offer more information when there is disruption or a breakdown, so that customers know exactly what the

problem is, why they either cannot get on a train or are stuck on a train and, if possible, roughly how long it will take for the problem to be resolved so that they can continue or start their journey. I am not asking for a lot. Better communication is quite straightforward in this era of social media and other communication systems.

If possible, I would like more work to be done to ensure that the current engines are best maintained to minimise the possibility of breakdowns. I also want fewer freight trains to run during rush hour, when they cause utter chaos if they break down. That is a challenge for now. As I have explained, the challenge for the future is looking good, but there is one thing this Government could do to help the network. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is shortly going to use money from a £450 million fund for trials of digital signalling for the railways, and pilot areas will be needed. Essex County Council and I, along with other hon. Members, are most anxious that one site where this digital signalling is tested should be the Liverpool Street-Chelmsford-Colchester-Ipswich-Norwich line. I urge the Deputy Leader of the House, who will be responding to this debate, to make the Secretary of State for Transport aware, as I have done, of how important it would be and what a signal it would give in terms of confidence in the system if the Department for Transport were prepared to use that line and rail network as part of the trials of digital signalling, because that is yet another investment that will improve rail travel in this country over the coming years.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Siobhain McDonagh—and Buster.

4 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. By now, hon. Members may have seen my break into the music industry with “National Living Rage”, a Christmas song that I recorded with a number of Labour Members last week. Derided by some, adored by others—my mum—I am delighted that the song has had its desired effect of generating national attention for the serious issue of pay cuts. It has had 40,000 hits on YouTube and been laughed at on everything from “Daily Politics” to Channel 4’s “The Last Leg”, but it has got a serious message out in the public domain by humorous means.

These cuts are being made by some good employers who have made a bad decision when it comes to older, long-standing staff. I want to take a moment to consider the tens of thousands of workers who face a pay cut this Christmas—those families who have to bear the pressure of selling their house or finding another job just to make ends meet. Christmas should be a time of good will to all men and women, but a disappointing roll call of employers are being scrooges this year. Instead of delivering presents, they are serving their loyal, long-standing staff with pay cuts and notices. From B&Q to Marks & Spencer, 2 Sisters Food Group, Waitrose, Caffè Nero and EAT, good employers are getting it wrong, using the introduction of a higher statutory minimum wage as an opportunity to cut total staff pay.

No one in this House should be under any illusion that this is some sort of niche issue—on the contrary, it is affecting residents in every constituency across the

country. It is estimated that about 11,000 of the iconic high street retailer Marks & Spencer's total workforce of 83,000 would be negatively impacted in some way by pay cuts—that is 13% of the workforce adversely affected, almost all of whom are on pre-2002 contracts. Some 2,700 workers will lose more than £1,000 a year, and 700 will lose more than £2,000 a year. Approximately more than half a million people in the retail, restaurant and food manufacturing industries will receive a pay cut—that is about 13% of the total number of workers in those industries. Many of the companies involved are high street names with historically good reputations, but they have made some terrible errors of judgment. It is not too late for them to change their minds, and I am asking all of them to reverse their decisions to cut staff pay at their January board meetings. Should those companies not change their minds, I hope the Government will step in and salvage their policy for all workers.

I have seen evidence that proves that many other companies are planning the same sort of pay cuts in the coming year. The chair of John Lewis, Sir Charlie Mayfield, stated in a private meeting earlier this year his intention to review the partnership's "historic premium pay arrangements", which he said were not in keeping with John Lewis's competitors. We know what the John Lewis Partnership's competitors are doing, so clearly the "review" of "legacy payments" is just a euphemism for the cutting of pay for long-standing staff. We have already seen clear evidence of that in Waitrose's decision earlier this year to take away paid breaks from new and existing staff. The House will appreciate my frustration when Sir Charlie emailed me to say that he no longer had any intention of meeting me today. Buster, the boxer from John Lewis's heart-warming Christmas ad, and I are very sad not to have the opportunity to discuss John Lewis's plans for pay cuts. Can we assume that the decision not to meet me is an admission of guilt on its part? I guess that Buster and I will not know for sure until those pay cuts are announced in the coming year.

If I am wrong about John Lewis, I will happily return to this House and publicly apologise. I will be delighted to be wrong about John Lewis—it is a great British business that got great through great customer service from well-treated staff, the sort of people whom the Prime Minister describes as those giving their best and putting in the effort. I am happy to apologise if I am wrong and I reiterate to Sir Charlie that I would be happy to meet him and discuss this important issue wherever and whenever he likes.

Having concentrated on unscrupulous employment practices, I know that corporate executives are watching every move in Parliament so, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to deliver a message to all those company CEOs and chairmen of boards. The campaign to ensure that no one in this country loses money as a result of the national living wage will continue into the new year, until every worker gets the pay that they so richly deserve. My colleagues and I will be writing to chairmen this week to ask for their contract changes to be reversed at the January board meetings.

I want to use these last few minutes to express my deep concern for the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Pakistan and in this country.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): As vice-chair of the all-party group on the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, I want to say that we

all stand in solidarity with them wherever they are in the world. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should always speak out against religious persecution, wherever it occurs and whoever it falls on?

Siobhain McDonagh: I agree with the hon. Lady: whatever the religion and wherever people are, we must stand up for religious tolerance.

There have been two worrying developments overseas. The first was a raid in Rabwah, where 16 fully armed policemen and 12 plain-clothed officers from three police vehicles forced entry into an Ahmadi office without a warrant, wounding and arresting four innocent Ahmadi men. The raid was unlawful and most likely ordered by the highest ranking officials in the Punjab province.

The second was the destruction of the historic Chakwal mosque, which was attacked by more than 1,000 people a week ago. Stones were pelted and the property was burnt to

"bring it under the influence of Islam."

I need not remind hon. Members that Ahmadiis are not allowed to define themselves as Muslim in Pakistan. I hope that all hon. Members will stand together to express their solidarity with the Ahmadi Muslim community and I ask the Foreign Secretary to do all he can to stand with the oppressed and persecuted Ahmadi people.

Finally, I wish all my constituents in Mitcham and Morden, all hon. Members and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, a very merry Christmas and a peaceful new year.

4.8 pm

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): This is the season of good will—let us see whether we can change that, shall we?

What I am going to relate to Members is important to anybody in this House and anywhere else. It is about one part of rural Somerset—as most Members know, my constituency is there—where there is a determined effort to hijack public opinion and, I would say, horribly to kill off local democracy. It is a tale of gerrymandering, sharp practice and strong suspicions of corruption. It concerns the plan to merge West Somerset council with one of its neighbours, Taunton Deane, and I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) is not here. It is a merger most foul, and, as in most blood-curdling stories, the real motive is money.

Having won the House's attention, I shall give Members the background to this sorry saga. West Somerset District Council is the smallest authority in England with a population of 35,000. It is a very beautiful part of the world and includes most of Exmoor. Unfortunately, the local council is perilously close to going bankrupt, partly because there are not enough people to pay the bills. For years the council has struggled to make ends meet and unfortunately it has failed. Three years ago it was lured—rather like a prostitute into a strange house—into a deal with Taunton Deane. For reasons that I do not completely understand, the leadership would not consider taking help from any other neighbour, including its nearest neighbour, Sedgemoor, which happens to be one of the best run councils in the United Kingdom. It has healthy finances and would have helped sort out West Somerset's problems without neutering that council. But the old guard preferred to do a deal with Taunton. I do not know why.

[Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger]

Taunton Deane was—and still is—desperately short of money. Why on earth would it want to bail out a bankrupt neighbour when it is heading towards bankruptcy itself? Two failing councils together make a successful council? You do the maths. I believe that Taunton wants to get its greedy hands on the business rates that will ultimately come from Hinkley C nuclear power station. [Interruption.] I heard somebody say “Ah!” from a sedentary position. The House is getting the plot. My little council may be on the verge of bankruptcy today, but in 20 years when Hinkley comes on line and produces electricity, it will become seriously rich. There is nothing like the prospect of gold, as Judas would say, to bring out the green streak in neighbouring town halls.

Taunton has always craved a share of the action. It is consumed with envy. When the plans for developing Hinkley were submitted, Taunton Deane put in a formal objection. A bit of an irony, I know. It did so out of jealousy and on the orders of its leader. He is a builder by trade and a sharp and interesting operator. John Williams is his name. He looks a little like Santa Claus, but please do not be fooled in this time of good will. He is more like Rudolph who has been garrotted, but I cannot see him saying, “Ho, ho, ho.” He rules Taunton Deane with a grip of iron and he likes to get his own way, mainly by foul means, so when West Somerset came begging, he spotted his chance and went for it.

Williams’s henchmen moved in like the mafia—horses’ heads in the bed—took over the local council, pensioned off most of the staff and started running everything from Taunton, not Minehead. Since then West Somerset’s 28 councillors have unfortunately—I say this against myself, as much as anybody—become little more than a glorified talking shop. I am not being rude, but the good people of West Somerset now realise that the levers of power are being manipulated elsewhere. There are those who think Scotland has a problem!

All that would matter less if Taunton Deane were a well-oiled machine, but the truth is quite the opposite. It is led by an autocrat and managed by an absentee. Its chief executive has been off for six months—with a bad back, we think, but we are not entirely sure. She has cost £80,000 in sick pay, and nobody knows what is wrong. The House will be relieved to learn, however, that she is coming back soon after seven months. She is to be phased in in January. What is “phased in”? I should try that with my Whip, who is sitting in her place.

The penny has finally dropped! Penny James and Councillor Williams have a long and undistinguished record for getting everything wrong. They were enthusiastic supporters of Southwest One. I will not bore the House. It is an appalling IT project that cost the taxpayers of Somerset £80 million and saved nothing. Taunton urgently needs to replace its IT equipment, but it does not have anybody who knows what to do with a computer, so for the chance of another expensive disaster, watch this space and my place in the House.

Taunton Deane is known as cock-up valley. That is written all over it. One of the latest occurred a couple of weeks ago. I must tell the House about it; it is fascinating.

Bob Stewart: Oh, go on.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend for his support.

The planning committee of West Somerset council was meant to be considering a highly controversial building application, but the planning officers in Taunton, forgot—Fidel Castro-style—to inform any of the interested parties. Result: red faces, great anger, expense and—guess what—it had to be pulled. In my opinion West Somerset is trapped in an unfair partnership with an ineffective, overstretched and financially dodgy council. The chances are that there would be only nine or 10 councillors left when the changes come because of the demographics. It would spell the end of local democracy, not something that we want to see.

The plan was sneaked in under the radar, using a new Act of Parliament to get round the involvement of the Boundary Commission. Cunning stuff, as Baldrick would say. The Boundary Commission is an independent body, as the House knows. It always demands a fair referendum to test public opinion when it wants it. It would have gone through the emperor’s maths with a fine-toothed comb and made a fuss if the sums did not add up. However, Emperor Williams decided to push through his plans without bothering to tell Taunton Deane’s councillors precisely how he was going to do it.

In July, Taunton Deane Council approved the merger. That decision has now led to a legal challenge by a number of Taunton Deane’s councillors who insist that they were not told the truth. The legal challenge is powerful and, I can assure the House, is already causing the emperor and his team considerable anxiety. I am not surprised, because this time he has gone too far.

Do not get me wrong: I am not against change and I never have been. Partnerships can work and collaboration between councils is sensible, and maybe there are too many overpaid senior officers and too many people in town halls who do not know what they are doing. But big issues such as these deserve proper and thorough consultation. Instead we are getting a cheapskate confidence trick dreamt up by a cheapskate confidence trickster—try saying that quickly.

Through my door at the weekend came a questionnaire seeking my opinion, which will then be conveyed to the Government. Oh yeah? Golly! The plan is that money is so tight that something had to be done, so at a stroke, and without consultation, they ruled out the possibility of any partnerships. They are now looking to see how these councillors will work. Basically, there will now be a high-level business transformation document, which presumably is deliberately phrased to convince everyone that the only way is a full-blown merger.

With mergers come costly dreams, such as Southwest One, the multi million pound IT scheme. You name it, they’ve got it. This time Taunton Deane wants to put services online and trim back the staff, but that will not work because in West Somerset broadband is intermittent—in my house it is under a megabit—or non-existent, so the population do not have computers because they do not work. Pigeons are quicker. My constituents need to be able to talk to real human beings, not robots in Japan.

Unfortunately, the architects of these great schemes never do their homework. The business plan was riddled with financial guesswork, half-truths and downright lies. The document never offered the most sensible solution, which was to go back to the drawing board, talk to neighbouring councils—exactly what the Government told them to do—and find a more imaginative way

forward. That is what I want and what the Government want, but Emperor Williams does not much fancy working with top-flight councils, because he could not cope with it—he is not that bright—so he has done everything in his power to prevent constructive talks taking place. Now he wants a Greater Taunton, a sprawling new authority with no separate identity for West Somerset.

The questionnaire asked me just about everything, from my favourite colour to my inside leg measurement, but at no point have I been invited to provide my name and address, even though it is a consultation in two councils, so anybody could respond. In fact, please write in—you can all take part and it is great fun—but do not opt for the merger in West Somerset and Taunton Deane.

The whole of this is ridiculous. These forms could be filled in by Mickey Mouse or even Emperor Williams. They have set up a new website with similar questions. It is not doing the trick. People are not conned, and we should know that in this House—we have seen Brexit and Trump. But it might not stop Councillor Williams and his mates trying to skew the results by making multiple entries from different computers on his own—yup, it happened before. It is a consultation sham designed to be abused, and it was ordered and approved by a council that claims to be democratic.

No wonder the electors in the Taunton Deane ward of Blackdown last week voted out the Conservative candidate after 42 years—it has always been blue, but no longer. They actually went and got a Liberal Democrat; that is how bad the council is. People in Taunton Deane are sick of the way the council is working, and it is getting worse. It used to be the county town, but its famous market has moved to the far better Bridgwater, the old site is still derelict and ugly, the whole area is overrun with unpopular housing schemes and there seems to be a determination to build for the sake of building.

But guess what? Emperor Williams is a builder. He looks great in a yellow hard hat and reinforced boots, and he is often photographed alongside prominent local developers—I will leave that hanging. They looked like a happy family in their ceremonial Day-Glo regalia. This month, “Brother John” was seen with the bosses of Summerfields, a local housing association, which recently completed Taunton Deane’s brand new Direct Labour headquarters—it sounds almost like something from the other side of the Chamber. It is located on a business park owned by Summerfields—funny, that—but most of the council’s workload is actually in Taunton, another town, so the staff have to go from one place to another to do their work. It is absolute madness. So why was there no reference to the extra cost when these plans were considered? One does not know. Ask Brother John.

A year or so ago, Summerfield applied for permission to build affordable homes just beside the M5—the famous M5. Guess what? Taunton Deane let it slip through. I am told the construction work was subcontracted to a company owned by, guess who, Brother John himself. Such a relationship is a bit too close for comfort, but, guess what, nobody has ever said there is a conflict of interest—they would not get away with it in most places. There is absolutely nothing in Taunton Deane’s constitution that obliges councillors to declare an interest when a subcontract is awarded. That is not good. We need openness in local government—I do not need to tell anybody here that.

I have highlighted these things simply to give the House a sense of perspective about what is going on in my part of Somerset. My constituents will not have the wool pulled over their eyes. They can smell a rat, and they know what one looks like, and I am sure they will reject this half-baked merger scheme. They want to keep their council—and so they should.

4.20 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Should fate ever somehow decree that I end up as a member of a council in Somerset, I shall make it my absolute priority—horses’ heads or no—to stay on the right side of the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger).

This has been a tumultuous year culturally and politically. With the assassination of an ambassador and a further apparent terrorist atrocity yesterday, it seems we are finishing on a stark but familiar low. The attack in Germany drives home to me the fact that, to coin the phrase of the moment, we have more in common with our European partners than divides us. I fear that the current stand-off over Brexit and the forthcoming negotiations will drive us further apart from our neighbours, when these are surely times when those nations committed to the cause of democracy, freedom and pluralism must stick together and find common ground, rather than hunker down in an introspective bunker, focused on the challenges of Brexit while the big global challenges and threats remain.

The main debate in the EU negotiations seems to be one of immigration versus free movement and access to the single market. I am in favour of the free movement of labour; I am just not in favour of the free movement of unemployment and the free movement of exploitation. Over a decade ago, as a trade union official, I saw construction workers being brought in from abroad and used on big construction projects; names such as Staythorpe power station or Lindsey oil refinery spring to mind. Those immigrant workers would be used by the prime and principal subcontractors to drive down wages in a sector where skilled, well-paid jobs provided a good standard of living and were negotiated nationally between the unions and employers, and where the system worked.

All of a sudden, wage rates were falling in a race to the bottom, which even good employers—the majority of employers—were forced to join to stay competitive. The difference was kept by the corporations and their bosses in the form of bigger profits, rather than being shared out among the men and women doing the work. Bogus agencies were set up in eastern Europe, advertising British jobs at below UK agreed rates of pay—again so that the money could be siphoned off from the workers and those at the top could keep a bigger slice for themselves.

It is unsurprising that so many working-class people voted to leave the EU, when that was their most visible personal experience of it, albeit it was not necessarily the EU that was at fault but the system of globalised capitalism we are seeing today. My solution would be simple: retain free movement in a qualified manner. If someone has a job, they can come and work here, but the job must be advertised in the UK and in English, and it must pay accepted UK rates. I suspect that the rest of the EU may soon find itself moving towards such a system anyway.

[*Christian Matheson*]

The Euro-referendum and, it would seem, events elsewhere, have brought into focus another new aspect of the state of politics, exemplified by the word of the year: post-truth. In the UK, there was no better example of that than the red Vote Leave bus, with its siren promise of an extra £350 million a week for the NHS—a promise it took Nigel Farage barely 12 hours to admit was false, on breakfast TV.

Members of the House who associated themselves with that promise have never apologised or faced the appropriate obloquy for their association with it. I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I sought guidance from Mr Speaker and the Clerks as to how I might criticise Members such as the Foreign Secretary for their association with the bus and the claim. I learned that the rules of the House preclude me from calling Members such as the Foreign Secretary deliberately mendacious. Were I allowed to do so, I would, indeed, suggest that these Members were deliberately and wilfully mendacious in the pursuit of short-term political gain—a practice that is known in Cheshire as being a snollygoster. Of course, the rules do preclude me from that, so I will not be making any such allegation.

Post-truth politics is dangerous because it devalues our political system, corrodes the quality of our democracy and diminishes public trust in our institutions. It has a broader effect too—a cultural effect, because as well as undermining honesty and trust and celebrating deceit, it celebrates ignorance and stupidity in saying that learning is not to be valued and has nothing to contribute. So when the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) told Faisal Islam on “Sky News” that he had “had enough of experts”, it was a breathtaking attack on progress, an attack on scientific and cultural learning, a devaluation of the intrinsic importance of the—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. You are mentioning Members. Did you give notice that you were going to mention Members in the Chamber?

Christian Matheson: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will bear that in mind and amend my comments suitably as a result.

When Members say that they have had enough of experts, that is an attack on progress—a devaluation of the intrinsic importance of the accumulation of knowledge as a good thing that has benefited, and will continue to benefit, humanity across the ages.

I say this clearly to the House: please reject the dishonesty of post-truth politics but reject also its regressive and reactionary message that ignorance and dishonesty are somehow a good thing. Post-truth did not put a man on the moon or develop the Hubble space telescope, post-truth did not invent the internet or the worldwide web, and post-truth will not find a cure for cancer. If we in this place cannot address an argument with fact, it may be time to reassess whether our views are correct and sustainable.

As we look forward to the new year, I make a further plea to the House to reject the notion that the 52% vote to leave is somehow the will of the people. It is the will of the majority of the people and it must be respected—we must deliver the exit from the EU agreed in the

referendum—but it cannot be portrayed as the will of all the people. The views of the 48% must be taken into account in how we exit the EU; they cannot be ignored or airbrushed away. I fully support and pay tribute to hon. Members on my Front Bench who are trying to bring the country together and make efforts to represent the 100%, because I fear that, in addition to the perils of post-truth politics, we face another threat—one of cataclysmic disunity. The referendum was brought about by this Government to halt long-running rifts over Europe in certain parts of the House, but those rifts have now been transferred to the whole country, and have fed narrow nationalism in certain parts of it. Narrow, petty nationalism cannot be the solution to any problem that we face in the world today.

I am certainly not imagining a nation where we all agree and everything is fine and dandy, but a basic consensus about how we do politics has been attacked, as exemplified by recent media attacks on High Court judges and their integrity. We are stronger when we stick together. I have never known our country to be so deeply and unpleasantly divided. We have heard so much about putting the “great” back into Great Britain; perhaps now, with all the external threats and challenges we face, it is time to put the “united” back into the United Kingdom.

4.27 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I wish to address two very important constituency issues: transport infrastructure improvements, and education provision in Filton and Bradley Stoke.

The Metrobus scheme will provide a dedicated bus route from the south of Bristol to the northern fringe of Bristol, including my constituency, in order to provide an alternative to private car journeys. It should carry 600,000 passengers per year, which equates to roughly 820 two-person car journeys a day. It is a key element in encouraging economic growth and unlocking future housing potential. It is a £100 million project funded by the Department for Transport, South Gloucestershire Council and Bristol City Council. I have always been a keen supporter of the scheme and remain so.

However, the Metrobus works have caused major congestion, disruption and delays for the residents of Bradley Stoke and the surrounding areas. For example, one of my constituency team usually has a 10 to 15-minute drive home during the rush hour, but one evening she had a journey that took nearly two hours, most of which was stuck in stationary traffic. As a resident of Almondsbury, with my constituency office in Bradley Stoke, I have experienced and shared the frustration of people stuck in these jams during commuting hours without much evidence at times, it seems, of work actually taking place on the Metrobus route. Constituents have reported to me that, while stuck in their cars in traffic jams, they have seen workmen asleep on the site. The works have taken too long and are over time, and initially there was no understanding or appreciation that people have to get in and out of Bradley Stoke every day to travel to school and work. The project has suffered from a lack of communication by the contractors and the council with locals.

I organised and chaired a public meeting earlier this year to get local people face to face with the contractors, the council and First Bus representatives. A few weeks

ago, I organised a meeting with the Alun Griffiths road contractors, MetroBus, South Gloucestershire Council, including the lead councillor responsible for transport in South Gloucestershire, Councillor Colin Hunt, and local Bradley Stoke town councillors, to try to find a workable solution to the congestion. I also met the Secretary of State for Transport a week or so ago to bring the issue to his attention and ask for his help.

Of course, I understand that major transport infrastructure projects and improvement works will cause disruption and jams occasionally. However, right next door to the congestion is the M4-M5 managed motorway scheme, which was constructed by Balfour Beatty on time and on budget. Often the contractors worked through the night and at all hours. One evening they removed a pedestrian bridge and replaced it that same night. The works were completed with minimum disruption to local residents.

I suggested to the Alun Griffiths contractors that those ought to be the methods that they should aspire to adopt, but I was told that they could not work longer hours due to health and safety considerations. Future transport infrastructure improvements should be done along the lines of the managed motorway scheme, with minimum disruption to local road users, rather than along the lines of the initially shambolic MetroBus works in my constituency.

Since the recent meeting that I organised with the stakeholders, greater efforts have been made to communicate with local residents, and progress has been made in assisting the flow of traffic to minimise the impact on local road users at peak times. However, the MetroBus works need to be completed as quickly as possible, so that we can start reaping the benefits of the scheme.

The other local issue that I want to raise relates to Winterbourne International Academy in my constituency. The Ridings Federation of Academies, which runs that academy and Yate International Academy in the constituency of Thornbury and Yate, was issued with a financial notice to improve and provide a plan on how it would achieve a balanced budget, as it has a potential deficit of £1 million. Winterbourne International Academy has had some issues with its leadership and management over the past year or two, and it now finds itself in a position where it needs to be re-brokered into a new academy structure.

During that process, parents, teachers and pupils felt that they were not being kept informed. I and my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall), were contacted by a large number of constituents who were very concerned about what was happening at the school. My hon. Friend and I met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education to bring the matter to her attention. We also met Rebecca Clark, the regional schools commissioner for south-west England, and I met the chair of trustees, Claire Emery. That enabled us to get more background information about the situation in which the federation finds itself, and to respond to our constituents and reassure them that everything possible was being done to find a solution to the difficulties in which the schools find themselves.

Winterbourne International Academy will now be taken over by a new trust. The trustees of the Ridings Federation of Academies have considered their options and communicated their recommendations to the regional schools commissioner, who has taken them to Lord Nash,

the Minister, for the final decision. There should be full clarity about who will run the trust early in the new year, but I want to place it on the record that, in future, better communication with parents, pupils and staff is needed.

I understand that the outcome that parents, pupils and staff are hoping for is that the school becomes part of a multi-academy trust managed jointly by the existing Olympus Academy Trust, which runs the successful Bradley Stoke Community School, and the Castle School Education Trust, which runs the successful Castle School in Thornbury. I welcome the recent news that, with effect from 3 January 2017, Dave Baker, chief executive officer of Olympus Academy Trust, and Will Roberts, CEO of Castle School Education Trust, will jointly provide interim leadership support for Winterbourne International Academy, with a view to appointing a principal at the end of January.

The third issue that I want to address ties in with my membership of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Defence Committee. After the Good Friday agreement, hundreds of convicted terrorists were let out of prison in the name of peace and reconciliation. There are, therefore, lots of former terrorists walking the streets, some of whom have worked their way up into eminent positions in political life. We had the debacle over the on-the-run letters and the John Downey case, where there is essentially a de facto amnesty for former terrorists, and yet the full force of the law is being used to prosecute people who were on the other side of events: former soldiers who were just doing their best, doing their duty and serving our great country. This is clearly wrong, and it smacks of victors' justice. It cannot be right to let terrorists out of prison and give them get-out-of-jail letters at the same time as we pursue former British soldiers. Surely, if there is to be lasting peace and reconciliation, there needs to be fairness on all sides—not that I think for one minute that there is any moral equivalence between terrorists, and soldiers and security forces trying to keep the peace and protect lives.

My younger son, Michael, passed out of his basic military training in Pirbright a couple of weeks ago. Of course, I am immensely proud of him. When he is, as I hope he will be, deployed on an operational tour and he asks me for advice—not that sons are very good at asking their fathers for advice, but I have done an operational tour myself—do I say to him, “Be careful,” because if mistakes are made, if things go wrong or if the politics change, even 45 years later, he could be pursued through the courts in his retirement in nothing less than a politically motivated witch hunt? I do not think so. My advice would be the same as the advice I received before my operational tour: “If you feel as though your life is in danger or your comrades' lives are in danger, do not hesitate to defend yourself.” Our Government need to support former servicepeople against this injustice, because what is happening is a stain on our country's honour. We are letting down so badly the people who risked their life to keep us safe, protect our freedoms and preserve our way of life.

4.36 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am honoured to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti). I agreed with much of what he said.

[Lyn Brown]

I am going to speak about three issues that have come up in community casework in my constituency. I have previously raised the issue of how hysteroscopies and uterine biopsies are conducted in the NHS. I have drawn to the attention of the House the serious pain and distress suffered by far too many women, who are not well served by the advice and support—or, frankly, the lack of support and empathy—that they receive from clinicians and the NHS.

As the House will, I know, be aware, in the hysteroscopy procedure a small camera is passed through the cervix to examine, and often take a sample from, the lining of the womb. Yes, that means cutting out a piece of the lining of the womb. The procedure is useful in the diagnosis of cancer and other womb conditions, as well as to investigate fertility issues and to perform minor operations. For most women, it is a significantly uncomfortable procedure, but for a sizeable number it can be unbearably painful, leading to significant blood loss, loss of consciousness and, in some cases, hospitalisation. Such procedures are usually carried out as outpatient appointments, and often without any kind of anaesthesia.

The NHS website helpfully says of the procedure:

“You may experience some discomfort similar to period cramps while it’s carried out, but it shouldn’t be painful.”

To say that that advice is misleading is something of an understatement. The problem is that for some women, the procedure is unacceptably painful. Hysteroscopy Action estimates that up to a quarter of UK hysteroscopy patients have reported severe pain. I know that you will agree with me, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is not acceptable to be led to presume that the worst that can happen is that, as the NHS website says, women will experience some discomfort, given that the reality is very different. All women need to be offered proper anaesthesia at the appropriate moment so that the sizeable minority who experience significant pain can be supported. To do anything else is nothing short of barbaric.

This is the third time that I have raised this matter in an Adjournment debate, so I have decided not to read out the cases that individuals have mailed to me, trusting that their stories will get action. Today, I ask the Deputy Leader of the House whether he will raise the matter on my behalf with the Department of Health and get a statement from the Department about pain management with hysteroscopy.

We need better systems to be put in place to ensure appropriate triage, rather than trial and error. More information about what may happen needs to be made available to patients beforehand, accompanied by the support required to ensure that women understand the risks and can make real choices about the best method of treatment for them. It is not acceptable for women to be told by a male doctor that they must have a low pain threshold when they are begging for the procedure to be stopped.

Given that this is the third time I have raised the issue and that I have received warm and comforting words from Health Ministers in the past, I fail to understand what is preventing such action. Frankly, I wonder whether it is because of money—the cost of an anaesthetic being available to women. I look forward to receiving a written response from the Department of Health. I am not an unreasonable woman, in the main—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Agreed.

Lyn Brown: Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In the main.

Lyn Brown: Indeed. Not unreasonably, I expect a response by mid-February. If I do not get one, I will seek a further debate in the House to focus attention on the issue. I cannot believe that other Members in the Chamber for this and previous debates think that what I have described is acceptable.

Secondly, a couple of months ago we had our first debate on arthritis for many years. Given that the condition affects about 10 million people—one in six of the population—one would have thought it deserved greater attention. In particular, it is important to understand the differences between the various types of arthritis and how they affect everyday life. Too often, we assume it is an issue for the elderly, not one that is really so important. In fact, one constituent wrote to me that she was very grateful for the debate, because she got an arthritic condition in her 20s. She was so exhausted by it that she was unable to continue working in the law, and she has spent many years trying to get it under control. She told me, “It’s not about having a creaky knee, but people believe that’s all it is—they simply do not understand how it can have a massive impact on somebody’s life.”

There are implications for employers, carers and the Government’s welfare to work policy. For example, rheumatoid arthritis, which occurs when the immune system targets affected joints, can be a fluctuating condition. If it is not properly controlled, it can make it so hard for a person to sustain full-time work; yet when properly understood and managed, there is no reason why an individual cannot continue their working lives, provided that there is sufficient understanding and flexibility not just to avoid and manage flare-ups, but to accommodate the necessary medical appointments. One constituent wrote to me to ask whether the House could consider a legal right to flexible working for those with fluctuating health conditions.

I recently spoke in the House about my own experience of having an immune-based arthritis and of getting it under control. I want to place on the record my thanks to the many constituents and others who got in touch with their stories and told me about their similar experiences. I am delighted to hear about the breakthroughs in medical science that will help others to live full working lives. The UK is leading the way in the development of many potential solutions. I have read about the medical research on osteoporosis being carried out in Glasgow, and I know that our European partners are also working in this area. I have read that clinical trials are taking place in the Netherlands to reverse the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis through using an electronic implant attached to a nerve. My concern is that some of the critical research collaborations in this area may be threatened by our departure from the European Union. I know that the House discussed these issues yesterday, but I would again be very grateful to the Deputy Leader of the House if he discussed this with whomever he needs to discuss it with and confirmed that specific areas of research on arthritis will be protected.

Finally, I would like to mention one of the more troubling and tragic cases I have received at my constituency surgery in recent months. It concerns a British national,

Ali Asghar Khan, the husband of a constituent. He was killed in Pakistan on a trip to visit family. He had been celebrating Eid and was returning home with two friends when their vehicle was ambushed on a mountainous road. A gunman opened fire and both Mr Khan and the driver of the vehicle were killed instantly. The third passenger, who was sat in the back of the car, managed to escape by jumping into the ravine and was subsequently able to raise the alarm.

My understanding is that Mr Khan was not the intended target of the attack, but that is of course little consolation to his widow and family. My constituents have struggled to ensure that his death is fully investigated and the perpetrators brought to account. Sadly, they are struggling to the point of being asked for money by the local investigating police force to transport files and take witness statements.

I have written to the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), about the case, and his response was really quite helpful. My purpose in raising the case today is to draw attention to the plight of the family of my late constituent and get a greater understanding of how the Government can meet the safety concerns of British nationals in Pakistan and what assistance is afforded to them while visiting the country. When he winds up, perhaps the Deputy Leader of the House will say whether he will consider pushing for some parliamentary time to discuss the subject more widely.

I thank the House for the opportunity to raise these issues today. I wish you, Mr Deputy Speaker, all colleagues and all the amazing staff of this House, who are so very good with us every single day, the very best for Christmas and the new year.

4.46 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Having served in Northern Ireland during the troubles there, I have been asked by my old comrades in the Cheshire Regiment to highlight an iniquity that has already been referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), my good friend: that many British soldiers could be reinvestigated for their actions during fatal shooting incidents. Apparently, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has been instructed to look at about 230 fatal shooting incidents, during which some 302 people died, almost all of them terrorists. If that is the case, my understanding is that about 1,000 ex-soldiers could be hauled in to account for their actions all those years ago, and could even be retrospectively charged with manslaughter or murder.

I am appalled that such actions are being taken against our soldiers when so many terrorists from all sides were granted full pardons under the Good Friday agreement. To me, it looks like a highly political and vindictive move by Mr Barra McGrory, the Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland. As I understand it, in the past McGrory represented Provisional Sinn Féin and on-the-run terror suspects as their solicitor. He negotiated an effective amnesty for many of them. His background hardly suggests impartiality to me.

Our soldiers were trained to apply strict rules of engagement. The so-called yellow card—technically, “Instructions by the Director of Operations for Opening Fire in Northern Ireland”—was both detailed and precise.

The rules of engagement outlined exactly when soldiers could use firearms, and our troops spent a long time being instructed about them during pre-Northern Ireland training sessions.

Opening fire in Northern Ireland was considered a very serious matter by the Army. After every shooting incident, regardless of casualties, the Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary held an investigation. When such events involved casualties or fatalities, strict procedures were followed. That normally involved soldiers having to go to court to prove that they had acted within the law and the yellow card rules.

In one incident in which I played a small part, I recall having to tell two soldiers that, having escaped with their lives by opening fire, they would none the less be charged with manslaughter. Unsurprisingly, the two men, still in some shock, were utterly appalled. They shouted at me, saying that they had been abandoned by the Army. As their superior officer, I totally understood their feelings and shared them. None the less, the Royal Ulster Constabulary had informed me that the two soldiers had to be charged with manslaughter. Personally I was furious and I argued vociferously that this was wrong and very unfair. Regardless, the soldiers appeared in court. It was quickly proved that they had acted within the law, and their case was dismissed.

It was difficult for me and especially the soldiers at the time to understand the reason for that court appearance, but it was explained to me that, having had their case dismissed, they could never be charged again—perhaps, if the political climate changed. Guess what? It seems to have done. I had difficulty seeing the logic at the time. Then later, after the immediate drama was over, I did. I believed that the whole matter had been dealt with in court and it was over—forever. But maybe I was wrong. I presume that my two men could be among the 302 soldiers apparently under investigation by the Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland.

I do not maintain that our servicemen and women are above the law—of course they are not. But re-opening all fatal shooting incidents involving soldiers is hugely one-sided and looks very bad to the armed services community, and that includes me and several other Members of the House.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the hon. and gallant Gentleman for giving way. He was a leader of the Cheshire Regiment, and many of my constituents served with him in that excellent regiment. Does he agree that all those former servicemen who risked their lives serving in Northern Ireland, including my constituents, deserve to have that black cloud removed from them as quickly as possible?

Bob Stewart: I thank my good friend—I call him that because he comes from Chester and I commanded the Cheshire Regiment—for that intervention. Yes, our soldiers should not be under this cloud. They are not terrorists. Terrorists have been given amnesty and a pardon in the Good Friday agreement. Why should our men, some of them quite old now, not sleep soundly when terrorists who have killed do so? It is wrong, iniquitous and possibly malicious, and it is a huge waste of public money while we are at it. Why is the Director of Public Prosecutions not telling the Police Service of Northern

[Bob Stewart]

Ireland to direct its efforts into clearing up and charging so many unsolved terrorist murders from the time of the troubles?

Incidents involving soldiers were investigated at the time and, if wrong was done, our soldiers were taken to court at the time. Some even went to prison. What sort of people are we who give terrorists amnesty and hound those who put their lives at risk for the rest of us?

I demand that the legal authorities in Northern Ireland desist from this clearly politically inspired blanket action against what could be almost 1,000 soldiers. They should concentrate their energies on finding the still-unlocated remains of the many innocent people massacred by terrorists, and bring those murderers to book.

4.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a real pleasure to follow the gallant gentleman, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I wholeheartedly support his comments, and those of the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti); I think they resonate with everyone in the House. We all want the prosecutions and investigations to stop.

May I first associate myself and my party, the Democratic Unionist party, with the comments that have been made about all those who have lost loved ones in the awfulness of the unspeakable attack, so close to a church, in Berlin? We offer our sincere sympathies. It is good that we remember, at this time of year, those who grieve.

In the short time available, I want to speak about making a difference. I also want to focus on this time of the year. I am one of those guys who loves Christmas. I love taking my grandchildren to special church services, attending services in different churches and just remembering the real reason for the season: a chance to celebrate Jesus. We all know, in all reality, that 25 December is not just the day Jesus was born. It is a time to focus our minds on the greatest gift ever given to mankind: the Lord Jesus, the greatest story ever told.

Last week, I tabled an early-day motion on the real meaning of Christmas. Many Members took the opportunity to sign it and to endorse that comment. The Christmas message is the celebration of Jesus who came as a baby, grew to be a man and gave his life for those who would accept him into their hearts. I love the celebration of his birth, as I see it as a time for faith, for family and for focus. I want to thank the Lord Jesus for the personal faith that I have.

I thank God for the time that I spend over Christmas with my family: with my wife and the boys, my granddaughters and my mother. I take the two days as days to be with them. I cherish the time to laugh—and to be laughed at!—and just to be in each other's company all together. Finally, I see it as a time when I refocus on what is important and on what I need to do. It is a time when I think on my role and how I can make a difference in my own family, my own community and my own constituency.

The hon. Member for Beckenham spoke about our soldiers. While we are in this House, Army, RAF and Navy personnel, and those in the emergency services—the police, fire and ambulance services—are all working to protect us. We should put that on the record.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am the chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief. I want to focus on and pray for persecuted Christians across the world who cannot worship their God as we will this Christmas, and to think of the 100,000 Christians who will be killed for their faith this year, the 200 million who will be persecuted and the 2 billion who live in an endangered neighbourhood. Those are the facts of where we are.

It is Christmas time and we all enjoy a good Christmas movie. "It's a Wonderful Life" starring James Stewart is a great film that could probably epitomise the life of every person in the Chamber and every person we meet out in the street, because every person's life has an effect on everyone else. When I think about making a difference, I want to focus on that. I will relate a quick story to illustrate that, which I believe carries a lesson for us all.

An old man used to go to the ocean to do his writing. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish in both directions as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance, the old man noticed a small boy approaching, wearing his wellington boots and carrying a bucket. As the boy walked, he paused every so often. As he grew closer, the man could see that he was occasionally bending down to pick up an object, put it into his bucket and take it into the sea. The boy came closer still and the man called out, "Good morning! May I ask what it is that you are doing?" The young boy paused, looked up and replied, "Taking starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up on to the beach and they can't return to the sea by themselves. When the sun gets high, they will die unless I take them back to the water." The old man said, "But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on the beach, and I am afraid that you will not be able to make much of a difference." The young boy bent down and picked up yet another starfish, put it into his bucket and took it out to the sea as far as he could. Then he turned, smiled and said, "Ah, yes, but I can make a difference to this one." People may raise their eyebrows—

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his inspiring story. I would like to pay tribute to his work on the all-party group on freedom of religion or belief. It is my belief that he is making a difference to people across the world, and for that, I am most grateful to him.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, which I greatly appreciate.

People may raise their eyebrows when I highlight individual cases in this place, but it is because I believe in trying to make a difference where I can. There is time for each Member to focus on our constituencies to see where we can make a difference. It could be the time taken to fill out a benefits form for someone who is deserving; contacting the Housing Executive to get someone's heating fixed more quickly; the time spent sitting down with businessmen and women to see how they feel the Government could do better for small and medium-sized businesses; giving someone help to get an operation or to get further up the list for their medical examinations and investigations; contacting the road

service about potholes; the time taken with producers to register concerns about Brexit and to highlight the necessities going forward; or the time we take as MPs to encourage others to focus on their families and communities. I believe that we have a duty and a responsibility to attempt to encourage others to do what we do and not simply as we say.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland in my area recently put a post on Facebook, and instead of breaking into a house where an elderly lady had rung for an ambulance but could not come to the door, neighbours were able to contact the family to let the emergency services in. This sense of community simply warmed my heart, and harks back to the days long ago when people left their doors open and their neighbours looked out for them. I am sure we can all remember that happening in the past. There is more of a need now than ever to take care of each other where we can, to look out for our elderly relatives and neighbours, and to help where we can. Yes, it takes time; yes, it takes effort; but we will all be the beneficiaries from living in a community that cares, one in which people can and do trust their neighbours. Perhaps that is the Christmas message that applies all year round, which should be sent from this Chamber: make a difference where you can.

I am very aware that I am only one of 650 Members in this place. I am only one of an eight-strong DUP team grouping in this place. It is a party that, if I may say so respectfully, boxes above its weight. Instead of throwing my hands up and giving up on making a difference, I pledge to keep on making a difference where I can. This is the mantra that I believe this new year should bring: do what we can for everyone. I have a lovely quotation from Edward Everett Hale:

“I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.”

This is a lesson that we in this place can all take on board: to have the mentality of doing what we can for all those that we can help.

I want to put on record my thanks to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to all the Deputy Speakers and to Mr Speaker for your understanding and your patience, and for giving us the chance to speak in this House. That applies particularly to myself, given that I try to contribute on a regular basis. I thank you, too, for understanding my Ulster Scots accent. I see that the Deputy Leader of the House is looking at me, and I know that he enjoys my Ulster Scots accent, so I hope he has understood my speech well. I want to thank all the staff who look after us here and keep us safe. I thank the *Hansard* staff who clearly write down all the words. Just when I think they are getting to understand me, they send down a wee note asking, “What was that you said again?” We still have some learning to do, but it is a privilege and pleasure to be a Member of this House.

Bob Stewart: I would like to say one thing to my friend: sometimes we may not understand you, but my God, you’ve got one hell of a heart, and we can see it.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As he knows, I think the same about him, and we have a mutual understanding in relation both to our service in Northern Ireland, in uniform, and to our service in the House.

I wish all right hon. and hon. Members a very merry Christmas and a happy new year, and God bless for 2017.

5.4 pm

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I, too, think that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) makes a big difference in the House, and is a great asset to the Chamber.

I agreed with everything that was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) about the onerous nature of the quarterly tax returns, and I hope that the Minister will think about her proposals, which I fully support.

I want to speak briefly about assessments by the Department for Work and Pensions. I am pleased to say that we have good employment figures in my constituency, and I am grateful for the fact that since 2010 the unemployment figures have decreased by 34%. I am, however, concerned about the attitude shown in DWP assessments.

Many of us have seen Ken Loach’s film “I, Daniel Blake”, and observed the excellent acting of Dave Johns in that film. It is a very moving film, but what is more troubling for me is the people whom I have met in my surgery who are not actors, but who have lived through the kind of scenes that have been portrayed by Ken Loach. Indeed, I have seen people who have been treated worse than the character in “I, Daniel Blake”.

My concern, which I have mentioned to Ministers in the past, is that people with terminal illnesses or degenerative conditions must not go through an assessment if they have a consultant’s report. I value the assurance from the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), that such people did not need to have repeated assessments, but others who undergo the DWP assessment must be treated with dignity. I have met people—gentlemen older than me—who have been shamed in those assessments, and who have not been given the respect that they deserve. That is shameful.

I believe that, just as we need the police to wear body cameras, we need DWP assessments to be recorded—with, obviously, the agreement of the people undergoing them—so that if it is felt that someone has not been treated with respect, or, worse, has been shamed, the assessors can at least be shown why and how they have given that impression, and training can be provided so that it never, ever happens again. There needs to be recording, and there needs to be more accountability. No one should ever feel shamed when undergoing these assessments.

Having said that, as this is Christmas, I wish Mr Speaker and his Deputies, our excellent staff and all Members a very merry and peaceful break.

5.8 pm

Sir David Amess: Before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess, I want to raise a number of points. As we move towards Christmas we celebrate the birth of new life, but many Members and others who work here will be reflecting on bereavements. I have been in the Chamber and listened to outpourings from colleagues who have lost babies. Then we think of the murder of

[*Sir David Amess*]

our colleague Jo Cox. I join other Members in hoping that that record will become No. 1, and a good bit of money will be made from it.

My own mother, Maud, died earlier this year at the age of 104. People would say that she had had a good innings, and she did live long enough to vote in the European referendum. Obviously, however, for many people Christmas will not be quite the same, so I want to spend a moment talking about bereavement counselling services. As I listened to colleagues talking about their experiences 10, 15 or even 20 years ago, it was clear to me that those services are very important.

I praise the all-party parliamentary group for funerals and bereavement for what it does, and, in particular, I praise Fair Havens Hospice in my constituency. For over 30 years the hospice's staff have carried out the wishes of Dame Cicely Saunders and have allowed people to live rather than to die. They play a vital role in supporting families in their time of greatest need and their bereavement counselling services are second to none. More than 75% of those who work at the hospice are volunteers, and £3 out of every £4 goes to the hospice. I hope that somewhere in the wider world there is an individual with lots of money who might help us, as we want to kick-start the fund for our new hospice.

Southend hospital has a number of challenges. I was convinced by the Essex success regime that we would see management changes, but that just has not happened yet. I hope we can get on with it, and any alterations to accident and emergency services can only happen if they are clinically led.

I am delighted to tell the House that on 1 January Southend alternative city of culture will be launched. An illuminated train will be going to the end of the pier—the longest pier in the world—and our new Southend town crier will be saying, “Oyez, oyez, oyez,” welcoming the year of celebrations. We have 12 themes. Each month we will be celebrating food and drink, music, fashion, architecture, the armed forces: the list is endless, and I am greatly heartened by the way the local community is rallying around in support of the event.

At the same time Southend will be celebrating the 125th anniversary of the founding of the borough. There will be events celebrating the historic milestone, including the festival of Southend-on-Sea, led by her worship the Mayor of Southend, Mrs Judith McMahon, and the leader of the council, John Lamb. It will be a wonderful occasion.

John Lamb is very concerned that the upper-tier local authorities are struggling to meet the spiralling costs of adult social care, with budgets still reducing through reductions in Government grant. I will be grateful if my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House gently asks the Secretary of State to again look at funding for adult social care, particularly for councils such as Southend.

The Scottish National party chose the Chilcot inquiry as the subject of one of its Opposition day debates. I was very disappointed with the outcome. The Chilcot report took seven years to produce and cost £13 million. Most Members were not present so cannot be blamed, but a terrible mistake was made. It is clear from the report who was to blame and I very much hope that at some stage the former Prime Minister Tony Blair will be

called before one of the Select Committees to give an account of how on earth he came to those decisions which were clearly wrong.

On Iran, I was very pleased to see that the refugees from Camp Liberty were successfully airlifted to Albania back in September, and I hope that Mrs Maryam Rajavi, leader of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, will be able to speak in the UK at some point.

School inspections is a worry for all our schools, and I was appalled by the inspection at our wonderful local Our Lady of Lourdes school. I do not know whether the inspector had an agenda, but how on earth the inspectorate team could have judged the school as failing beggars belief. That shows absolutely poor judgment. School inspections generally should be revisited when a new chief inspector of schools is in place.

My constituent David Forde was arrested under counter-terrorism legislation at the beginning of the month after returning from Kurdistan where he had been giving infantry and life-saving medical training to the Peshmerga, who have been funded by the UK. His arrest is a disgrace. This constituent has been left with no money and no support and I intend on another occasion to raise the subject in a dedicated Adjournment debate.

Mr Markos, a constituent of mine, and his mother have lost their home—he has lost everything—following a boundary dispute about a fence that was just 4 inches out of place. In his case, the law was an ass, and this perverse case really wants looking at again.

In August, we launched a public appeal in Southend for the London Shipwreck Trust. I am a trustee of the organisation, and it is wonderful that valuable artefacts are being rescued from the Thames estuary.

Pulse fishing has been brought to my attention by fishermen in Leigh-on-Sea. I do not think that fish terribly enjoy having pulses sent through their bodies, and I hope that the Fisheries Minister will carefully consider the issue before he comes to meet me and others.

The Eastwood Academy is one of the outstanding schools in my constituency. It has achieved magnificent progress at all levels and was selected to appear in the 2016 Parliamentary Review for its efforts in raising standards in secondary education.

I was delighted to support Gas Safety Week. There have been more than 20 gas-related deaths and over 1,000 gas-related injuries over the past three years.

I recently met Jesuits from the Philippines, including Richard Greenwood, assistant director of Jesuit Missions, and Father Pat and Bernie, who spoke to me about the inspiring work of SLB, their organisation which promotes socio-political involvement and has led massive disaster-relief operations. I commend them for their work.

Anglia Ruskin University celebrates 25 years of university status next year. I recently met the new vice-chancellor, who briefed me on the plans for the next 25 years, including specialist medical degrees aimed at increasing the number of doctors and nurses to fill vacancies in the NHS. I salute the university for its work.

Marine protection zones are important. The UK has a reputation for being a leader in ocean conservation, and I congratulate conservationists on their work.

I want to refer to a few local issues. I congratulate Borough, a third-generation family-owned plating business, for sustaining its operations for 50 years. I was delighted to visit Pride & Joy Classic Cars in my constituency.

I congratulate the local activists who took part in the walk of witness for climate change and the active ageing event that was held in my constituency. It was also a privilege to visit the Explore Enterprise programme run by the Prince's Trust, and I congratulate the young people involved on their wonderful work. I visited Angloco, which is doing marvellous work in delivering 45 new fire engines to Essex County Fire and Rescue. I also had the opportunity to visit Pinewood Studios. I am still waiting for a casting, but it is going to help with the alternative city of culture project.

I also had good visits to the Philippines, where one of our colleagues took us to Smokey Mountain, which was a humbling experience, and to the Dominican Republic, which is keen on doing further trade with us.

So, Brexit does mean Brexit, and I hope that we will make a success of it. I wish Mr Speaker, the three Deputy Speakers, all parliamentary colleagues and everyone who works in the House of Commons a very happy Christmas, good health and a wonderful new year.

5.18 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who represents arguably the second best seaside resort on the east coast. Before I move on to what are more mundane issues than those that others have spoken about, I want to say how much I agree with the comments of my honourable and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who spoke for the whole House.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—my hon. Friend—reminded us of the real message of Christmas. Like many Members, I have attended many services of nine lessons and carols over the past couple of weeks, which of course include the opening passages from the gospel of St John. I always find particularly profound the section about how Jesus came into the world, but “the world knew him not.”

We often reflect on some of the more perverted religious happenings in the news, but we should remember the true meaning and the fact that faith is the driving force for so much good that happens in the world. I commend the hon. Gentleman for what he said about that.

I wish to reflect on some of the more mundane issues that affect my constituency and highlight some challenges facing it. In doing so, I am mindful that I do not want to give the impression that I am just here holding out a begging bowl to the Government for more money for this, that and the other, although that would be very welcome. The resort of Cleethorpes has responded to the changing situation and has an offer unsurpassed among resorts on the east coast. Only last week, one of the three finalists in the British high street awards were the traders from Sea View Street in Cleethorpes, which shows how dedicated small, independent retailers can be. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West talked about the longest pier, but Cleethorpes has the pier of the year, a prize that we are certainly not going to be giving up easily to Southend, however cultured it may or may not be. My constituency also contains the largest port complex in the country, at Immingham, and has a rich rural hinterland stretching as far north as Barton-upon-Humber, at the southern end of the Humber bridge.

So much for the advantages of my area—I now turn to how we are going to meet the challenges. Regeneration is an essential ingredient of lifting morale, and in the North East Lincolnshire Council area we have put together a team made up of the council leader, the chief executive, myself and a number of private sector partners. We are putting together plans that I am sure will attract private sector investors, but that will need some Government support. I have discussed this with a number of Ministers in recent weeks, and we hope to receive that support when plans are finalised. As I said, this is not just holding out a begging bowl, but a genuine attempt to inject investment into the area.

Cleethorpes has done incredibly well, but may I draw attention to local government funding? I recognise that local government was bloated and, to some extent, inefficient. I spent 26 years as a local councillor, so I have seen many of its failings, but the Government need to recognise that a council budget can be cut only so far. I am not referring to adult social care, important though that is; many of the things that make our lives that little bit better—libraries, parks, gardens and so on—are being cut to the bone in many respects. Those little things do improve people's quality of life. We need them and enjoy them, and I urge the Government to recognise that as we try to come to terms with balancing the country's finances.

Housing is rightly a priority for the Government, who have introduced many new and innovative schemes, but too many homes are being built on greenfield sites. The main entrance to a town such as Cleethorpes could be greatly enhanced by investment, whereby retail units that have been made redundant by a change in shopping habits could be given new life. This is a main arterial route into the resort, and investment in such an area is very worth while. While on the subject of housing, let me say that I note the section in the statement by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government saying that a consultation would be held on whether or not to withhold new homes bonus payments from developments that were granted only after appeal. I can give my response to that consultation now: forget it! Local democracy is important and the Government have done a lot to bring about localism, but this move goes completely against that. I urge the Government to think again and abandon even the consultation.

Transport connections are vital to any local economy, and my constituency is no exception. It is moderately well served by road, with the A180-M180 link providing access into the national motorway network, although there is room for improvement. The A180 still has stretches of that old concrete surface, which is extremely annoying to my constituents who live in villages such as Stallingborough and causes an unacceptable level of noise.

I welcome the almost complete £100 million A160 upgrade, which will enhance access to the port of Immingham. The next part of the jigsaw in the network of roads that give access to Immingham and the Humber ports is the A15 between Lincoln and where it joins the A180 close to Scunthorpe. It is an extremely dangerous single-carriageway road that urgently needs dualling. I recognise that it is a local road and that the Government can therefore get away with saying, “It's nothing to do with us, gov,” but it provides important access to the Humber ports, which are part of a strategic Government policy, so the Government need to give the road some consideration.

[*Martin Vickers*]

Let me turn to rail services. This is yet another opportunity for me to put the case for a direct rail service between Cleethorpes and Grimsby and London Kings Cross. Business in the area regards it as vital and this issue is raised at every meeting I and neighbouring MPs attend. As I mentioned, Immingham is the largest port in the country—25% of the rail freight in the country comes and goes from there, but passengers cannot and the area needs that. The Office of Rail and Road recently considered an application from Great North Eastern Railways, an open-access operator that wanted to provide those services. However, because it was linked to additional services into Yorkshire, the ORR had to reject it because it had to protect Virgin East Coast's market share. I recognise how important that is from the Treasury's point of view, as Virgin pays a huge amount of money for the privilege of running those trains, but is that decision more to do with the interests of the company and the Treasury rather than the interests of the passengers?

I chair the regeneration committee for Barton-upon-Humber in the North Lincolnshire Council part of my constituency. I congratulate Councillor Rob Waltham, the deputy leader of the council, who sits alongside me at those meetings and delivers some of the minor improvements to the town that are essential. I know that that goes against what I was saying earlier, but I question how long even a well-run council such as North Lincolnshire will be able to maintain those schemes.

I remind the House that the rural economy is not just about agriculture but about other rural pursuits and it is important that we recognise that conservation comes naturally to those working in the countryside.

Finally, may I reflect on the educational performance in our area? Like many coastal communities we have many high-performing schools but poor standards overall. The argument about selection will run and run, as it has for the past 30 years. My view is that if selection can provide our young people with more choice in the schools in the area, we should focus on the areas where results demand change. Grammar schools can be a force for good and, for some, that is an opportunity we should not deny them. I would also argue that bilateral schools, which are part selective, have a role to play in my area.

I will conclude by following on from the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West about Brexit, which was voted for by 70% of my constituents. I believe that they were right to do so and that it will give our country more opportunities. In our area, the common fisheries policy has long been a cause for concern. I urge the Government, as I have done on previous occasions, not to forget the fishing industry. It was forgotten in those original negotiations in the 1970s. At one time up to 600 deep-sea trawlers sailed out of Grimsby, providing thousands of jobs to the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area. That is now down to a handful of near-water boats, but there are still great opportunities for those in the fishing industry and the food and fish processing industry, which are vital to the Cleethorpes constituency.

I conclude by wishing you, Mr Speaker, and all Members and staff a happy Christmas and a peaceful new year.

5.30 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I start by thanking all the emergency services for their work over the Christmas period, especially those who will be working while we are enjoying time with our families. As I propose to speak on a Home Affairs issue, I pay particular tribute to the police.

I was out on a Walk the Met session with the Chessington safer neighbourhood team just last week and saw the excellent work they do for us day in, day out. Kingston is now the safest borough in London and I want to put on record my thanks to Chief Superintendent Glenn Tunstall, who retires in three days as Kingston's borough commander with that accolade. I am pleased that I started my dealings with Chief Superintendent Tunstall with a campaign for more police officers in Kingston town centre and ended it with a campaign for automatic number plate recognition software on the A3 corridor, both of which he pushed for and our Conservative council is delivering.

Today I want to speak about a national challenge for the police—the rise of hate speech and extremism online. I will refer to Facebook and Twitter because they are the most widely used social networks, not because they are the only platforms on which these issues arise or the only companies that bear responsibility for them. Social media has revolutionised the way we communicate, the way we receive news and information and the way companies advertise. Undoubtedly, it has many social benefits and can be used as a force for good, but social media platforms are being abused by those who wish to do our society and individuals in our society grave harm.

It is important to remember at all times that these social media platforms are not established and maintained out of a sense of altruism. They are designed to make money for their owners, principally through advertising revenues. The revenues of Facebook in particular are enormous and I do not criticise the company for that.

Right now, in less than a minute, any Member of this House with an iPhone would be able to find copious amounts of hate speech on Twitter—racism, especially anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, homophobia and many other forms of discrimination, and not just language that would not survive the Equality Act 2010, but language that is downright abusive and would not survive our criminal law.

In the Home Affairs Committee's recent report on anti-Semitism, we outlined how a Jewish colleague received 2,500 abusive tweets over a few days using the hashtag #filthyjewbitch. Two of her abusers have already been sent to prison for this. Now there can be no dispute that that hashtag is offensive, abusive and racist, yet if one searches for that hashtag now, as I did just a few moments ago, one will find it still on Twitter, not from two hours ago or even two weeks ago, but from two years ago. I say that that is a disgrace, especially after the matter has been raised by a Committee of this House.

Although hate speech makes up a very small proportion of the overall traffic on social networking sites, when we live our lives more and more online, and this speech exists online in a way that it does not exist in the street or in the way we speak to one another, there is a risk that it becomes normalised and gives a licence to others to repeat it and to do worse.

I turn to the other factor—extremism. The issue does not stop at hate speech. Just as social media are used by people to advertise holidays and beauty products, they are used by those who want to advertise terrorism. It is no exaggeration to say that Daesh has run the most successful propaganda campaign since Goebbels in Nazi Germany, yet Daesh has a much wider audience because of the reach of social media. It has managed to persuade people who enjoy all the rights and privileges that we enjoy in this country to travel to Syria to work with a barbarous medieval regime or to commit atrocities here in Europe, like those which we saw in Nice and appear to have seen in Berlin.

I am not going to overstate my case and blame all of this on social media, because that is certainly not the reality, but I am going to say that young people in Britain today are being radicalised in their bedrooms, and the gateway to a lot of the radical material online is the common social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition to being a conduit through which extremists are recruited, social media are used by Daesh and its supporters to generate propaganda to attract support and funds. Social media platforms that are used by millions of our constituents every minute of every day are being abused by people who want to peddle extremism and hate. What are social media companies doing about that? The answer is, far too little. I have not heard one Member of this House demur from that proposition.

I am not sure that we, as a society, should accept the proposition that organisations such as social media companies should be allowed to create something to make money that has the potential to do harm, or at least to facilitate harm, and then claim that because it has become so big, it is unreasonable to expect them to do more to prevent that harm. I say that the polluter should pay.

Who is left to pick up the pieces? The police. With the Home Affairs Committee and the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who was then our Chair, I visited Scotland Yard to see the unit where dozens of officers spend all day every day going through Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites to flag up this material. They do that not really for any law enforcement purpose—they are not there to apply for a court order—but merely so that they can tell Twitter, in particular, that something violates its own in-house terms of use. To its credit, Twitter often removes that material, but why should the police have to do the searching? The Committee also visited The Hague, where Europol has a similar unit for non-English language material. My question is this: why should our constituents' taxes be used to fund our police to do the work that social media companies should be doing themselves?

My father, who passed away three years ago this week, was fond of quoting Margaret Thatcher. I have not been able to verify this quote, but she once said that she did not like people coming to her with problems but no solutions. I will therefore present three options in the few minutes remaining. The first is to consider legislation. The most straightforward approach would be to make social media companies liable for what they allow or enable to be published on their platforms. For other reasons, including libel and copyright law, that would be devastating for those companies; they do not want it to happen. The German Government announced only

last week that they will consider legislating for fines of up to half a million euros for social media companies that fail to remove within 24 hours posts that breach Germany's hate speech laws. We can be emboldened by the fact that our friends and allies in Europe are considering legislation.

The second option is to encourage social action. Social media companies rely on their members seeing the advertising from which they make money. If we voted with our feet, they would not be able to survive. If we, as users of social media—most, if not all of us are—made it clear that we would not stand for hate speech or extremism on those platforms, that would send a very clear message.

The third option, which I favour, is that social media companies get their own house in order, take a bit of responsibility and, for once, show some real leadership. They could establish, or at least fund, a not-for-profit organisation that employs people to identify and remove offending posts, that uses and develops their technological brilliance in order to filter out that material for manual checking, and that has police officers stationed there, paid for by that organisation, to gather intelligence and progress any cases that need legal input. There is a model for that in the National Centre for Missing & Exploited Children in Washington, DC, which I have had the fortune to visit. It is a not-for-profit organisation, funded by the technology sector—in large part by Facebook and Google—that tackles, among other things, online child exploitation. Why can that not apply to online hate speech and extremism?

I suggest that social media companies go away for Christmas, have a long, hard think and come back early in the new year with a proper proposal for an organisation of that kind, so that they can tackle online extremism and hate speech. If they do not do so, they should expect to be scrutinised in this House and for there to be concerted calls for legislation to make them do so in 2017.

On that note, I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everyone else present a merry Christmas and a happy new year.

5.40 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), who gave an excellent speech. He is right to have raised the problems of extremism and hate crime on the world wide web. I had to step out during the debate because I was leading my own debate on the tragic death of Brandon Singh Rayat, a 15-year-old boy who committed suicide because of the cyber-bullying he had experienced, and I am glad his parents are in the Public Gallery, as they were earlier in Westminster Hall.

The hon. Gentleman is right that leadership needs to be shown on this issue. There has been a succession of reports by the Home Affairs Committee, one them co-authored by the Deputy Leader of the House before he was promoted to his august position. The tragedy is that these things are not followed up—an excuse is always given. The hon. Gentleman's example of the organisation, funded by the companies, that can professionally monitor what is going on, rather than people having to try to find out who in California they should speak to if they want something removed from

[*Keith Vaz*]

the net, is a very good one. Rather than serving on the Home Affairs Committee, he should be giving evidence to it on this important point. I hope he will put his example to the Committee when it next meets.

In the few moments I have to speak in this traditional debate, I want to raise a few of my passions. First, as I said, I am glad to see the parents of Brandon Singh Rayat here. I hope the debate will lead to Mina Rayat being able to pursue her important campaign on cyber-bullying, which she launched two weeks ago, and that she will continue with it. When someone loses a child of 15—some of us in the House today are parents—it must be an unspeakable tragedy for them, and this campaign will give hope to families in a similar position.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned support for his local police service. When the Deputy Leader of the House comes to reply, I hope he will give us some good news about an issue that still concerns me: the Government's failure to announce the police funding formula for not just the Leicestershire constabulary but the police service throughout the country. The former policing Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning), said the review of the police funding formula had been paused until the National Police Chiefs Council had completed its investigation into policing capabilities. We now know that Sara Thornton, the chair of the council, has said there is nothing to stop the review from proceeding at the same time as her capabilities review. It would therefore be good to find out when constabularies such as Leicestershire and Buckinghamshire, London boroughs such as Kingston and, indeed, Northern Ireland—although I think there is probably a different formula there—will know precisely how much money the police will have to spend.

As is my custom, I want to mention diabetes; I would be missing an opportunity if I did not. There is a time of year when people eat a lot of sugar, mince pies, cakes and things of that kind, as I have just done—I will have my metformin shortly to compensate. It is important to look at the variations in care for diabetes. Diabetes UK published a very interesting report with the all-party group on diabetes, which I am privileged to chair. The report was launched by the Health Secretary recently and pointed out that people are able to get structured education and care in certain parts of the country but not in others.

If, when I was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, I had been sent off to the gym instead of being sent to the pharmacy to get my metformin and my other tablets, perhaps I would have prevented its onset. It would have come eventually, I know, because my mother had diabetes as well, but that might have prevented for a little longer its taking hold of my system. We should look at ways of saving money in the long term by spending more money now, and that means through structured education.

A number of my constituents will be heading off to India because the Indian Government have decided to recall the 1,000 rupee note, which is worth about £10, and the 500 rupee note, which is worth only £5, as part of their campaign to root out corruption in India. A number of British Indians came back with rupees when they last visited the country. When we go abroad we change our money and sometimes do not change it back over there but bring it back with us. A lot of my

constituents, and indeed other members of the British Indian community, are having to change their money by 31 December, so many of them have very quickly decided to go back in order to bank it before it ceases to be legal tender. It is as though we had gone abroad with our £20 notes and suddenly the British Government had announced, "The £20 notes are no longer legal tender—please come back and bank them before 31 December."

I wrote to the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, about the issue. He wrote back to tell me that if the Indian Government agreed, he would be quite happy for the rupees to be banked in an Indian bank in the United Kingdom to save my British Indian constituents, and others, from having to go all the way back to India. A lot of cricket supporters who have just gone over to India for the cricket matches have changed their pounds into rupees and now cannot change them back, so this is a good way of proceeding.

I wonder whether the Deputy Leader of the House could speak to the Foreign Secretary; I wrote to him some time ago to ask the British Government to contact the Indian Government to enable the notes to be banked in the United Kingdom. There are eight Indian banks in Leicester East; I am sure that the Deputy Leader of the House has one or two in Northampton North. This is an opportunity to save a lot of money for people who would otherwise have to go all the way to India just to put their money in the bank.

I have two final points, one of which is about Yemen. There is tragedy in Syria. The tragedies in Berlin and Turkey are terrible events that have shocked the whole world, but the situation in Yemen has now been ongoing for 15 months. Mr Speaker, you kindly granted an urgent question last week when we looked at the situation in Yemen, and the situation is not improving. The basic foods are not available. As I said to the Prime Minister when she gave her statement on the European Council on Monday, citizens in Hudaydah are eating grass and drinking sea water. The ports are closed and the airport is closed, so wheat cannot be brought into Yemen. Without wheat, people will not be able to survive.

This is not about a lack of aid. I thank you again, Mr Speaker, for coming to the Yemen day that we held last week, where we met members of the Yemen diaspora. Eight aid agencies were there, together with a Minister of State at the Department for International Development and a Foreign Office Minister, and we heard from the UN Deputy Secretary-General. Unless the ports and the airport are opened, humanitarian aid cannot be got in. The appeal launched last week by the Disasters Emergency Committee on the BBC has raised a lot of money, but there is no point in just having the money; it has to be spent on the people in Hudaydah and in other parts of Yemen. I very much hope that we will pursue the cause of a ceasefire.

Finally, let me say why I will remember 2016 as a good year. There are lots of reasons why I might not remember it as being particularly riveting, but for one reason I will: the victory of Leicester City football club as the English champions. It was one of those great events. I am not going to say that it will never happen again, because we know what happened to Mr Gary Lineker. Full marks to him for wearing only his underwear, as he promised he would do, when he lost his bet with the nation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a Leicester City supporter—he supports the foxes. Every time I go to a match at the King Power stadium, I bring him back a programme. People wonder why I take two programmes and I always say that one of them is for him, so he has a collection that is as good, if not better, than mine. A number of other Members also support Leicester City football club. This was our year—it was a fantastic year—and that is why I was so pleased that, only on Sunday, Signor Ranieri was named coach of the year and Leicester City team of the year. The year 2016 has been a historic year for us; we will never, ever forget it and it will probably never be repeated.

Jim Shannon: Did Arsenal win anything?

Keith Vaz: I was going to say something about Arsenal—I thank my hon. Friend—because, of course, Mr Speaker is a great supporter of theirs. What unites us, of course, is that we do not really want to see Chelsea win the league. I think that it is Arsenal's turn, but every time they get to the top of the premier league, something goes wrong. This year, we will keep our fingers crossed—not just for Mr Speaker, but for young Oliver, who can recite the players' names backwards and forwards in the blink of an eye. Of course, we will carry on winning the premier league, but we would like to share it; it is only fair that we should give it to another team. This week I will place a bet on Leicester winning the champions league, because I am hopeful that we will proceed. That is what 2017 will be all about for me.

May I end by wishing you, Mr Speaker, the staff of the House, the Deputy Leader of the House, Ministers and colleagues on both sides of the House a very happy Christmas? I understand that it was an old tradition—I wonder whether this is in “Erskine May”—that whoever wound up this debate for the Government always ensured that every Member who was still in the House when it rose for the Christmas recess would get a mince pie. I do not know whether you have heard that particular story, Mr Speaker, but one of the Doorkeepers mentioned it to me, so I am looking forward to visiting the rooms of the Deputy Leader of the House at the end of the day and getting one. Let us hope that 2017 is a great year in which all our ambitions and dreams can be fulfilled.

5.52 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), even though I am an Arsenal supporter, like you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate Leicester City on their fine achievement earlier this year.

At the beginning of last week, I was in Berlin with the Parliament choir and it was a great honour to sing in the Bundestag building. It is with great sadness that we heard of the terrible event last night. I am sure that all members of the Parliament choir and others who were in Berlin at the time—my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) was there with the Communities and Local Government Committee—will wish to pass on our condolences to the people of Germany.

Stafford has this year seen some great developments economically. General Electric, which took over the business of Alstom in Stafford and elsewhere, has almost completed the construction of its first new factory, which

contains its automation business. After the referendum, it decided to go ahead with the construction of its second new factory in Stafford, on the Redhill business park, and that will deal with its high-voltage direct current business. Stafford is a world leader in that regard and I welcome that development.

I also welcome a Chinese institution's investment in the site of the former campus of Staffordshire University, which it vacated in order to go to Stoke-on-Trent earlier this year. A new university will be established in Stafford, alongside an international school. I welcome the continuance of higher education in Stafford provided by Keele University through its medical school and, indeed, by Staffordshire University, which maintains another campus in the town.

It was announced this year that the Ministry of Defence would further expand its site in Stafford to welcome more servicemen and women in the coming years, and I very much welcome that. Stafford has a great tradition of hosting the armed forces, both the RAF and the Army, and the arrival last year of two new regiments—1 Signals and 16 Signals—to join 22 Signals has made a great and positive difference to our town.

Our IT sector in Stafford is expanding, as are many small and medium-sized businesses. As it is Christmas time, I want to pay particular tribute to those who run small and medium-sized businesses. Year in, year out, those people work 60, 70 or 80 hours a week running businesses, employing people and paying their taxes. They are not much sung about, and they often have to deal with a lot of hassle, but they get on with the job of providing jobs and, to a large extent, they keep this country going. More than 50% of jobs in this country are created and sustained by the small and medium-sized businesses in all our constituencies.

I want to say a little about the sustainability and transformation programme for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, which I have raised in the House on a couple of occasions. I approach this in a positive spirit. We need a transformation of our care, and there are many good ideas in the programme. I wish that the leadership of the programme had engaged more with Members of Parliament; we have had one or two meetings, but sadly the suggestions that I put forward were not taken up. I believe that the leadership needs to listen much more to Members of Parliament as they take this further forward.

I have already mentioned the suggestion that one of the accident and emergency departments in Stoke and Staffordshire should close. I believe that that is absolutely wrong and will not benefit my constituents or those of the other Members of Parliament in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. I will take the matter up, as I did with the Secretary of State this morning, at every opportunity. However, I believe that some positive work is being done, and I urge those involved to engage with local Members of Parliament.

The issue that really concerns me, as it does a lot of Members, is social care. Staffordshire has been warned this week that social care homes in the private sector across the county are being closed because it is simply unaffordable for them to continue. That is partly a consequence of matters that have gone on for quite a long time, but it is partly a consequence of the introduction of the living wage. We have to bear in mind that most of those who work in the care sector are on approximately

[Jeremy Lefroy]

the minimum wage. They have, rightly, received a pay rise through the living wage, but there has not been a corresponding increase in the amount paid to care homes for the provision of services.

In Staffordshire, the better care fund has not worked as it should have done this year. Fifteen million pounds was supposed to go into improving care, but it has been retained in the health service. That happened for understandable reasons, but it has caused a great shortfall for the county council. I hope that that will be remedied, to some extent, for the coming year.

We now face a crisis in the funding of social care—indeed, in the funding of health and social care—and we need a long-term solution. Many Members from all parts of the House have raised this on numerous occasions, and I have certainly done so over the last two or three years. The time has come for action. We cannot have more sticking-plaster remedies. The announcements made by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government last week were very welcome, and I support them, but they are sticking plasters in the context of the sums of money required.

I want briefly to mention transport in my area. I have asked the Secretary of State for Transport to meet me to discuss the road system in Staffordshire, particularly in Stafford. I have done so for a couple of reasons. Although I welcome the improvements that will shortly be made to the M6 between junctions 13 and 15, those improvements, which will take at least two years, will inevitably have a knock-on impact on other roads in the area. We need to ensure that those improvements are made in the most efficient and effective way, with the least disruption.

A much more serious matter is the potential for disruption that may be caused by the construction of HS2 phase 2a if the HS2 Bill passes through the Houses of Parliament in the coming 12 to 15 months. The line cuts across all the major north-south transport routes in Staffordshire, which are the national north-south routes in the west of the country, and unless we think about this and alternatives are planned well in advance—how it will be planned, when road closures will happen, when work is to be done—there will be chaos for not just a couple of years, but many years. I urge the Government to think about that in advance. They may say, “Well, it hasn’t passed Parliament yet, and we can’t do anything about it until then”, but that is absolutely not the approach to take. We must think about this now, because the consequences—for not just Staffordshire and Stoke, but the entire west midlands and north-west economy—could be quite serious.

I would like to see progress on other issues that I have raised in the House during the past year. The first is the issue of hoists in hotel rooms for disabled people. It was a surprise to me when my constituent Daniel Baldawi pointed out that it is not a requirement even for major hotels and chains to have hoists in one or two rooms so that disabled people can enjoy the benefits of staying in them. I have written to many chains: some have come back to me with very positive replies, but others have not done so. I would like it to be standard in every hotel constructed in this country—indeed, hotels already in existence if they are above a certain size—to have hoists available in some rooms.

Following the tragic loss of two lives in Stafford two years ago, I have raised the issue of fireworks and the inspection of facilities containing fireworks. It is quite extraordinary that responsibility for inspecting facilities that can contain almost as much explosive, or gunpowder, as Guy Fawkes had when he wanted to blow up this place are regulated by local authorities. Local authorities may be very good at other things, but they simply do not have such expertise. I want any major facility—with upwards of a few tens or hundreds of kilos of explosives—to be regulated by the Health and Safety Executive or possibly the fire and rescue authorities, which have the experience to make judgments on such matters.

A couple of weeks ago in Westminster Hall, we had an excellent debate, which I was privileged to lead, on the ivory trade. The request was made to the Government that the United Kingdom should end the trade in ivory. I spent many years of my life in Tanzania, which has suffered a huge depletion in the number of its elephants, so this is a very personal matter for me. I know that the Government are looking at it and will hold a consultation early in the new year, but I hope that they will broaden the scope of the consultation so that all trade in ivory ceases, with the few sensible exceptions that were raised in the debate.

The final issue that I have raised in the House during the past year is that of employment and support allowance for those in the work-related activity group. A lot of colleagues on both sides of the House have concerns about this. The Government promised to come up with measures that would to some extent compensate for the loss of the additional money for those joining that group from April, but we have yet to hear about concrete measures that I believe will be satisfactory. I hope the Government will take another look at this issue.

I want very briefly to mention international development, particularly in relation to Syria. With colleagues on the International Development Committee, I was privileged to see the work that the UK Government are doing with the incredibly generous Governments and people of Lebanon and Jordan, as well of those of Turkey, Egypt and Iraq, which we were not able to visit, who are hosting millions of refugees and providing education for their children—so much so, that in Lebanon there will shortly be more Syrian refugee children than Lebanese children in its state schools. That is an example of the excellent work done through the international development budget. It has received a lot of criticism in the press in recent days and it is quite right that we should investigate all those issues, but we should never forget the tremendous work done through that budget and the support given to the marvellous people who help those who are in the most difficult of circumstances.

With that, Mr Speaker, I wish you and all the staff a very happy Christmas and a blessed new year.

6.4 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many distinguished speakers this afternoon. In particular, I would like to add my agreement to the arguments put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) and my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) about the concern that some of our

servicemen seem to be being treated more adversely than some suspected and, indeed, convicted terrorists. I hope those concerns are heard not only by the Government but by the devolved Administration in Northern Ireland.

One of the joys of our role as Members of Parliament is being able to work with so many community organisations that, all year round, do such valuable work for people who are often the most vulnerable in our society. During a public service and volunteering week I held earlier in the autumn, I had the pleasure of spending some time with a range of organisations, including Age UK, the Springboard Centre, Black Country Food Bank, the dementia unit and A&E volunteers at Russells Hall hospital and the West Midlands police.

At Christmas in particular we value the role of our community organisations, but they do such work all year round. It is very difficult to pick out any one individual example above any other but it would be remiss of me not to highlight Wordsley community centre in my constituency, led by the formidable Janet Blakeway, and its work to improve the centre's accessibility. I recently launched its new stair lift, which had been made possible by Janet's work to bring in local firms, CE Solutions and Handicare, to do the work for the local community, really transforming the services that are on offer.

The big society may have passed into political history as a buzzword, but the work that so many unheralded volunteers and community organisations do—every day of the week, every week of the year—continues regardless of passing fads in our political lexicon. Some argue that, in the selfish age in which we are supposed to live, people are no longer interested in working for a community, giving up their time or supporting good causes. That is certainly not my experience from the support for the Macmillan coffee morning or the community clean-ups we have held in Dudley South, which have been extremely well supported by the community. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will ensure that the Government continue to look at how they can make it easier for people to give up their time and for businesses to donate resources and skills to help the communities around them.

I am particularly pleased to see a growing number of friends' groups supporting our local parks and green spaces; at a time when local authorities are having to look at how and where they can dedicate resources, communities are saying that these things are important to them and going out and taking practical action. Most recently in Dudley South, the Friends of Cot Lane Park group was formed a month or so ago on a wet Wednesday evening, but still attracted 60 people from local estates. The group was formed in response to damage and disruption caused following an unauthorised Traveller camp at the park.

The Black country has seen an unusual number of unauthorised Traveller camps over the summer and into the early autumn. Many have been responsible and considerate to local neighbours, but sadly some have behaved criminally. There has been disruption and criminal damage and police have reported not only robberies but violent crimes. While local authorities in my own borough of Dudley and neighbouring boroughs have pursued successive magistrates court orders, those who seek to take advantage of the system know that that means that they have at least seven days before they have to worry

about it. As a result, some of the less responsible and considerate groups have merely gone from one park or play area to the next, causing the same damage and disruption at each.

I hope that the Government will look again at practical questions such as whether authorised land for Traveller camps can be pooled so that local authorities can come together to make adequate provision across a wider area rather than in a single authority area, and whether it is time to allow local authorities to designate particular land or categories of land as sites where unauthorised camps attract criminal penalties and the realities that go with that. Of course we must always consider the genuine human rights of Traveller communities, but they must always be balanced with the legitimate rights of settled communities.

I was pleased that the then Chancellor was able to announce in the Budget in March this year the approval of the enterprise zone in my constituency. We are still waiting for the final approval of the business case, and I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will make inquiries about it so that the new jobs, investment and increased prosperity can come into my constituency and benefit not only those whom I represent but those in neighbouring constituencies.

Similarly, the Government have signed off the extension to the metro network between Wednesbury and Brierley Hill in my constituency. It is being underwritten by the new West Midlands combined authority, meaning that it can go ahead sooner than expected. I hope that the Government will give serious consideration to extending it further to Stourbridge so that the tram link can connect back in with the main-line rail network and people can enjoy some of the benefits of HS2 connectivity.

The final theme I want to raise before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess is the need to work to ensure that everyone in our communities has the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed. I have been lucky enough to visit every school in my constituency since I was elected last May. Clearly, there is much excellent teaching and school management around Dudley and the wider Black country. It is important that I make that point because my wife has recently returned to the classroom and I know that she is listening; it could be a cold Christmas if I forget to emphasise that.

Invictus Education Trust and Windsor Academy Trust in my constituency are showing the power of schools working in partnership to drive up standards. However, across the wider Black Country, Ofsted has raised serious concerns with the four local authorities. Children in those areas start below the national average, but sadly they slip further behind across key stages 1 to 4. The performance, sadly, is less good than similar local authorities elsewhere in the country with similar levels of deprivation, so we really need to consider how we can ensure no child is left behind, whichever part of the country they live in. High-performing schools and academy trusts must be able to innovate, so we can have more diversity and tailored education provision in state schools. The Invictus Trust, which has one school in my constituency, is preparing plans for a specialist secondary school that incorporates part of an almost military-style curriculum, together with core EBacc subjects, to really target those in danger of becoming disengaged with the education system. I hope the Government will give that serious consideration when the application is submitted.

[Mike Wood]

As I said, we have a lot of talent in our schools. I saw that recently when I received a letter from India, Thea and Jasmine from Belle Vue primary school about the scourge of modern slavery. I have taken up this issue with Ministers, and I know the Deputy Leader of the House has done a lot of work on it in the past. The quality of the letter and the depth of understanding it demonstrated, not only of the slave trade in the early 19th century and the abolition of slavery in the United States but how it affects our communities now, was remarkable for primary school children.

You will be aware of the talent of some of my constituents, Mr Speaker, from the Christmas card I hope you received, which showcased the artistic talents of Alex Maher and Lucy Hannon of Maidensbridge primary school, William Hetheridge of Glynne primary school, Millie Millard of Ashwood Park primary school, Tia Worrell of St Mary's Church of England primary school, Thomas Pinches of The Brier school and Reggie of Netherton Church of England primary school. I am delighted that the seven excellent entries were all able to go on the Christmas card. Merry Hill shopping centre in my constituency was so impressed with the standard of the entries that it has put them on display, so that people doing their last-minute Christmas shopping can see just how many talented artists we have in Dudley South.

I think that that is a good point on which to finish. I again wish you a very merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, and best wishes for the new year.

6.17 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I want to speak today about just one issue of great concern, which is how negatively the proposed new national funding formula for schools will impact on schools in my Congleton constituency if it is not revised. It is critical for the children of my constituency that it is.

Prior to the announcement last week, my constituency schools were already among the poorest-funded in the country. We therefore expected a good funding increase. After this announcement, however, headteachers tell me that theirs will be the very worst-funded schools in the country. The most poorly funded local authority used to be £4,158 per head, but this will now be Cheshire East, at £4,122 per head. Imagine my heads' consternation last week when they discovered that their funding will not increase, but actually drop. I use the word consternation; they used the word outrage. No wonder that within 48 hours of the announcement no fewer than five headteachers came to my constituency office to express their utter dismay.

A year ago, I took a group of headteachers to meet the former Education Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), to ensure that he heard directly their concerns on the poor funding for Cheshire East schools, and to implore him that the new formula must address them. And this was after a similar meeting in the previous Parliament, when Cheshire East local authority officers met his predecessor for the same purpose. In addition, hundreds of my constituents signed a petition for fairer funding. This issue is far from new, which is why last week's announcement was so shocking.

My headteachers are asking how Cheshire East has become the most poorly funded area, after they made such a convincing case to the Minister at their meeting. They thought they had been heard. I, too, find it difficult to understand.

What is particularly concerning is that these are some of highest-performing schools in the country, but there is a point at which their laudable level of achievement cannot be maintained. Only yesterday, the Secretary of State said in this place that she had been able to ensure that underfunded areas would be able to "gain up to 3%" over 2018-19 and 2019-20. My schools are facing exactly the opposite—not a rise of 3%, as the majority of my high schools face a reduction of 2.9%.

Before I relay some of the unpalatable options facing headteachers in my constituency, let me set in context last week's announcement, because a number of other factors make the funding reductions for my schools far worse. First, the National Audit Office has said that schools face a reduction of 8% in funding in real terms by 2020, due chiefly to unfunded increases in employer costs. That makes the average savings to be found not over 2%, but over 10%. In addition, the reduction in the educational services grant will mean a further hit for academies in my constituency, which means all seven high schools. Even graver, there is still no local plan in Cheshire East, which has led to hundreds of new houses being built without additional funding for the proportionate increase in the number of children attending schools. This effect of so-called "lagging" means that schools are required to educate additional children with no additional funding.

What do headteachers tell me will be the effect of this new formula on their schools? With reference to the primary schools, Martin Casserley, headteacher at Black Firs Primary School, says they will be forced into significant reductions, including reducing support staff to help special educational needs children.

The high schools will lose £800,000 a year between them. Eaton Bank alone will face losses of £300,000 over three years. Headteacher Ed O'Neill says this would be "deeply damaging" and

"the removal of the educational services grant...and the NAO-calculated pressures mean that total savings of 12% will have to be found."

Richard Middlebrook, head of Alsager High, who was nominated for headteacher of the year and is a national leader of education, says that the only way to survive would be to open for only four days a week, narrow the curriculum or close the sixth form—all completely implausible.

Dennis Oliver, headteacher of Holmes Chapel High, also a national leader of education, is looking at the removal of all teaching assistant posts, or the loss of all technicians, or the loss of eight non-viable sixth-form groups, or removing heating and lighting for a year or removing general resources for children, such as paper and books. John Leigh, head at Sandbach High and a long-established Ofsted inspector, tells me he risks losing his school's "outstanding" status. He now has a £200,000 deficit as a result of lagged funding, due to new housing in Sandbach. He believes that the only feasible way to run the school would be to remove the rich programme of extracurricular activities, reduce the curriculum offer

and/or reduce the number of sixth-form classes. He is already teaching 12 hours of maths a week himself to help balance the budget.

Sarah Burns, headteacher at Sandbach Boys School, has calculated that losing the entire music, art, business studies or geography departments could achieve the reductions, but that is simply not possible for a school that is a regional leader in music and the creative arts. She is concerned about the recruitment and retention of key staff while managing a reduction of 2.9% and she calculates it will actually be 5%, taking other factors into account.

David Hermitt, chief executive officer of Congleton Multi-Academy Trust, of which I am a patron, is facing a reduction of 2.4% at Congleton High, but he tells me that in addition he has been educating over 50 children every year for free for the last three years due to the increased housing nearby, equating to over £200,000 per year of missing funding in each of the last three years. This has depleted healthy reserves. He says the school has made every cut it can to ensure that it has a balanced budget. He says that,

“we have increased average class sizes, removed some subjects from our post 16 provision, increased contact time for teachers and reduced the amount spent on books and computer equipment.”

I am proud to be patron for this well-run multi-academy trust, which is already helping to drive down back-office costs for the three schools in the trust by providing central services of finance and human resources.

Middlewich High faces even deeper reductions as a result of the change in funding for children with special educational needs and disabilities, for which it has a dedicated unit. It is a lead school for emotional health, and Members may recall that during Prime Minister’s questions recently, I drew attention to its outstanding work with the most vulnerable students and families. However, Keith Simpson, its headteacher, has said,

“as Head I have no option but to reduce staffing from this area in order to meet a minimum number of teachers to provide a curriculum.”

He added:

“This is alongside the shortfall in SEND funding for schools that maintain a truly inclusive intake. This short-term view will only store up problems for society and other services in the long term. I feel that the holistic support for children and families is being sacrificed and has no educational value in raising standards for our most vulnerable students.”

Those headteachers, whom I know well, are utterly dedicated and professional, but the concerns that I have expressed on their behalf today have been increasing for several years. They have concluded that the proposed national fairer funding formula is not fit for purpose, certainly in Cheshire East. They are asking the Government to go back to the drawing board after listening to the outcome of the current consultation, and I am asking for the concerns that I have expressed today to be included in that consultation. I hope that the Deputy Leader of the House will refer them to the Schools Minister, and will convey my request for an early meeting with him to which those headteachers will travel at short notice; and I hope that the Schools Minister will not just hear but act, by reviewing the impact of the new funding formula on the schools in my constituency. Without such a review, there will be grave implications for the education and life chances of the children about whom those headteachers care so deeply.

I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all Members in the Chamber a happy and restful Christmas.

6.26 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to make my debut appearance as shadow Deputy Leader of the House to respond to the Christmas Adjournment debate. I believe that the House is at its best when Members raise such a huge number of issues. However, I am conscious that, apart from the Deputy Leader of the House, I am all that stands between Members and their Christmas recess, so I shall be as brief as possible in expressing my thoughts about the debate that we have enjoyed this afternoon.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) opened the debate by remembering those who are less fortunate than ourselves—a very important message at Christmas—and the plight of those who are homeless. I add my thanks to Crisis, which does amazing work throughout the year but particularly at Christmas, and give credit to the last Labour Government, who did so much to tackle rough sleeping.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) raised important issues, including drug addiction and sprinklers in schools. She also spoke about jobs in her constituency; she is a tireless advocate for the people of North Tyneside.

The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) raised a subject that certainly interested me, namely the plight of his constituents who travel to London by rail. He said that their trains were now 30 years old. I see his challenge, and I raise him the class 37s, which are 1960s locos. They are used by many commuters between Barrow and Preston, and they frequently break down. I should also note at this point that they are magnificent engines, because last time I raised the issue in the House, many train enthusiasts berated me somewhat on Twitter. Those engines would make a great addition to any museum. All that my Fleetwood constituents would like for Christmas, however, is a rail line to Fleetwood.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) spoke of the workers who are receiving a pay cut this Christmas. She is a tireless advocate for the workers in her constituency, and today she raised the important issue of retail workers, for whom Christmas is often bittersweet. The hours and the money that they can earn until Christmas are great, but January often comes with a reduction in hours and a pay cut.

The hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) informed the House of a drama that was unfolding in his constituency, which he described as the end of local democracy. Many of my constituents might argue that that has already happened, given that fracking is being forced on the people of Lancashire.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) addressed the issues facing our country. He has clearly reflected on events over the past 12 months, and I concurred with his call for the rejection of post-truth politics. We should all commit ourselves to putting the “united” back into the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) talked about road transport infrastructure issues in his constituency. As we are now making our Christmas lists, I would certainly like to add the A585 to my wish list for the road to Fleetwood.

[Cat Smith]

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) raised the issue of hysteroscopies. This was the third occasion on which she raised it in the House, and I am sure the Deputy Leader of the House will now raise it with the Department of Health.

The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) raised the iniquity, also raised by the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke, faced by the ex-service personnel who serve in Northern Ireland, and I am sure the Deputy Leader of the House will expand on that in his remarks.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded the House of the real reason for Christmas: the greatest gift ever given, the birth of Jesus Christ. He remembered all the persecuted Christians around the world. It is an issue he feels very strongly about, and probably sometimes finds overwhelming to deal with, so my Christmas gift to him is 1 John 4:4:

“because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”

I hope that offers him some comfort this Christmas.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) spoke very eloquently about the shame faced by our constituents who face DWP assessments and the fantastic Ken Loach film “I, Daniel Blake”. If anyone has any time over Christmas, I am sure they will be hiring that on Amazon or elsewhere.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) reflected on bereavement, which is often felt more acutely at Christmas than at any other time of the year. I am pleased he found the opportunity to mention the work of his local hospice. Indeed, if I was not at this debate, I would have been at St John’s hospice in Lancaster, where students from Beaumont College were doing a Christmas performance. Instead, I will be visiting Brian House children’s hospice in Blackpool tomorrow.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) talked about Sea View Street in his constituency, which was a winner at the British high street awards last week. While his constituency may well have won the No. 1 result on the east coast, I recognise he had to specify that because he knows he could not possibly compete with the resort of Fleetwood; and indeed my constituent Craig McOmish, who owns the beach kiosk at Fleetwood, was a winner at the same awards. More seriously, the hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the fishing industry, and that must be looked at seriously in the Brexit negotiations. We must support the British fishing industry.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) talked about hate speech and abuse on social media. I am sure no Member of this House is unaware of the things that go on on social media—the anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, sexism and all the other forms of hate we see there. Last week I reported a comment on Facebook that was made about a person who is a democratically elected politician in this country. The quote was,

“shoot the bastard between the eyes and two bullets to the heart, will cure the problem”.

Within hours I heard back from Facebook that that did not breach its terms and conditions. That is absolutely a death threat, and I am continuing to pursue that with Facebook.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) raised a number of issues that he is passionate about, including cyber-bullying, the police funding formula, diabetes, Yemen and of course Leicester City. Of course 2016 was a very fine year for Leicester City, but it has also been a fine year for the mighty Barrow, who beat a league side away for the first time in 44 years. If there are any Bristol Rovers fans in the House, I can only apologise for what was clearly a very embarrassing defeat in the FA cup.

As we reflect on the year past, may I join Members who remembered our friend and colleague Jo Cox? In Jo’s maiden speech, she reminded us that we have “more in common than that which divides us”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

and as we adjourn for the Christmas recess, we remember all those Members of the House, and indeed our constituents, who come from many different faith and cultural backgrounds but are all in the same way British. So may I take this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, to wish you a happy Christmas, but to wish the Deputy Leader of the House a happy Hanukkah? In my household we will be celebrating both festivals, and anyone who has ever seen “The O.C.” will know that Chrismukkah is indeed a thing; it is a merger of both festivals.

So whatever Members of this House are celebrating as we break for the Christmas recess, may I wish them a very happy Christmas and a very peaceful new year, and extend that to the staff who work for us, the staff of the House, and all those who work here and all our constituents?

6.34 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to appear before you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and opposite the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who gave a consummate first performance. The shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), called me “suave” in the Chamber last week—the hon. Lady’s impressive skills of discernment are now evident for all to see—and I was rather disappointed at first that she was not in the Chamber today, but I welcome the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood to her place. She need only follow the example of the shadow Leader of the House to do extremely well. This debate provides an excellent opportunity to cover an unrestricted panorama of subjects without being checked by Mr Speaker for want of relevance. In the spirit of Christmas and in his absence, I want to refer to Mr Speaker and his awesome memory and attention to detail, which do this House proud.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) spoke about those less fortunate than ourselves. I commend him on the work that he has done and is doing on the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which is making good progress. I am told that it is the longest-ever private Member’s Bill—quite an achievement—and he has clearly done tremendous work in this area. His work with faith groups across our communities is also much appreciated and extremely impressive.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) spoke about drug deaths being at record levels and the importance of treatment for those who have become addicted to illegal narcotics. She made powerful points, just as she did about fire safety in schools.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) spoke about the digitisation of the tax system and the Federation of Small Businesses' estimation of the costs. She also spoke of the cost for entrepreneurs. However, it is a voluntary pilot system, and the points that she made with her customary eloquence will be listened to. She is considering the issue with the same skill that she used as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and she will no doubt keep pursuing her theme. It is a pilot scheme, as I mentioned, so her contributions will be particularly useful in the future.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) made good points about the dangers of illicit tobacco, about which we all know. Not only is it a danger to the Treasury as it leads to a loss of revenue, but more importantly it is harmful in so many ways. It is harmful to young people, because it may be distributed illicitly, allowing young people to access it, and it may contain unwholesome content that is obviously unregulated.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) is a senior Member from whom I have occasionally sought advice. He discussed the problems with the trains in his area—the same infrastructure failures no doubt arise elsewhere—but major investment in the line from Liverpool Street up to his part of the world is under way and there is a commitment for new trains in 2019-20. He made a valid point about the need for jam today as well as jam tomorrow. We would all like jam perhaps every day and, as a member of the “breakfast club” here in the House of Commons, he is someone who partakes of that. His constituents are well served by him, and he made some valid, sensible points about engineering work that sometimes overruns from the weekend into a Monday morning and the fact that freight trains use the line during rush hour. He also mentioned the Government's planned digital signalling trials. He suggested that his constituency be part of the experiment area. That request will go to the Transport Secretary, because I will make sure that it does, and we will see whether that can be made to apply.

I was not aware that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) had made a music video, but I know now. Obviously, I was in a minority, because I understand that tens of thousands of people have already watched it. She spoke of our businesses and companies in this country, which of course are the engine and lifeblood of the economy. It is appropriate to thank them for the work they do, in employing people and contributing in their highly valuable way to the economy. Full-time work makes up nearly 70% of the growth in employment since 2010. I would like to say that John Lewis is a very good company, as I believe she recognised, and it has an excellent reputation, but I gently encourage all chief executives to find time to meet Members of Parliament when requests for such meetings are made, wherever possible. Her mention of the Ahmadiyya community was appreciated across the House, and I thank her for it. We certainly wish to show our support to the Ahmadiyya community in this country; although small, it is a great asset to our society.

I see my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) in his place, and I had to think long and hard about what to say about his speech. He referred to a “merger most foul”, and I am sorry to hear about the local difficulties in his area. I can tell Members who were not present that it was a

subtle speech. He is a ferocious voice for his constituents, and those in his district really must think twice before crossing him. I shall say no more about that.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) mentioned that the European Union is a source of concern to him in terms of where we go from here. I assure him that Her Majesty's Government are not going to be introspective—they are not, will not be and have not been introspective. The UK has always been an outward-looking country and we will continue to be. We should have faith, as he should, in the people of this country moving forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) spoke of the MetroBus scheme in his area, which sounds as though it will be a valuable alternative to private car journeys when it is up and running, but there has been consequent congestion and delays. He has clearly been working hard on behalf of his constituents, seeking meetings both here and in his constituency; he particularised the meetings that he has been having on this subject. Progress has apparently been made, so I was pleased to hear about that. I was also struck by what he said about his excellent son and the excellent advice he gave him. He is rightly proud of him and although I have never met his son, may I, too, say that I am proud of him, as someone who has joined Her Majesty's armed forces recently?

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made powerful arguments that had the House paying close attention. The pain of the patients she spoke of undergoing these procedures is palpable. I have already instructed that the matter be raised with the Department of Health, as this issue clearly needs a response, and I will transmit that message to the right quarters. She also mentioned research into arthritis, and I undertake to look into that.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke powerfully. May I say to him that I have briefly discussed the matter he raised—the UK soldiers being investigated—on the Front Bench with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland? First, I wish to say that Her Majesty's armed forces have made and continue to make such a contribution to peace and stability in Northern Ireland. They will be provided, where necessary, with as much taxpayer-funded legal support as necessary. Her Majesty's Government are aware of an imbalance in the system and, as part of addressing the legacy of the past, are looking to create a more balanced and proportionate system. I thank my hon. Friend again for his powerful contribution. The way in which he speaks and the subject matter on which he speaks always command the respect and attention of the House.

The House is richer for the presence of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He has the true affection of the House. He spoke of his love for Christmas, how he enjoys spending Christmas with his grandchildren and the true meaning of Christmas. His powerful religious invocation struck me and I commend him not only for that but for all his work in this Chamber over the past year and throughout his time as a Member of Parliament. He does a great deal of powerful work on freedom of religion in general throughout the year, as well as for Christians persecuted around the world—sadly, the number of persecuted Christians is ever increasing.

[Michael Ellis]

My hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) spoke of Department for Work and Pensions assessments, and she is a fiercely independent voice throughout the year. I mean that as a compliment, although some Members behind me assume that it was not. She is a fiercely independent voice throughout the year and she continued to show that independence today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) clearly enjoys these pre-recess Adjournment debates, and we enjoy hearing him. The litany of points that he raised was too long for the short few hours remaining, but I was struck when he mentioned that he lost his mother this year at the age of 104. One is never old enough to lose one's mother, and my heart goes out to him for his loss. I know that he has mentioned his mother's birthdays as they have come along each year and I have been pleased to offer my good wishes on those occasions. I commiserate with him for his loss.

My hon. Friend spoke about the Prince's Trust, among many other things, and about how effective one division of the trust was in his area. I commend the work of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, who has many achievements and has done superb work in many areas. The Prince's Trust is one of them. It is the 40th anniversary of the Prince's Trust this year and it has clearly transformed many young lives, not only in the my hon. Friend's constituency but across the country. We are very lucky to have the Prince of Wales, in my opinion. I have to get that in, Madam Deputy Speaker, as clearly the House expects it of me.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) spoke affectionately of his constituency. He spoke of the pier of the year winner; I thought for one minute that he was talking about the other place, but he meant the pier that goes out into the sea. On the private sector investment coming the way of Cleethorpes, he spoke of Government support needed in that quarter. He actually requested lots of money for Cleethorpes from Her Majesty's Government, while reiterating that he was not asking for any money. He certainly made a very attractive case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), as well as giving a charming retirement message to the chief superintendent of his area, Chief Superintendent Tunstall, whom we all wish well, spoke keenly about social media abuse and the prolific amount of hate speech. The social media companies have a moral responsibility to do more.

I take this opportunity to commend the cross-party Home Affairs Committee for its report on anti-Semitism. My hon. Friend spoke about that and I know that he is on that Committee. He referred to the 2,500 deeply offensive anti-Semitic messages received in a short period of time by one Member of this House. I commend the Committee for its work. In this context, the death was announced today of Rabbi Lionel Blue. He was a wonderful voice of reason on the airwaves, in marked contrast to the virulent anti-Semitism that we are hearing about on social media in so many quarters.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton spoke about a remark that the late Lady Thatcher had made. The anecdote to which he was referring, if I am correct, was about Lord Young of Graffham, of whom Lady Thatcher had apparently said, "Most people bring me their problems. He brings me solutions."

I have not forgotten the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who spoke of the campaign against cyber-bullying and the tragedy of the loss of a boy of 15, Brandon Singh Rayat. The right hon. Gentleman does so much to raise individual cases such as that in this place, and I commend him for that. The whole House offers its sympathy to the parents of Brandon Singh Rayat who, I know, have been in the Palace of Westminster today. We send our deepest commiserations for their loss. The points that the right hon. Gentleman made reiterate the damage done to young people in particular, but to people of all ages, by cyber-bullying.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East has a tremendous history of good work on diabetes and on Yemen. To my certain knowledge he has focused on Yemen for years—for as long as I have been in the House. Now it is a cause that many are exercised by, rightly, but he has been a beacon of support for Yemen for many years. His support for Leicester football club is also widely known. He said something about mince pies. I will have to consult the Clerk about "Erskine May" on that. We will see whether that applies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) spoke of his affection for his constituency and the unsung heroes: the small and medium-sized enterprises. It is right that we talk about them, because so much work is put in by small business owners and managers, who often work all hours of the day and night and are the lifeblood of our economy. My hon. Friend made very valuable points about the ivory trade as well. His knowledge of African affairs is very impressive. I remember speaking to him a few weeks ago and I was bowled over by his knowledge of African affairs. When he speaks on the subject, he speaks with experience and persuasion.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) spoke of the valuable work done by volunteers and what we can do to encourage companies to encourage volunteers to do good work. I know of one example from my own constituency: the Nationwide building society, which I think allows each of its employees three days a year to do voluntary work in their communities. They are paid by the company for those three days, as part of the company's social action project. If more companies can do that sort of thing, it will provide encouragement for those who wish to support their community. My hon. Friend said that he had visited every school in his constituency. Someone asked from a sedentary position whether he had passed all the exams. I have no doubt that he would if he needed to.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke powerfully about school funding. I know that she will continue to fight on that subject. She is a powerful voice for her constituency, and she certainly knows how to make it heard in this place.

I take this opportunity to wish everyone a happy Christmas, particularly the staff of the House, the staff of Members of Parliament, the police and security staff who look after us, Mr Speaker and all the Deputy Speakers, including you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have had a year to remember: 2016 will go down in history for myriad reasons, not least this country's second female Prime Minister, along with many other causes of celebration.

But the House also lost a Member in the prime of her life. Jo Cox was an exemplar of public service. If I may say so, her family have shown extraordinary dignity in

their bearing. We remember that family at Christmas. We wish them and all our constituents, especially those who have suffered a bereavement, all the very best this Christmas and in the new year.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

Woolwich Barracks

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

6.56 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for selecting this topic as the last to be debated before the Christmas recess and, in so doing, providing me with an opportunity to put on the record my objection to the proposed closure of Woolwich barracks. As I might not get another chance, may I take this opportunity to wish you and the staff of the House a very merry Christmas?

I am also pleased to see the Minister in his place. He knows Woolwich station well, and I know that, for reasons he might touch on in his response, he is extremely fond of it. I would like to take this opportunity to let him know that the extremely courteous manner in which he has engaged with me on this issue over recent weeks has been appreciated.

There has been an unbroken military presence in Woolwich since 26 May 1716, when a royal warrant in the name of King George I authorised the formation of two permanent companies of royal artillery in the town. The Gunners' regimental motto is "Ubique", which as Members will know means "everywhere." It could just as equally serve as a metaphor for the imprint of the military on Woolwich, which is visible in everything from its architecture to its street names. The King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery are quartered in Woolwich today, maintaining a bond between our community and our armed forces that spans three centuries. In determining to sell off Woolwich barracks by 2028, the Government intend to break that bond.

There will of course be those who argue that the disposal of the barracks has been a long time coming, that we should just accept that Woolwich's days as a garrison town are numbered, and that the focus of this debate should therefore be on the future use of the site and how we secure the optimal outcome for those affected, not whether the decision itself is the right one. If I was convinced that the Department's case for disposal was irrefutable, that is the debate I would have called for today, but I do not. I believe that the case for disposing of Woolwich barracks has not yet been made convincingly. I hope to probe the rationale that underpins the decision and, in so doing, convince the Minister to ask his officials to revisit it.

In objecting to the closure of Woolwich barracks, I want to make it clear to the House that I do not seek to undermine the Department's defence estate strategy in its entirety. In his statement to the House on 7 November, the Secretary of State for Defence was correct in asserting that the current estate is too big, too diffuse, too expensive and too inefficient. He was also right to argue that, as a result, it too often fails to meet the needs of our armed forces and their families.

Just as the size and structure of our armed forces have changed to meet different threats over recent decades, so it is right that the defence estate is modernised and rationalised for reasons of affordability and efficiency. I fear that that will be extremely challenging to execute in practice, but I take no issue with the strategy itself. The issue I want to raise is not whether the strategy to

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

reduce the MOD's built estate is the right one, but whether it is right that the disposal of Woolwich barracks should form part of it.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Matthew Pennycook: I believe that it is not right for three main reasons.

The first is that I question why the Department's approach to Woolwich station has altered so dramatically over such a short period. It is worth recalling that it was only in 2009, in the defence estate strategy that preceded this recent one, that Woolwich station was designated a core site. Sadly, no detailed justification for that designation was given at the time, so it is impossible to know the detailed reasoning that underpinned it, but it seems reasonable to assume that there were solid strategic grounds for it.

As a core site, Woolwich station has been the recipient of significant investment over recent years. The Woolwich development project announced in 2009 provided for new and refurbished accommodation. A new, purpose-built, state-of-the-art equestrian training facility and accommodation centre was built to accommodate the King's Troop following its transfer from St John's Wood in February 2012. Even now, funding is in the pipeline to comprehensively remediate and reinstate the King's Troop external exercise area on Woolwich common, following its use in the 2012 Olympic games.

I simply ask the Minister, what has changed about Woolwich in the past few years to so fundamentally alter the thinking of officials in his Department in relation to the future use of the site and to license the Government to write off the significant investment that has been ploughed into it over the past few years? It will strike many of my constituents as little more than an asset-stripping exercise driven by an analysis of rising land values in London rather than an exercise driven by the requirements of our defence estate.

The second reason relates to the first. I am not entirely convinced that the strategic case for selling off Woolwich barracks is as watertight as has been presented. In the correspondence we have exchanged over recent weeks, the Minister has assured me that the Department's estate optimisation strategy was formulated with military advice provided by each of the front-line commands. I have no reason to question that assurance, but I do question whether the advice received was sufficiently wide in scope and, specifically, whether the Department, along with other Departments, has assessed the value of the site as a strategic resilience location outside zone 1.

Our security services have had incredible success in foiling terrorist attacks on the British mainland, but the threat to the UK from terrorism remains severe. Last night's tragic events in Berlin are a timely reminder, if one were needed, that we can never be complacent. Lord Harris's recently published independent review into London's preparedness to respond to a major terrorist incident makes it clear that, while the involvement of the military in the event of a prolonged attack or a move to the critical threat level was once seen as a last resort, it is now integral to the planning process. In such

a scenario, the military could now be deployed under Operation Temperer, which would allow for the mobilisation of up to 5,000 troops to increase the operational capacity and capability of specialist counter-terrorism and armed police. If they were called on, those troops would require accommodation, and there is a case for looking at Woolwich—as a strategic location outside zone 1 and close to the River Thames—as a site that can provide that necessary resilience. While I do not expect the Minister to comment publicly on such a sensitive matter, I would urge him to satisfy himself on this point by looking again at whether there is strategic value in retaining Woolwich barracks as a resilience location in response to a major terrorist incident or a comparable civil emergency.

The third and final reason is that the closure of the barracks will have a detrimental impact on my constituents and on a local community whose very history and identity are intertwined with our armed forces.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as a former member of the Royal Artillery and having done my training at Woolwich barracks for two weeks before I joined the Territorial Army. I remember the importance of not only the camp but the museum. We have lost the museum, unfortunately. I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate because this is an important matter. Does he agree that we need to retain the barracks for the core reason of looking after the MOD, looking after the Army, and ensuring that we have it there for the future? The future is uncertain, and for that reason we need Woolwich barracks.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. and, I believe, gallant Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right. This is a unique site and there is good reason, given the risks of an uncertain future, to retain it. He will know that the collection that was formerly at the Firepower museum in Woolwich has been moved to Larkhill, where I know that, albeit in a different location, it will be cherished and valued. Its collection includes the many medals that have been awarded to the Gunners for outstanding acts of bravery.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The one thing that the hon. Gentleman has not mentioned that is incredibly historic about Woolwich is the fact that it was the original Royal Military Academy, and actually superior to Sandhurst in priority terms. Sandhurst has taken the Royal Military Academy badge from Woolwich, but Woolwich has that huge history. It is not just about the Gunners.

Matthew Pennycook: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman may know that the Woolwich academy is commonly known as "the shop", because the first building was a converted workshop from the Royal Arsenal. It is luxury flats now. Many of my constituents are concerned that the whole area of land on which the barracks now lies will simply be sold off for housing that many of them cannot afford.

The decision to close the barracks will have a detrimental impact on the community. That impact will be felt by the whole community, not only by the staff who work at the barracks, because Woolwich has been, and remains, a garrison town. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Woolwich

without a military presence. I recall the day in 2012 when the King's Troop returned to Woolwich—in the words of the then commanding officer, Major Mark Edward, the “spiritual home” of the Gunners—and locals of all ages lined the streets in their thousands to welcome the troop back. That is a sign of the deep affection in which the garrison is held—an affection that has arguably only deepened in the wake of the tragic murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby on the streets of our town in May 2013.

However, it is not just a question of sentiment and identity. The regiments that are stationed at the barracks, and those that have served there in the past, have all supported the community in very practical ways. Every year, the garrison commander makes available his barrack field for an Eid-in-the-community festival that has done more than anything else to build trust and understanding between the local Muslim community and our armed forces. In the wake of Lee Rigby's murder, that could not have been more timely. All that work—I could give numerous other examples if I had the time—will be lost, and the loss will be acutely felt by the local community, if the barracks are closed.

I finish by simply saying this: it would be a travesty if an association—a bond—between the community in Woolwich and our armed forces that has lasted for over 300 years was ended now for anything other than the most incontrovertible of reasons. For the strategic reasons I have raised, but also, unashamedly, for reasons of history, identity and sentiment, I hope that the Minister will revisit the case for disposing of the barracks and come back in the new year with a reconsidered Government position.

7.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I congratulate the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) on obtaining this debate on the future of Woolwich barracks—an MOD site in his constituency. I thank him for his kind remarks about the manner in which I have attempted to engage with him and, indeed, other hon. Members over what I absolutely accept is a pretty emotional process as we move to close a number of sites across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Gentleman touched on the fact that I should declare my interest not only as a member of the Army Reserve, but as one who is based at the barracks under discussion. It is my home barracks at the moment—it is where I go to serve. When we are faced with these decisions, they are, of course, personal and emotional, and it is not without considerable thought and effort that I have questioned this potential closure myself.

Let me say from the outset that the Department is ever mindful of the emotive nature of estate rationalisation and that the concerns and feelings of all local communities affected by our plan have been, and will continue to be, considered as part of the decision-making process. Before I address that point in detail, let me start by explaining the imperative behind our plans, which the hon. Gentleman has touched on.

Our defence estate represents almost 2% of the United Kingdom's land mass. That is equivalent in size to Luxembourg and almost three times the size of Greater London, which is perhaps the comparison we should use in this post-Brexit world. Whatever comparison we

choose to use, it remains a fact that our estate is vast and vital to our military capability. It is where our people work, live and train; where advanced equipment is maintained; and where cutting-edge research is undertaken. It is also where major exercises are conducted and major operations launched.

It is, therefore, vast and vital, but it is also inefficient and does not meet the standards that we expect to provide to our people in the modern world. Some 40% of our assets are more than 50 years old. What is more, while the armed forces are 30% smaller than they were at the end of the last century, the estate has reduced by only 9%. That is why the 2015 strategic defence and security review committed to invest in a better built estate that will reduce in size by 30% by 2040 and that will, most crucially, better support the future needs of our armed forces.

Last month we set out how we plan to do that, when the Defence Secretary unveiled our strategy for a better defence estate—the most significant change to defence land since the second world war. The strategy has two strands. The first is to rationalise and consolidate our estate by selling off sites that are surplus to defence needs and bringing people and capabilities into new centres of specialism. Secondly, we will invest by spending £4 billion over the next decade on improving our infrastructure and modernising our accommodation. In short, our vision is to create a world-class estate for our world-class armed forces—one based on their future needs, rather than those of previous generations.

Before I continue, I should say that, given the scale of the strategy and the fact that it will be delivered over 25 years, those plans are subject to revision, but they set out our current intentions. It is a strategy that we must deliver.

Turning to the matter at hand, as part of our strategy we have confirmed the disposal of 91 sites, including Woolwich. The decisions to dispose of those sites were made as the result of a systematic and thorough review of all of our defence assets by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, working closely alongside head office and each of the frontline commands.

When it comes to the rationale behind our decision to dispose of the Woolwich site, the reasons are many, clear and, I hope, compelling. First, selling Woolwich will contribute to our overall aim of consolidating our defence estate into fewer centres of gravity and specialisation, with better support capability. It goes without saying that, given its size and location, the site itself is not suitable to become one of those larger centres. Let me explain further. When it comes to supporting military capability, a barracks in an urban location, such as Woolwich, simply cannot compete with those located in less densely populated areas. At Bulford barracks in Wiltshire, for instance, soldiers live literally on the doorstep of Salisbury plain training area, the largest military training area in the United Kingdom, equivalent in size to the Isle of Wight. They are also located alongside other units with which they live, work and train.

By comparison with Salisbury plain's 94,000 acres, the entire Woolwich site stands at 252 acres. That includes an outdoor training area, but one that is, as hon. Members might imagine, severely constrained. For instance, if soldiers want to practise live firing or conduct an annual personal weapons test, they must be bused an

[*Mark Lancaster*]

hour and a half south to Lydd ranges on the Kent coast. What is more, when it comes to working and training, units based in Woolwich do not have the day-to-day access to other units that their colleagues elsewhere enjoy. As such, they miss out on the vital exchange of ideas and tactics that gives an Army its crucial edge.

Bob Stewart: I accept everything that the Minister has said; that is logical. What I am concerned about is this: where is a unit such as the Royal Horse Artillery, which needs to be close to central London, going to go? We have had all these facilities built in Woolwich specifically for the Royal Horse Artillery, and now, a few years after producing them, we are going to throw them all away. It does not seem to make sense to me.

Mark Lancaster: I will come on to that in a moment, if I may. In many respects, the site for the King's Troop Royal Horse Artillery at Woolwich is sub-optimal, because it is away from central London, where the Royal Horse Artillery historically used to be. We are looking, in another project, at how we might be able to relocate the site closer to central London, where the Royal Horse Artillery perform their ceremonial duties. Woolwich is not an ideal site for them; they moved there out of need, because of a lack of equine space elsewhere in central London. I will come back to that in a moment.

Woolwich dates back to the 18th century. The site has a proud heritage, but one that comes with a high price. The grade II-listed barracks were built 240 years ago, and they require care and attention far beyond anything that modern, purpose-built barracks would need. Of more importance is the fact that the technical accommodation on the site—meaning things such as offices, garages and stores—will require extensive investment in the not-too-distant future, and they are not set to support the armed forces going forward. Although the single living accommodation was modernised back in 2010 to ensure a good standard of living for our personnel, by the time we complete the disposal of Woolwich, we will have had 18 years of return from that investment and it will not be too long before further updating is required.

Finally, we must take into account the wider potential of the site itself. It is a key site in a popular London borough, which, with the introduction of Crossrail in 2019, will be a prime location for the construction of new homes for the capital's workers. That is not the principal driver of the plan, however.

Taking all that into account, would it really be the best use of the defence budget and of taxpayers' cash to retain the site? Would pumping money into facilities that are constrained by their age and location really offer us value for money? Would it be right to continue investing in a site that is sub-optimal because of the constraints on it? Would it be right to hang on to such a high-worth site when the money raised by its sale would otherwise be reinvested back into the defence estate where it is most needed?

Having examined the facts objectively and in great detail, the conclusion we have come to is: no, it is not right to hang on to the barracks. Having explained how we have come to that conclusion, let me turn to what will happen next. First, let me deal with the question of

those living and working at Woolwich barracks. There are currently 1,054 military and 97 civilian staff permanently employed at the site. I recognise that our intention to close the site is unsettling for all those people and for their families. Let me reassure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich that we will do all we can to provide them with the necessary certainty about their future locations as soon as is practicable.

For operational reasons, I cannot go into detail on the re-provision of the Kings Troop Royal Horse Artillery any further than I already have following the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). The re-provision for the other units on site, including the 1st Battalion the Royal Anglians, is yet to be determined. What I can say is that all military personnel, regular or reserve, will be relocated with their unit or re-assigned in accordance with existing career management procedures. Civilian staff will be managed in accordance with normal departmental policy and processes. Formal trade union consultation will occur well in advance of any closure, and where possible we will look at other locations where those staff can be employed. There are also a number of third-party users of the site, and we want to give them the opportunity to find alternative locations with plenty of time.

Secondly, let me deal with the future of the site. My Department has begun the process of assessing the Woolwich site for sale. The findings of that work will better inform the disposal process and ensure that the revenue situation becomes clearer. The MOD, like all Departments, follows a set process for disposing of any site. Once declared surplus to defence requirements, the site is placed on a register of surplus public sector land, which is a database managed by the Cabinet Office that provides an opportunity for other public bodies to express an interest in acquiring such sites before they are placed on the open market.

Subject to planning permission, land at Woolwich might accommodate 3,000 housing units in support of any future Government house building targets, but any decision to use the land in this way would of course need consultation with the local authority, which would seek the views of local residents as part of that process. The local authority would also have to approve planning permission for appropriate housing for the location. The MOD will continue to liaise with the local council and planning authorities to ensure the best possible future use for the site, and the local community will be kept fully informed of all developments.

That leads me to my final point—it goes to the very heart of this debate—which is the impact of this closure on the local community. As I said at the start, the Department is ever mindful of the emotive nature of estate rationalisation—all the more so when the links between the community and the armed forces are as steeped in history as they are in Woolwich. After all, heritage and tradition are things by which the armed forces set great store. This year marks the tercentenary of the Royal Regiment of Artillery—and, indeed, of my own corps, the Corps of Royal Engineers—which was raised in Woolwich in 1716. To this day, Woolwich station remains a thriving and integral part of life in the borough. I witnessed that myself when I attended Armed Forces Day there earlier this year and saw the local people's great support for the barracks.

The units based at the station enjoy living and working there. Likewise, I know the local community holds these units in great esteem, as the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich said. We in the Ministry of Defence are truly grateful for the steadfast support we have received from the people of Woolwich over the centuries, and I appreciate wholeheartedly their concerns and those of the hon. Gentleman, who I must say has conveyed their concerns and expressed their wishes very eloquently in the Chamber this evening. However, modern armed forces must continually evolve and move with the times, and we must ensure our people have an estate that supports them and provides the working and living environment they rightly expect.

I urge the hon. Gentleman to see our decision to sell the Woolwich site for what it is—a well calculated judgment that forms part of a wide-ranging, painstakingly considered and carefully constructed plan. It is a plan to secure the future of our armed forces and the safety and prosperity of our nation for many decades to come,

and a plan that benefits the Woolwich community by giving the borough an opportunity to use this great site in a new way. Having said that, as the hon. Gentleman has been so courteous in making the simple request that I look again at the detail of the decision, I make a commitment to do so once we return in the new year.

Winston Churchill, who can always be relied on for an apt quote, once said:

“If we open a quarrel between past and present, we shall find that we have lost the future.”

We stand at such a juncture now, so hard as it may be—and despite the commitment I have just made—it is our collective duty to look upwards, outwards and forwards and to work together for a better defence estate.

Question put and agreed to.

7.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 20 December 2016

[ROBERT FLELLO *in the Chair*]

UK Nationals Imprisoned Abroad

9.30 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the case of Andy Tsege and other UK nationals imprisoned abroad.

It is a pleasure to see so many hon. Members here today. I will try to limit my remarks to 20 minutes. I was informed yesterday that only three Members had put their names in to speak, so I do not know how many Members present intend to do so. Clearly, I welcome the opportunity for the debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for it.

During this festive period, hundreds of thousands of British citizens will be travelling home to their families or going on holiday for a break. People would expect such a trip to be uneventful. Why would anything go wrong? However, for some British citizens, what happened while they were travelling abroad has turned their lives upside down in a way that many of us could not begin to comprehend.

Two prominent examples of that are Andy Tsege and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Both are British—Nazanin is a dual national—and were arrested by foreign authorities and imprisoned without access to a fair trial. Andy was kidnapped by Ethiopian agents at Sana'a International airport in Yemen, with the Yemeni authorities stating that his detention had not occurred pursuant to any judicial process. Nazanin, whose two-year-old daughter was with her, was arrested while leaving Iran. The ordeal that both Andy and Nazanin have since faced is truly shocking, and on top of the injustice of their detention, their daily lives have been subjected to gross human rights violations.

In the time permitted, I will concentrate on the cases of Andy and Nazanin. A longer debate would of course have allowed the cases of prisoners of conscience of all nationalities, held around the world, to be raised, and many organisations have contacted me since this debate was allowed in order to draw attention to such cases. For instance, Ali al-Nimr is spending his 22nd birthday in prison in Saudi Arabia. His crimes were participating in a demonstration,

“explaining how to give first aid to protestors”

and using his BlackBerry to invite others to join him at the protest.

There is also the case of Nabeel Rajab, whose trial has been delayed for the fifth time and who is expected now to be sentenced on 28th December. That is perhaps a diversionary tactic because there may be less attention on his case as festive celebrations get under way. He is a Bahraini human rights activist and opposition leader. That case is of particular interest to the UK, because of the funding from the UK that is going into training and supporting the security and justice systems in Bahrain.

There is also the case, drawn to my attention just yesterday, of a dual UK-Lebanese citizen detained in Israel. The release of Mr Faiz Mahmoud Ahmed Sherari has been ordered by a military court in Israel, but as far as I am aware he has not been released.

I would also like to use this opportunity to raise the case of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. I know that many hon. Members here today have raised concerns about the pressures that that community are under in different countries around the world—perhaps most prominently in Pakistan, but also, I understand, in Algeria.

Today, however, I will concentrate on Andy and Nazanin. This will be the third Christmas that Andy has spent alone in a prison—he is now in a prison notorious for being Ethiopia's gulag. He has not been able to speak to his partner and children in London for two years and has had no private access to British consular officials, leaving him unable to describe freely the treatment that he has received at the hands of his jailers.

Nazanin has been held, mostly in solitary confinement, for more than nine months. Her husband has campaigned tirelessly back in London for the UK Government to call for her release. It is still unclear whether the Government have done that. I hope that when the Minister responds, he will be able to clarify that. Have the Government actually called for her release? Her husband says that she has been at breaking point. She is currently allowed to see her daughter only for one hour each week in prison. Her daughter remains trapped in Iran, unable to see her father. Furthermore, representatives of both Andy and Nazanin have repeatedly raised serious concerns about their health.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. He raises the point about what our Government have done. In the case of Andy Tsege, I do not think it is in dispute that he was rendered unlawfully and was tried in absentia, and we would not recognise those processes. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think it extraordinary, therefore, that the Government have not even requested his release?

Tom Brake: I do indeed. What the Government are trying to initiate, which I will come on to shortly, is providing Andy Tsege with a lawyer, but as I understand it, he has no right of appeal in Ethiopia, and therefore providing him with a lawyer does not seem to be of great use.

The mistreatment of British citizens imprisoned abroad is unacceptable in all cases, regardless of what crime has been committed, yet in these cases the astounding truth is that it is clear that Andy and Nazanin are being held unlawfully. Attached to Andy's name was a conviction and death sentence, after a trial in absentia, which was condemned throughout the world. Although Andy was previously prominent in Ethiopian politics, no country other than Ethiopia had found evidence, at the time of his kidnapping, that the political organisation with which he was involved had conspired to commit acts of terrorism.

Nazanin was recently sentenced on charges that remain secret, despite her previous employment in Iran as an aid worker. The simple fact is that if these British citizens are not going to be charged with an offence

[*Tom Brake*]

recognised internationally, they should be released immediately so that they can spend Christmas at home, safe with their families, who want nothing more than for them to be at home and for their lives to return to normality.

Yesterday, a representative of Reprieve and I met the Ethiopian ambassador about Andy's case. We are grateful to His Excellency and the Minister responsible for public diplomacy for their time. We are aware that last Thursday—15 December—Andy received a consular visit. However, like all the other consular visits, that visit was supervised by the prison authorities. As I stated, Andy has never met consular officials in private. We understand that during the visit the UK ambassador told Andy that the UK may have found a lawyer to help him to

“assess his options under the Ethiopian legal system.”

Unfortunately, that does not, in my view, demonstrate progress on his case. First, the UK Government's approach to this case appears to ignore the fact that Andy is the victim of a series of crimes and is not a criminal. The UK Government's failure to condemn the series of abuses that Andy has suffered and continues to suffer at the hands of the Ethiopian regime signals that foreign Governments can ignore international law and kidnap British citizens at will.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I declare an interest as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Ethiopia and Djibouti. The right hon. Gentleman has repeatedly referred to Mr Tsege's “kidnapping”. Does he have any evidence that that was a kidnapping? Does he have any statements provided by the Yemeni Government to that effect? I ask because obviously that is not what the Ethiopians are saying. If the right hon. Gentleman does have such evidence, I am happy to help him with the case as far as that goes.

Tom Brake: My understanding is that the Yemenis have stated that the process of getting Mr Tsege from Yemen to Ethiopia did not follow a judicial process that they recognised. Furthermore, as the hon. Gentleman may be aware, the UK Government have repeatedly asked for a copy of the extradition treaty that apparently exists between Yemen and Ethiopia and, as far as I am aware, that has not been provided. I hope that that might provide sufficient evidence for him to want to investigate the matter further.

In addition, the UK Government's strategy of focusing on access to a lawyer in this case is unworkable for a number of practical reasons. There is no legal conviction and sentence to appeal. Andy was convicted and sentenced to death illegally in 2009, while living in London with his family. The trial was described by a representative from the US embassy in Addis Ababa as “political retaliation” and

“lacking in basic elements of due process”.

I maintain that Andy was abducted in 2014 amid a sweeping crackdown on opposition voices. There was no lawful basis for Andy's rendition from Yemen to Ethiopia, and he has not been charged with any new offence.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that UK Governments—this Government and previous ones—have been too slow to criticise rendition, especially when rendition has been on the British Indian Ocean Territory?

Tom Brake: I entirely agree with the hon. Lady's intervention. Rendition, and the UK's involvement in it, is a black mark on our past. I hope that the UK Government will now fight it at every opportunity, including in this particular case.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I am slightly confused by this. Do the Yemeni Government accept that they knew that Andy was being removed from their territory, or do they say that it was done secretly without their knowledge?

Tom Brake: At the risk of repeating myself, the information I have is that the Yemeni authorities clearly know that he was taken from there but have stated that they believe that no judicial process was followed to extract him in that way. That would imply that if there was an extradition treaty in place between Yemen and Ethiopia, it was not actually used as a means of extracting him from that country. Perhaps when the Minister responds he will give us some more detail on what he believes the position to be.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way, and is laying out his case carefully and strongly. I congratulate him on securing this important debate. May I pursue this question? He has already stated that Mr Tsege may quite possibly have been the victim of a crime or of several crimes. If no judicial process was applied in the rendition from the airport in Yemen, does that imply that there could have been an official but non-judicial process? Could there have been some sort of official complicity among Yemeni authorities as well, in which case should we be aiming fire at their potentially having committed crimes against Mr Tsege?

Tom Brake: That is a very helpful intervention, and the hon. Gentleman has highlighted an area that requires pursuing. When we had the meeting with the Ethiopian ambassador yesterday, he implied that in the past there have been arrangements between the Yemenis and the Ethiopians and that perhaps those arrangements were used, as opposed to there being a formal extradition process. Yes, we might well want to question the involvement of the Yemeni authorities.

What is clear is that had the Ethiopian Government wanted to extradite Andy lawfully, they could have made a request for his extradition from the UK authorities—although I understand that there is currently no formal extradition agreement between the UK and Ethiopia. I believe that no such request was made and, as far as I am aware, the UK Government have been provided with no evidence of Andy's so-called terrorist activities. I understand that the UK Government are apparently being encouraged to follow—this is the description from the Ethiopian ambassador—the open trial process that found Andy guilty in absentia as their means of obtaining information, rather than necessarily expecting it from the Ethiopian Government directly.

The Ethiopian Government have publicly confirmed, on a number of occasions, that there are no legal options open to Andy. Most recently, at the meeting yesterday it was confirmed that he cannot appeal his sentence because he was absent from his trial. A plea for clemency to the Ethiopian President may be possible, and I look forward to some information that we were offered at that meeting about how such a plea could be initiated.

I maintain that access to a lawyer will not achieve justice for Andy. By continuing to pursue an unworkable strategy, the UK Government are not living up to their duty to protect British citizens facing the death penalty overseas. On that point, we got a degree of reassurance from the Ethiopian ambassador that Ethiopia does not apply capital punishment, although he did set out a couple of exceptions to that rule, so it was half reassuring and half not.

Andy's most recent consular visit also highlighted continued failures by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in handling his case. For instance, although the FCO has continuously claimed, and represented to a UK court, that Andy could call his partner and children whenever he wanted to, the prison director informed the ambassador at the latest visit that

"prisoners cannot make phone calls."

That, too, was confirmed in the meeting with the Ethiopian ambassador yesterday. Thus Andy is not—and, as far as I am aware, never was—able to call his family, so his children face the third Christmas in a row without any contact with their father. He does not even have a pen and paper to write them a Christmas card. Given the fairly significant failures in this case and the way that it has been managed, I hope that the Minister will be willing to conduct a meaningful review of the Government's approach, because I do not think that approach is delivering.

What more can be done to help Andy and Nazanin? Although hundreds of thousands of people have supported petitions and campaigns, in partnership with the tireless advocacy work of groups such as Reprieve and Amnesty International, ultimately it is the Ethiopian Government, the Iranian Government and our Government who have the most influence and leverage. To the Ethiopian authorities, I make a simple plea: let Andy make that call before Christmas. He has had two years without contact with his wife or children, and that can stop very easily if the Ethiopian authorities permit it.

To the Iranian authorities, pending Nazanin's release, which I hope will be soon, I say: allow for visits for her young daughter involving extended contact, and in a suitable environment, taking account of the best interests of the child in line with the provisions of the convention on the rights of the child, which I am pleased that Iran has ratified. There is not time to raise the case of Kamal Foroughi in any detail, but I hope that other Members may refer to his case as well.

What should the UK Government do at this point? They need to call openly and loudly for Iran and Ethiopia to free Nazanin and Andy respectively. I believe that the weight of the Prime Minister calling for their release would be significant and set a strong tone that the UK does not stand by and let its citizens face appalling treatment, trapped in prisons, thousands of miles from their homes. We have seen the US and

Canada—and the UK previously—secure the release of their citizens after publicly raising calls for the release of their nationals imprisoned unlawfully abroad. Yet the UK Government appear reluctant to do the same now.

The FCO stresses the work that it does for the families of Andy and Nazanin, and says that it repeatedly raises their cases with the respective Governments. However, all it appears to be doing is acquiescing in the dubious charges imposed on them by saying that it will not get involved in the legal system of another state, despite those legal systems being grossly, and so obviously, unfair. I am familiar with that argument—all too familiar with it—in relation to the constituency case of Neil Juwaheer, whose parents believe was murdered by Brazilian police in a Brazilian police station.

If we were to get just one official public statement from our Prime Minister unequivocally calling for Andy's and Nazanin's release, and for the release of other British nationals imprisoned unlawfully abroad, that would convince the public that our Government will stand up for their citizens and would send a strong and unequivocal message to foreign Governments. My call is for the Prime Minister, the Government and the Minister to give Andy and Nazanin's families some seasonal comfort over the next week—pick up the phone, issue a statement and call for their release.

9.49 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this debate. As we have heard today, Mr Tsege, who was a prominent figure in Ethiopian opposition politics, has experienced terrible difficulties. He has undergone experiences that give many colleagues in this House cause for concern, which is evidenced by the number of Members of Parliament, from many different parties, who are in their places today.

I am here today because a member of my staff recently met Mr Tsege's partner, Ms Hailemariam, at her request here in Parliament, was deeply moved by the family's plight and referred Mr Tsege's case to me. I pay tribute to Ms Hailemariam for her tenacity and perseverance in championing her partner's case; as I said, that is why I am here today.

I will focus on one aspect of Mr Tsege's case—that is, the apparent absence of the appropriate due judicial process. Judicial process under law is not apparent from his situation, and we in the UK Parliament should defend the right of all our fellow citizens, wherever they are in the world, to have the benefit of due process under law, whatever they might be suspected or accused of. We should not tolerate without challenge a UK citizen being subject to peremptory abduction, rendition, imprisonment and the lack of a fair trial, as appears to have happened in Andy Tsege's case. That is why so many of us are here today.

Bob Stewart: I am so sorry to interrupt again. Is Andy now under sentence of death, having been tried in absentia, so he is there permanently? Is there any chance of a review of his case by the judicial authorities in Ethiopia? In other words, are we down to political, international and diplomatic pressure to get him out?

Fiona Bruce: As far as I understand it, in Ethiopia there is no right of appeal from a death sentence. I stand to be corrected if other hon. Members understand the situation differently, but I see some nodding in the Chamber.

I do not want to interrogate the veracity of the claims against Mr Tsege, but whatever the intricacies of his particular case, we cannot avoid the fact that a UK citizen has, by all accounts, been kidnapped, arrested, rendered and imprisoned, and then tried, convicted and sentenced to death in absentia, in flagrant contravention of the due process of law.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing the debate. Is it not material to this matter for the international community that the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention described Mr Tsege's detention as "illegal" and concluded that an "adequate remedy" would be to release him and afford him "adequate compensation"?

Fiona Bruce: That is right. As we have heard, Mr Tsege was convicted in absentia in 2009 while he was at home with his family in London. He was not formally notified of the proceedings brought against him, nor of his ultimate sentence. Obviously, he was not given any opportunity to defend himself and the US State Department has described his 2009 trial as an act of "political retaliation" that was "lacking in basic elements of due process".

Mr Tsege was sentenced under Ethiopia's Anti-Terrorism Proclamation of 2009—a statute that the Foreign Office has noted has been used to "restrict...opposition and dissent" by targeting "members of opposition groups, journalists" and "peaceful protesters."

Mr Tsege was tried alongside scores of other political prisoners including his 82-year-old father. What is very concerning is that the anti-terrorism proclamation under which he was convicted was not introduced until a month after his in absentia trial began in June 2009. I know that many hon. Members share my concern about retrospective legislation, particularly in the case of criminal charges.

During the proceedings, the prosecution amended the charges against Mr Tsege, dropping the initial allegation that he was involved in plotting a coup d'état and introducing instead charges of conspiring to dismantle the constitutional order. I understand that UK authorities have noted that at no point have they been presented with any evidence against Mr Tsege from the Ethiopian authorities that would stand up in a British court, despite the requests made of the Ethiopian Government.

The civil liberties group, Reprieve, which I commend on highlighting the case, said that Mr Tsege was bound, hooded and bundled onto a plane headed for Ethiopia. It should be noted that the circumstances of his abduction, which have been widely publicised, have not been disputed by Ethiopian officials. The fact remains that the Ethiopian Government did not request his lawful extradition while he was living in London, nor have they produced any

evidence to back up the claim of an extradition arrangement with Yemen. His kidnap at an overseas airport is a clear breach of the established international legal extradition process.

Further, the UN special rapporteur on torture reported to the United Nations Human Rights Council that Ethiopia's treatment of Mr Tsege has violated the convention against torture. In addition to the marked difference in Mr Tsege's physical appearance before and after abduction in his television appearances—it is clearly discernible—a British psychiatrist commissioned by Reprieve, who has assessed his case, has noted his deteriorating mental state. I understand that Ethiopia has not allowed the British Government to have a private consular visit, making it impossible for Mr Tsege to report directly instances of suspected mistreatment.

There have been some consular visits, albeit not private. When Mr Tsege was with the UK ambassador to Ethiopia he stressed that he only ever advocated the conduct of politics "by peaceful means." That echoes his testimony before the European Parliament in 2006 in which he encouraged Members of the European Parliament to back the

"peaceful, just and fair struggle of the people of Ethiopia for freedom and democracy".

In the years before his abduction, Mr Tsege mounted a global campaign to draw worldwide attention to concerning developments in Ethiopia. He testified before the European Parliament and the United States Congress, encouraging the latter to introduce legislation to encourage Ethiopia to engage in "democratisation and economic liberalisation".

Some organisations, such as the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, which has investigated the case, have concluded that the only proper solution is for Mr Tsege to be immediately released and returned home. It could well be argued that the UK Government should demand that. If, following his release, the Ethiopian Government then wish to pursue a case against him, they should do so legitimately by seeking his extradition and observing the norms of legal process. What is the Minister's response to that and what steps have the UK Government taken in that regard? Have they pushed for Mr Tsege's release from Ethiopia, or have diplomatic efforts been limited, as has been reported, to efforts to try to convince the Ethiopian Government to grant him access to a lawyer, which, as we have heard, will be of limited benefit at this stage? Perhaps the UK Government are aware of information that is not in the public domain; what can the Minister tell us to help us to understand the otherwise inexplicable treatment of Mr Tsege?

In a recent letter to supporters of Andy Tsege, the Foreign Secretary wrote that

"Britain does not interfere in the legal systems of other countries", but it is interesting to note that in recent years, two UK citizens who were arbitrarily detained have been released: Lee Po in China and Karl Andree in Saudi Arabia. I understand that, in both cases, their release came about following intervention by the UK.

The question is whether we believe that the circumstances of Mr Tsege's arrest and subsequent treatment are acceptable. Surely they are not.

Dr Mathias: Does my hon. Friend have concerns, as I do, that the UK Government may be giving aid worth millions of pounds to a country that is maltreating a UK citizen?

Fiona Bruce: I was going to observe later in my speech that I had the privilege of visiting Ethiopia as a member of the Select Committee on International Development in 2013 to look at UK aid projects there.

Mr Laurence Robertson: It is my understanding that no UK aid actually goes to Governments these days. Certainly, it does not go to the Ethiopian Government. I think that it goes much further down the line.

Fiona Bruce: It is now often the case that aid is not paid bilaterally to many countries. None the less, UK aid money is being spent in Ethiopia, as has been indicated by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias).

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): While the hon. Lady is on the subject of aid, I wonder whether she had an opportunity on her visit to look at the MSC in security sector management. I understand it was initially funded through a Department for International Development programme and it appears that some of the people who were responsible for Mr Tsege's detention had taken part.

Robert Ffello (in the Chair): Before the hon. Lady responds, I gently suggest that other Members wish to speak and that I will call the Front Benchers at half-past 10 o'clock.

Fiona Bruce: Thank you, Mr Ffello. I did not have an opportunity to see the project to which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) referred.

In conclusion, disrespect for basic human rights continues to be widespread throughout the globe. I see that all too frequently as chair of the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission. It is in that capacity, as well as in my capacity as a Member of Parliament, that I raise concerns about Mr Tsege today. As the Secretary-General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, so eloquently stated:

"Upholding human rights is in the interest of all. Respect for human rights advances well-being for every individual, stability for every society, and harmony for our interconnected world."

Robert Ffello (in the Chair): There are now six Members who wish to speak. We have 29 and a bit minutes. I call Kerry McCarthy to demonstrate how succinct Members can be.

10.1 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Ffello. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for this opportunity to discuss Andy Tsege's case, which my speech will be focused on. Over the past year or so, I have been contacted by a lot of constituents who are concerned about the British Government's apparent failure to support a British citizen with a partner and three children in London. I have met with Reprieve to talk about the case and I pay tribute to that organisation, not just for representing

Andy, but for its work over many years in challenging the use of the death penalty across the world.

As we have heard—I will recap briefly—Mr Tsege was sentenced to death in absentia in 2009. He was at home in the UK at the time and had received no notification of the proceedings against him. He was convicted under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, legislation that was not even introduced until a month after his trial began, and there are reports that the prosecution frequently amended the charges against him. The trial was described by a representative from the US embassy in Addis Ababa as "political retaliation" and

"lacking in basic elements of due process".

As we have heard, rather than the Ethiopian Government approaching the UK to see whether Mr Tsege could be extradited, he was kidnapped at a Yemen airport, bound, hooded, and taken on a plane to Ethiopia in breach of international legal extradition processes. For a while, no one knew where he was being detained, but he eventually surfaced at a prison that has been described as "Ethiopia's gulag". His partner is not permitted to travel to Ethiopia and neither she, nor their three children, have spoken to him in two years. He has been shown on state television, where he apparently appeared exhausted and to have lost a lot of weight. The UN special rapporteur on torture has reported to the Human Rights Council that Mr Tsege's treatment has violated the convention against torture, and a British psychiatrist has reported that his mental state is deteriorating.

While Mr Tsege has been detained, he has been allowed only brief and irregular visits from British consular officials, and none of those visits has been private. I understand that the most recent visit was last Thursday, in which he was told that a lawyer may have been found for him to assess his options under the Ethiopian legal system. I am sure that the Minister will tell us that this is a positive step forward, but it will be small comfort given that Mr Tsege was illegally convicted and sentenced to death, that there was no lawful basis for his rendition from Yemen to Ethiopia, and that the Ethiopian ambassador has confirmed to Reprieve and to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that there is no right of appeal. Will the Minister explain what he believes legal representation for Mr Tsege would actually achieve and why the Foreign Office has not done much more to support him?

The Foreign Office, in seeking to explain its reluctance to help Mr Tsege, said that the UK does not intervene in other countries' legal systems. Yet Reprieve points out that the UK has frequently requested and secured the release of British nationals who have been arbitrarily detained in other countries. It also points to President Obama's successful request, before his visit to Ethiopia, for the release of bloggers sentenced to death under the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation as evidence that the Ethiopian Government will respond positively to international pressure. The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has also called for Mr Tsege's immediate release.

I can understand why the UK would not wish, as a general rule, to intervene in other countries' judicial systems, but surely that should apply only when we have confidence that the rule of law, due process and the independence of the judiciary from political interference—basic principles that should be at the heart of any legal system—are being upheld. Surely we have a responsibility

[Kerry McCarthy]

to speak out where freedom of expression is under threat, and a duty to challenge torture and oppose the death penalty in all circumstances. The Minister must see that Mr Tsege's case highlights concerns on all those fronts, and he knows that there are wider concerns about Ethiopia's human rights record. The Foreign Office has expressed concern that, in an attempt to restrict dissent:

"Those detained under the ATP include members of opposition groups, journalists, peaceful protesters, and others seeking to express their rights to freedom of assembly or expression".

Amnesty International's annual report highlights how members of opposition parties and protesters have been extra-judicially executed, and that the elections took place

"against a backdrop of restrictions on civil society, the media and the political opposition, including excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators...and the harassment of election observers".

It also reports that the ATP was used to "suppress freedom of expression" and detain journalists in the run-up to the election, and that many journalists have been forced to flee the country. Amnesty has condemned the recent arrest of the Ethiopian opposition leader as

"an outrageous assault on the right to freedom of expression and should sound alarm bells for anyone with an interest in ending the deadly protests that have rocked Ethiopia over the past year."

The Human Rights Watch report on Ethiopia also makes for disturbing reading, with evidence of

"harassment, arbitrary arrest, and politically motivated prosecutions."

It says that the media "remained under government stranglehold" and that security personnel have tortured political detainees. Human Rights Watch also describes Mr Tsege's removal from Yemen as "unlawful".

Even if the Foreign Office thought that Mr Tsege's trial and detention complied with international law—a very big if, given what we have heard this morning—surely the Government would still have an obligation to challenge the death sentence given that the UK unequivocally opposes the death sentence in all circumstances. That used to be a human rights priority for the Foreign Office, but those priorities have now been abandoned in a shameful sign that the Government's human rights work has been downgraded.

The Government chose not to renew their strategy for the abolition of the death penalty when it ran out last year. I would be grateful if the Minister would tell us why, and what the Government are doing to ensure that the international community does not interpret this as a weakening commitment to global abolition, because that is what it looks like. Will the Minister tell us whether FCO resources for challenging the death penalty have also been downgraded? The Minister will no doubt tell us that the Foreign Office has replaced its six human rights priorities with its three pillars. I would appreciate an update on how the Foreign Office is working to support those pillars overseas. I urge the Minister to consider the questions that Mr Tsege's case raises about Ethiopia's commitments to democratic values, the rule of law and the rules-based international system.

The UK's support for human rights—domestically and internationally—should be robust and categorical. Too often, the issue appears to be an afterthought for Ministers when abroad and to be seen as a nuisance at

home. I ask the Minister to reflect on what Mr Tsege and his family have been through over the last few years and to consider whether he deserves better from this Government. It is shameful and indefensible to treat a British citizen in this way. I hope we hear a firm commitment from the Minister to do absolutely everything he can, using the considerable leverage at the Government's disposal, to secure justice and freedom for Mr Tsege.

10.9 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing it. The Library background information shows that he has done a lot of extremely good work for the gentleman in question.

As the human rights spokesperson for the Democratic Unionist party at Westminster, it is incumbent on me to raise the plight of a gentleman who has been the beneficiary of political asylum here in the UK since 1979. We are all aware of how the asylum system works and the fact that asylum is not easily granted. I recently dealt with a gentleman seeking asylum whose brother was murdered in Zimbabwe due to his political affiliation, and it has been a long battle to have the Home Office recognise his status. As we all know, Zimbabwe will shortly hold elections, but it is an authoritarian regime. I can but hope that true democracy will happen and the dictator, Mugabe, will be ousted so that my constituent and his family can return home to the country he loves and where he wants to be.

The fact that Andy was granted political asylum shows that he has a valid case. Our asylum rules state that, to stay in the UK as a refugee, a person must be unable to live safely in any part of their own country because they fear persecution, as Andy clearly does. Such persecution must be because of a person's race, religion, nationality, political opinion—as in this case—or anything else that puts them at risk because of the social, cultural, religious or political situation in their country, such as their gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. A claimant must have failed to receive protection from authorities in their own country.

We are aware of many other cases across the world, and the right hon. Gentleman referred to some of them in his introduction. I asked a parliamentary question in July in which I asked the Minister to urge

"the government of Iran to apply without discrimination Article 58 of the Islamic Penal Code to permit Kamal Foroughi's early release."

The Minister replied that

"Mr Foroughi's lawyers would be welcome to have contact with the Iranian Judicial authorities."

Has the Foreign Office had any opportunity to assist Kamal Foroughi's lawyers?

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has also been mentioned. Human rights abuses are rampant in Iran, and this lady has been abused and had her personal liberty taken from her. There have been petitions, and MPs, including me and many others in this room, have joined the campaign—we are all here to make the case.

Andy, who was born in Ethiopia, was granted asylum because he is a well-known and respected critic of the Ethiopian Government. In recent years he has appeared before the US Congress and the European Parliament's

sub-committee on human rights to speak about the current regime's poor human rights record. Andy fled Ethiopia in the 1970s after facing serious threats from the then Government because of his democratic political beliefs. His younger brother had already been murdered by Government security forces.

Andy's safety in prison has been questioned, as have his cell and the people he is with. What has been done about that? We did not send him home, because we accepted that his life was at risk. His life is now at risk, and we have not secured his release and have perhaps not given the right help. Is that right? Surely we can and should apply diplomatic pressure to bring this British citizen, and father of British children, home to his family. The Foreign Secretary secured legal representation for Andy in June 2016, and he said:

"I have now received a commitment".

What commitment did he receive, and what is he doing in relation to that commitment? It is important that we find out.

Since being kidnapped in June 2014, Andy has not been allowed access to his family, a lawyer or British consular officials throughout his ordeal. He has not been charged with any crime, and he has not been subjected to any legal process. In July 2014, Ethiopian state TV aired a heavily edited video of Andy apparently confessing to a number of offences. He appeared gaunt and disoriented, and he had noticeably lost weight. Screaming could be heard in the background. Torture is extremely widespread in Ethiopian prisons, and political detainees such as Andy are routinely abused to extract information and false confessions. Ethiopia is one of the world's most repressive regimes. Christians are persecuted, stripped of their human rights, abused, tortured and reduced to second-class citizens in their own country.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) spoke about the aid that Ethiopia receives. Something is seriously wrong when a girl band—they are known as Ethiopia's Spice Girls—received £5.2 million in aid, on top of the £4 million that they have already received, but we cannot help this man Andy. That is disgraceful. I understand the Foreign Office's position, but I make it clear that we have a moral obligation to call for Andy's release. I support those calls today.

10.14 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello. I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for securing this important debate. I do not disagree with anything he said. I declare an interest as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human rights and chair of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy and human rights in the Gulf. I have tabled written questions on Andy Tsege, and I am thankful that we have now been afforded the opportunity to debate his case.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who is a vocal campaigner for Andy's release and has worked closely with Andy's family and Reprieve over the last six months. Unfortunately, my hon. Friend is unable to attend today's debate, but I hope that my party colleagues and I are able to convey many of the points he would have intended to make.

As we are all aware, Andy's situation is very worrying. Ethiopia is a country where tensions are high, where the human rights situation was described only last month as "dire" by a representative of Amnesty International, and where the recent elections in 2015 were held against a backdrop of reported political intimidation of opposition parties. Evidently, Ethiopia is a country fraught with problems, and it is concerning that Andy is currently languishing there.

Since his incarceration, the Ethiopian authorities have continued to peddle the myth that Andy is a terrorist and that his political party, Ginbot 7, is a terrorist organisation. Frankly, that could not be further from the truth and as his partner, Yemi Hailemariam, has said, he is a "politician, not a terrorist." Ginbot 7, despite sustained pressure from the Ethiopian Government, has not been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by any other Government and, indeed, the UK is yet to be provided with any evidence of Andy's supposed terrorist activity. It is appalling that Ethiopia is taking that line, and I truly hope that the UK Government have been vocal in rebuffing those claims to their counterparts.

I would be grateful if the Minister outlined whether the Ethiopian authorities have recently tried to provide any evidence against Andy and, if so, what the Government have said to the Ethiopian authorities in response. As per an answer provided by Baroness Anelay of St Johns on 1 December, Andy has now been visited by UK officials on 12 different occasions. That is in addition to the efforts of the Foreign Secretary and the UK ambassador, who regularly raise Andy's case with the Ethiopian authorities.

Despite those prolonged and sustained efforts, Andy remains locked up in prison. The Government's representations are welcome, but the Foreign Office must go further and call for Andy's immediate and unconditional release. We keep hearing from the FCO that Andy has access to legal advice, but that simply does not go far enough. Reprieve has argued that any legal access is effectively pointless, as the Ethiopian Government have already said that there is no legal route by which Andy can be allowed to contest his death sentence.

The UK Government have repeatedly claimed:

"Britain does not interfere in the legal systems of other countries by challenging convictions."

However, Reprieve categorically disputes that rebuttal. It is of the opinion that the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), personally intervened in the case of Karl Andree, who was released from a Saudi Arabian prison in 2015. As such, will the Minister clarify why it seems that the Government's approach to Andy is different from their approach to Mr Andree?

Furthermore, what is the Minister's position on the comments made by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) that, as Andy was kidnapped and sentenced to death in absentia, the Government should be calling for his release? Last Wednesday marked two years since Yemi and Andy's children last held a conversation with their father—two full years in which he has had minimal contact with the outside world and has been stuck in a prison dubbed "Ethiopia's gulag". Andy now faces the prospect of another Christmas behind bars, without seeing or hearing from his beloved wife and three children.

[Margaret Ferrier]

In closing, I would like to draw a parallel with the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Only last week, I met her husband Richard. After speaking with him, I could not stop thinking about how their family's Christmas will not be celebrated. Nazanin and Richard have a young child, Gabriella. It is absolutely heartbreaking to think what they are all going through. The hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) has been a great advocate for her constituent, and I hope that the Government can assist further with the case. At a time when families around the world are coming together, the families of Nazanin and Andy could not be further apart. The Government must do more for them, and they must be willing to demand their immediate release.

Robert Ffello (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that I will call the Front-Bench speakers at 10.30 am.

10.20 am

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is an honour to serve—in haste—under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this important debate, which allows us to mention a number of cases. We have heard about the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. We need her release, but also, pending that, we need proper access for her family. The case of Kamal Foroughi, which was described strongly by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), is similar.

Like others, I will concentrate particularly on the case of Andy Tsege. I met his family initially after, as an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on human rights, I was made aware of his case by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who was also an officer and ensured that the group took up his constituent's case, which he had been following. Obviously, since the right hon. Gentleman's elevation to Leader of the Opposition, he is more constricted in what he can do and say in proceedings such as this, but I note his attendance for a large part of the debate, as I am sure have Andy Tsege's family.

Let us be clear: we are talking in this case about a series of instances in which someone has been treated appallingly. Andy Tsege was tried in absentia, which is a scandal in itself. He was then sentenced to death, which is also a scandal and should be cause for alarm given the UK's diplomatic stance. He was then rendered in a gross way from a third country and imprisoned in Ethiopia, where he has been tortured and mistreated. Let us remember that the anti-terror proclamation under which he was sentenced was not introduced until a month after his trial in absentia began in June 2009. Every stage of this case stinks. We must remember that Andy Tsege is a dual national, and the trial in absentia happened while he was here in the UK with his family.

We have been told in numerous parliamentary answers that Andy Tsege's case is a priority for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, but can the Minister tell us what less the FCO could have done had this case not been a priority? Thankfully, there have been a number of visits, but none of them has taken place free of the presence of the Ethiopian authorities. The FCO is also involved in the constant circular offer of legal assistance. As the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington

said in introducing the debate, the fact is that Andy is not a criminal; he is the victim of a series of crimes. The Government should not collude in the fiction that there is a legal process or that there are recognisable charges against this UK citizen.

Mr Laurence Robertson: I am certainly not taking sides with the Ethiopian Government on this issue, but I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is using somewhat excessive language. The British Government have not been complicit at all. They have been active on the case for two years that I know of. Perhaps he might want to reconsider. He is normally much more reasonable than that.

Mark Durkan: If the hon. Gentleman checks, he will see that I said that the Government are constantly referring to legal advice and legal assistance, in circumstances where there is no process. We have already heard that there is no right of appeal for Andy Tsege, and that he was tried in absentia. What I said was that the Government's line about legal advice colludes with the fiction that there is a legal process with recognisable charges. I did not imply any other degree of complicity, and I did not actually use the word to which the hon. Gentleman refers. I know that he chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Ethiopia and Djibouti; it would have been interesting if he could have offered some alternative narrative from the Ethiopian authorities. As I understand it, the FCO has neither been given one nor referred to one, although the Minister might correct me on that when he replies.

10.25 am

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing the debate and giving such a succinct summary of the case. It seems to me that the crime committed by Andy Tsege is being an outspoken critic of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. I thought that we in this country encouraged that kind of behaviour, so I am not sure why, as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) has just said, we are now accepting the Ethiopian version of events.

What is clear is that if the cornerstone of the British case is that Andy Tsege should be allowed access to legal representation, that has to mean more than just a list of lawyers that he may or may not still possess. The bottom line is that we would not expect any British citizen to get such poor support from the authorities. Will the Minister demand private access to Mr Tsege? Will he ensure proper legal representation? In fact, will he do what we would expect him to do for anybody and demand this man's release?

Thinking back to the case of John McCarthy, what would have happened if we had all just sat back quietly and said nothing? Would McCarthy ever have been released? We must shout loudly and clearly that we are not putting up with that for Andy Tsege, or for Nazanin Ratcliffe. We expect our Government to protect our citizens, stand up for the rule of law and make it absolutely clear to regimes around the world that if they have no respect for human rights and the rule of law, they will get no favours from us.

10.27 am

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thank Reprieve for its outstanding research and advocacy on the case of

Andy Tsege and many others in which I have been involved. I say to the Minister, as have others, that the Government have intervened before. They intervened in the case of Karl Andree, and of my constituent Ghonchek Ghavami, the young woman imprisoned in Iran for trying to go and see a volleyball game. She was released; her case was raised by the former Foreign Secretary with his Iranian counterpart. The former Prime Minister intervened in the case of Shaker Aamer, as did others.

I am delighted to see here the Leader of the Opposition, who is Andy Tsege's MP, as well as the shadow Foreign Secretary. The Leader of the Opposition has worked on many such cases over the years. I went with him to Washington as part of the attempt to get Shaker Aamer released; the British Government were active in that case as well. The Minister himself has raised the case of the three young Saudis still on death row: Ali al-Nimr, Dawood al-Marhoon and Abdullah al-Zaher.

However, there are other cases in which the Government pull their punches, such as the case of Nabeel Rajab, the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, who has been in and out of prison for five years, and is currently there on a charge of spreading false news by tweeting in a bid to discredit Bahrain. Believe me, that regime needs no help discrediting itself. There is often a suspicion that where our Government have trade or military links, they pull their punches on such matters. They are doing so in relation to Andy Tsege, who is a British citizen. Many of the people in the other cases that I have mentioned were not British citizens, or had dual citizenship. Undoubtedly we should intervene.

I know that time is extremely short. There appears to be no doubt—again, I am grateful for the briefing from Reprieve—that Andy Tsege's case involves unlawful rendition. The Ethiopians do not appear to deny that; the Yemenis appear to accept it. That in itself should result in his release being immediately called for. There has been no due process. There is precedent for Government intervention, so I urge the Minister to give us some hope and confidence, particularly as we approach Christmas, that Andy Tsege can return home to spend time with his family in Britain.

10.29 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello. A lot of the points have already been comprehensively made, so I will be as brief as I can in order to give the Minister and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson the opportunity to respond. I join other Members in congratulating the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this debate, and I congratulate all the Members who have spoken and attended today.

Such cases attract considerable concern and public interest. I have been contacted—like almost every Member here, I suspect—by dozens of constituents calling on the UK Government to do right by these citizens and actively seek their release from unjust imprisonment. On behalf of the Scottish National party, I pay tribute to the campaign groups that have kept the flame of hope alive for so many prisoners, particularly Reprieve, Amnesty International and, here in Westminster, the all-party group on human rights. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret

Ferrier) mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who unfortunately cannot be here; I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who supported the bid to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West was told on 6 July by the then Prime Minister, David Cameron:

“Our consul has been able to meet Mr Tsege on a number of occasions and we are working with him and with the Ethiopian Government to try to get this resolved.”—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 878.]

Patently the situation has not been resolved. We have heard the details of the case from a number of Members: a UK citizen has been rendered from Yemen to Ethiopia, essentially abducted and detained after a trial in absentia that he knew nothing about, and is now under a death sentence, facing the rest of his life in prison with no access to legal representation or clear route for appeal. The point has been well made by several Members, including the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan): what is the point of legal representation if there is no right to appeal?

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on securing this debate. The case has horrifying features. The legal system that I have seen in this country in many years practising at the Bar has many features that protect the human rights of individuals who face trial. Does the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) agree that Britain can have a real role in arguing for increased standards in human rights and representation at trial throughout the entire world?

Patrick Grady: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place. I wholeheartedly agree with his point; I might touch on it towards the end of my remarks.

What other steps are the UK Government taking to monitor the wellbeing of their citizen, who is being held in what we have heard described as Ethiopia's gulag? When will the next private consular visit be? When will he be allowed to speak to his family?

We have also heard about the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about in some detail. It is another dreadful situation, in which a British citizen was lifted at Tehran airport and, after an unfair trial, sentenced to five years. Again, there has been massive interest in her campaign from civil society and the public; I saw some of the campaigners making their way along Parliament Street a few weeks ago as I was on my way to the SNP offices at No. 53. I am proud to be among the Members of Parliament who signed a card to Nazanin, to let her know that she was being thought about, at the reception recently hosted by Amnesty International in Speaker's House. The card is in the oldest and finest traditions of Amnesty. I remember being taken as a young boy to a talk about its work in support of prisoners of conscience and about the difference that a letter can make, whether it is to prisoners themselves, to the detaining authority or to our own Government. But we should not have to write such letters; as Members of Parliament we should be in receipt of them.

I believe that we are united today in this Chamber and across the House in calling out these unjust

[Patrick Grady]

imprisonments and calling on the Government to do more. The same is clearly true in the case of Kamal Foroughi. The SNP has welcomed the thawing of relations with Iran and the diplomatic progress that has been made, but how will the UK Government use that relationship to press for the release of these prisoners, or at the very least for consular access or third-party access from the likes of Amnesty and other human rights organisations?

The debate raises broader points for the UK Government. How can UK citizens denied their rights overseas be protected by any new human rights Act that the Government might bring in here in the UK? If UK citizens in such desperate circumstances cannot rely on the Government to defend their basic human rights, why should the rest of us at home have any confidence? The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) made a very important point about rendition, and particularly the use of the British Indian Ocean Territory. The Government have to be clear about whether that territory has been used for rendition and on what occasions, and while they are at it they should consider the resettlement of the Chagos islanders—an issue that I know the Leader of the Opposition is also exercised about.

The point about the UK's position on the death penalty was well made by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy); as is often the case, I agreed with almost everything she said, so there is not much need to repeat it. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and other Members all gave examples of cases in which the UK Government have interfered in or made comments about judicial systems in other countries. The key point in these cases is that there is no evidence that the judicial systems in question are meeting any international standards; these people have been illegally or unlawfully detained, so there is no judicial process for the Government to interfere with.

The UK Government have a duty to lead and to give confidence to all their citizens, here and overseas, that they respect human rights and the rule of law. This is the festive season; one of the great Biblical injunctions is

“to proclaim good news to the poor...liberty to captives”,

so let us hope that the Government will live up to the spirit of the season and call today for these prisoners to be set free.

10.35 am

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello. I thank the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) for securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. This matter is long overdue to be addressed by the House.

Some powerful speeches have been made today. I thank the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), for Foyle (Mark Durkan), and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for contributing to

the debate. A running theme has been the fact that the Government have intervened in other cases, with the case of Karl Andree being a prominent example. The hon. Member for Foyle made a powerful speech expressing his frustration, which I think many of us feel, and his criticisms should be borne in mind. Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak, highlighted the perceived poor support for these prisoners from the Government and the failure to demand their release.

On the day the Foreign Secretary was appointed, he stated that even when British nationals depart our shores, their rights as British nationals travel with them—that “when you leave Heathrow, when you leave Dover, a British citizen is basically the responsibility of the Foreign Office”.

Unfortunately, as this debate has highlighted, those words ring hollow in the cases of Andy Tsege; of many other British nationals who are being detained abroad, such as Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi, who are both being held in Iranian detention facilities; of Ali al-Nimr, who is being held in Saudi Arabia; of Nabeel Rajab, a Bahraini human rights activist; and of many others who have been mentioned today.

We are concentrating on the case of Andy Tsege. As we have already heard, he was sentenced in absentia under Ethiopia's anti-terrorism proclamation of 2009, while living here in London. That legislation has been described as a way to

“restrict...opposition and dissent”

by targeting

“members of opposition groups, journalists, peaceful protesters”—

those are the words of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

It is worth noting that Mr Tsege's case differs from many other UK consular cases, but that was not mentioned in a letter written by the Foreign Secretary on the matter on 14 December. Mr Tsege became a victim of extraordinary rendition in June 2014. He was apprehended by Ethiopian forces while travelling through an international airport in Yemen and taken illegally to a prison in Ethiopia to be charged and sentenced to death without a fair and free trial and without legal representation. My first question to the Minister is whether he will clarify why that point was not made in the 14 December letter.

The Ethiopian Foreign Minister has told UK officials that Mr Tsege is not permitted to appeal against his death sentence. After promising the previous Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), that Mr Tsege would be allowed to see a lawyer, the Ethiopian Government have failed to deliver on that pledge. He has only just received a list of lawyers allowed to represent him, but has been given no way of contacting them. I hope for more information and clarity on that from the Minister today.

Andy Tsege's whereabouts remained unknown for two weeks after he was taken. He was then kept in solitary confinement for 12 months. The UN special rapporteur on torture has reported to the UN Human Rights Council that Ethiopia's treatment of Mr Tsege has violated the convention against torture. UK consular staff in Ethiopia have yet to visit him privately since he was imprisoned. Rumours of human rights abuses have emerged, and he recently reported that he feared for his

life. Will the Minister provide an update on progress, Mr Tsege's health, and the possibility of future visits?

The shadow Foreign Office team have been working hard to press the Government into action to secure Mr Tsege's release and to raise awareness of the case at the respective agencies. My predecessors and I have regularly written to, met and spoken to the Foreign Secretary and Ministers to urge the Government to speak out on this issue, but so far they have refused to demand his release. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), and the Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), have on two occasions held meetings with the Ethiopian ambassador and the Ethiopian representatives at the UN Human Rights Council. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition—Andy Tsege is a constituent of his—has had a request to visit him refused. My hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary represents Yemi and Andy's family, who live in her Islington South and Finsbury constituency, and she has worked tirelessly to raise the profile of this case, which I am very pleased has been brought to the House's attention today.

While the release of Andy Tsege, and that of the other UK nationals in the cases highlighted, is being negotiated, what interim action will the Minister take to ensure that such prisoners are treated fairly and humanely? We fully understand and respect that we should not wish to interfere in other countries' legal systems and determinations, but Mr Tsege has been given no legal due process, nor has any evidence been produced of the crimes that he has allegedly committed. The legality of his extradition is also questionable. A British national has been illegally detained through the means of extraordinary rendition and has suffered human rights abuses. I press the Minister to use his influence and uphold our responsibility to secure Andy's release and return him home to our shores.

I pay tribute to the families who have endured the forced removal of their loved ones, often without knowing where they are, how they are being treated and even whether they are still alive. I, too, attended Amnesty International's Human Rights Day event, which the hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned. I agree with him that we need to do more than write letters, as much as we know that such gestures are appreciated.

Andy Tsege's partner Yemi has campaigned endlessly for the past two and a half years to try to bring her partner home to their three children. She has had one solitary phone call from Andy since he was apprehended. She has said:

"The saddest part in this ordeal is how Andy's case has been handled by this government. It is surely the bare minimum for a British national to expect that his government will protect him and stand up for his human rights."

She finished by saying:

"I am beginning to lose faith with what it means to be a British citizen. Not just for Andy, who has been abandoned by his Government, but also for me and my children, who were born and raised here. I fully appreciate the boundless complexities, but there is one very simple fact that every day that goes by we all lose the most precious of things which is time to be a family, and for Andy to be a father to our three children. I hope the government realises just how much we have sacrificed."

I thank Yemi for her words, and all Members present will feel a sense of empathy with the sadness she has

expressed. I hope that no one in Westminster will ever have to experience for themselves what such sacrifice truly entails. Will the Minister commit to securing Andy's release as soon as possible? We have heard the heartache of the families left behind; how long is the Minister prepared to let that endure?

10.44 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is an honour to respond to this important debate, Mr Ffello. I welcome all the contributions that have been made.

The debate is important because it has allowed Members of Parliament to express their concerns on behalf of constituents and the families of those affected by consular issues. It is important for Members to be able to raise these matters, but also for the Government to explain in more detail what we can do and are doing, as well as touch on the fact that many things are happening behind the scenes that we cannot share.

As many colleagues have outlined, the contact that Britons experiencing difficulties abroad have with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office may be the only time they have a relationship with the FCO, or indeed the Government as such. They want that support, and they want us to get it right and help them. In any typical year, we deal with more than 310,000 calls for assistance, and around 17,000 cases are running. That shows the scale of what Her Majesty's Government are doing through our posts, embassies and high commissions around the world, as well as in the Foreign Office, of course. I shall spell out consular policy in general terms and the policy on the detention of Britons by other states, and I will look at the two big cases—the Tsege and Ratcliffe cases—in a little more detail. I do, though, recognise that there are many other cases that MPs may want to raise separately outside this debate.

I do not say this defensively, but simply to try to put things in perspective: I ask for a more cautionary tone from some Members. There has been talk of the FCO doing little, not caring, or not being committed, and I take a bit of offence to that, personally. I understand that that sort of thing is sometimes said because these are passionate issues, and MPs want to be seen to be doing all they can to help the family concerned, but I fully reject the idea that the Foreign Office or Her Majesty's Government are not absolutely committed to helping every single Briton as best we can, often in very difficult circumstances, and to ensuring that justice is done, and that they can return to the UK as quickly as possible.

I shall not dwell on this, because that would not be appropriate, but my approach is shaped by my personal experience dealing with a very difficult consular case involving the killing of my brother in the 2002 Bali bombing. I think of that every time any family member comes to me and says that somebody is missing, hurt or needs to be brought home. I make sure that I and the team I am working with are able to do everything we can, but I ask Members to understand that a phenomenal amount of activity happens behind the scenes that we deliberately cannot talk about. In fact, talking about it openly could affect the agenda and how things are being interpreted in the relevant country, where they will read the headlines about us shouting from afar, as some Members have said. I know of cases that have

[*Mr Tobias Ellwood*]

been delayed by an unhelpful headline, because the country has taken offence at what they have read in the British press as it is reported back.

Liz McInnes: I appreciate what the Minister is saying, but he has heard the words of Andy Tsege's family, who have been left behind. I understand the need to keep some things confidential, but surely the family should not be feeling the way that they are; the Minister heard their words expressed very clearly.

Mr Ellwood: I understand what the hon. Lady is saying, and I shall address that specific case, but I should be clear that, in some cases, we are subject to the wishes of what the family want to do. I make an effort to meet the families, either with MPs, by myself or through our consular staff, and they themselves sometimes do not want things being made public—and sometimes I do not have permission to say what I am doing. Many cases have been brought up, particularly the two that we are focusing on, but I do not have permission to share in public what is going on, or to decide what can be said, because that is in the gift of that family, and we must respect their wishes. I ask Members to recognise that as well.

In these cases, we are often dealing with countries where governance, the rule of law and transparency are not at the levels that we in this country enjoy, defend or promote. We did not always have that right in the 800 years of our history; it took us a long time to get where we are today. Many countries are on that learning curve. It is absolutely right that our international development money goes towards helping to improve their justice systems, so that they have better, more transparent processes for dealing with such cases. That is the reality check—the prism through which we must look at these cases—but it should not deter us from ensuring that we work as hard as possible right across the piece to help Britons abroad.

As I say, consular assistance is at the heart of what we do in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our consular staff give advice and practical support to British nationals overseas when things go wrong. That support, I stress, is not a right or an obligation. We do not have a legal duty of care to British nationals abroad, but this Government are proud, as I think successive Governments have been, of the long-standing tradition of offering British nationals the best consular service in the world.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will not, because I am running out of time. If there is time at the end, I will. Independent customer feedback is overwhelmingly positive and shows that our staff approach their work with care, empathy and professionalism. As I have indicated, the volume, variety and complexity of cases are staggering. In the last financial year alone, our staff overseas dealt with more than 5,000 detentions, 3,600 deaths and nearly 4,000 hospital cases. We increasingly focus our precious resources on those who need it most: the vulnerable. Some things we do not and will not do, as has been

implied by hon. Members today: we do not take decisions for people; we do not interfere in another country's legal or judicial system, although as I said, we try to advance their systems through our other programmes; and we do not seek to get for British people a better deal than the locals get.

It is important that we use consistent criteria in determining how much support we provide in each case. Our job is to ensure that the public pressure in certain cases does not unfairly divert our attention from the large number of cases that never hit the media. While serious cases have been raised today, 13 British nationals face the death penalty throughout the world. There are more than 2,000 British nationals in detention at any one time, the greatest number of whom, about 400, are in the United States.

We have a clear process for engaging with detention cases. Host Governments notify us when a British national is detained, as long as that person agrees. We then make contact or visit the individual, where possible within 24 hours. Our priority is always their welfare—ensuring that they are receiving food, water and medical treatment, and that they have access to legal advice. In the majority of countries, our staff visit people in detention about four times a year. Some prisoners have described our visits as a lifeline; in some cases, they might be the only ones they receive.

Our assistance does not stop there. If British nationals tell us that they have been mistreated or tortured, with their permission, consular staff express our concerns to the authorities and seek an investigation. Where we cannot provide support, we work through others, such as the charity Prisoners Abroad, and they support detainees and their families and help to provide and maintain contact. If there is no family, Prisoners Abroad can help find people a pen pal or send them books to read or study. It can also help with prisoners' resettlement in the UK after release.

The death penalty was raised by a number of hon. Members. Irrespective of the charges against any British nationals, we do all we can to ensure that the death penalty is not carried out. Indeed, yesterday, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution in favour of a moratorium on the use of the death penalty. We continue to press countries to advance their systems so as to remove the death penalty, as we did in ours.

I turn to the two main cases that have been mentioned; if there is time, I will progress to others. If I do not get a chance to respond now, I will write to hon. Members on the details of the questions they have asked, as I have done after other debates.

Mr Tsege's case is well known to me, senior colleagues in the Foreign Office and Members in the Chamber. We are committed to offering the best consular support to him and his family. Since he was arrested and taken to Ethiopia in June 2014, we have worked hard to ensure his welfare, and his access to consular and legal advice. We continue to do so. We take every opportunity to raise his case at the very highest levels in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Government, whose own difficulties have been touched on today, are in no doubt about our concern for Mr Tsege and the priority that we place on ensuring his wellbeing. The Foreign Secretary and his predecessor have both raised Mr Tsege's case personally with the Ethiopian Government, and our ambassador takes every opportunity to do so. I will visit the country

at the end of January, and I will ensure that the mood and tone of this debate, and our important stress on the case of Mr Tsege, is related to the Government.

As a result of our continued high-level engagement, we have ensured that Mr Tsege is no longer in solitary confinement, and we have received a commitment from the highest levels of the Ethiopian Government that he will be given access to a lawyer. Last Thursday, our ambassador visited Mr Tsege, who appeared to be in good health and good spirits, and she was reassured about his welfare. Mention has been made of a private meeting not being allowed to take place, but the standard rules in Ethiopia are that all visits are accompanied. Those rules are followed by Ethiopians themselves.

I understand why some people have called for the UK Government to advocate Mr Tsege's release, but we believe that calling for his release would not meet with success; just by shouting out, we would not win his release at this stage. Indeed, to do so could put at risk the progress made so far, including on our access to Mr Tsege. Furthermore, as I said at the start, we cannot interfere in the legal systems of other countries. We have, however, lobbied the Ethiopian Government strongly and consistently against the application and use of the death penalty. They can be in no doubt about our position.

On the case of Mrs Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, as hon. Members are aware, Iran does not recognise dual nationality—that is not the case in the UK; we consider Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe to be a British national—and has repeatedly refused permission for visits to her. We have repeatedly requested the Iranian authorities to grant us consular access so that we may be assured of her welfare. The Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and I have raised the matter at our respective levels. I also raised it with the Iranian ambassador only a couple of weeks ago, and I have met Richard Ratcliffe, the husband.

Since we were first made aware of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's arrest, we have been supporting her family. I have met the family on three occasions to reassure them that we will continue to press the Iranians for greater consular access. We also stand ready to assist, if requested, with the return to the UK of her daughter, who is not, as has been said in the debate, trapped in Iran. The daughter is allowed to return to the UK at any moment; it is a family decision for her to remain in Iran.

I am obliged to give the final minutes to the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who introduced the debate. In conclusion, therefore,

I simply say to all hon. Members that we take the issue of those detained overseas very seriously. I pay tribute to the families and loved ones during distressing times, and I thank consular officers who work every day to support British nationals in their most difficult times. I also thank Members of Parliament for the role that they play in bringing aspects of different cases to the fore and in lobbying me personally. I stand ready at any time to meet them, even away from the Foreign Office.

Supporting British nationals in difficulty abroad is an absolute priority for me and for us at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. We cannot always do as much as families want, but I assure the House that we do everything we can, and we will continue to work tirelessly to protect British nationals' welfare and to uphold their rights.

10.58 am

Tom Brake: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken, and the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), for making time to attend the debate. The Minister has heard the consistent and very strong message from all Members today that Andy and Nazanin's detentions are unacceptable and illegal, and that their trials have been frankly deplorable. He is also getting a consistent and identical message from their families. If I have concern about what he has said, it is that he is hiding behind family confidentiality. He must respect that, of course, but families are asking him to take the action that has been set out in this debate. We must have public, outspoken action now at the highest level, from our Prime Minister, to secure their release. We demand—

Mr Ellwood: I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman's peroration, but what he said is incorrect. I am following the advice of families very carefully indeed. I would say more if families allowed me to, and I think he disingenuously has misled the Chamber by making that suggestion.

Tom Brake: It is clearly very important for the Minister to sit down with the families. Having observed some of the body language of the families—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

CrossCountry Trains: Gloucester

11 am

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered CrossCountry intercity train services to Gloucester.

Mr Ffello, it is a great pleasure to hold the last Westminster Hall debate of 2016 under your chairmanship. Although the subject—the thorny issue of CrossCountry trains to Gloucester—is narrow, many wider issues of growth, regeneration, connectivity and, ultimately, responsibility are at stake today.

I will start with the wider issues. Small cathedral cities such as Gloucester are among Britain's greatest jewels. We have an abundance of natural, architectural and human heritage. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s developers and planners alike took a cavalier and unimaginative view of heritage, today, much boosted by a greater understanding of the modern uses of old buildings, and by the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, we realise that heritage, alongside modern retail attractions, is a driver of tourism and economic growth. Gloucester's visitor economy grew by 8% last year, the fastest growth in the county of Gloucestershire and among the fastest in the country.

Gloucester has modern industries, including cyber, the reinvigorated nuclear power industry with the operational headquarters of EDF Energy, and sophisticated engineering, particularly aerospace and automobile. Also, the future of tidal lagoon power will potentially be headquartered in the city. But like other small cities, our ratio of private to public sector jobs is low—Gloucester ranks 56th out of 62 cities in Centre for Cities research—and we have one of the lowest rates of private sector job growth. Under the Governments since 2010, several public services have—understandably, given the pressures on public finance—been consolidated into regional hubs. The Courts and Tribunals Service, Her Majesty's prisons and, most recently, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs are three examples. All the workers from Gloucester at those employers, as well as at Royal Mail some time earlier, have been offered jobs in Bristol. With the regionalisation trend and the growth of, and emphasis given to, big cities, Bristol has inevitably been the main beneficiary of the relocation of public sector jobs around the county. In both those cases—of tourism, because of Gloucester's great heritage and the new retail attractions, particularly in Gloucester Quays, and of public sector employees whose jobs have been relocated to Bristol trying to get to work—there is a huge demand for the connectivity that good rail services provide.

Gloucester railway station is, in many ways, remarkable. It has the longest platform in the country, and it is right in the city centre, the advantages of which anyone who lives or works in a city knows. But it struggles with two competing facts. To enter the station trains have to come off the main line from Birmingham to Bristol and through the railway triangle and, from a train operator's point of view, that takes extra time and causes services between those two cities to take longer.

In 2006, the then Gloucester Heritage Urban Regeneration Company—snappily named GHURC—closely considered what might be done to create an alternative station “on the main line” next to and parallel with Eastern Avenue, which is the main road entrance

to the city. The GHURC carried out an extensive review and had many meetings with the landowner Network Rail and the train operators, and its chief executive, Chris Oldershaw, summarised why he believed a new railway station would not be possible:

“Extensive discussions between the GHURC, landowner Network Rail and the train operators were held last year to scope the building of a new railway station on the railway triangle. The train operators did not support this course of action and Network Rail finally ruled this out as unviable. Network Rail has said that the future of Gloucester central station is not in doubt and confirmed its intention to retain the station and invest in improvements over the next three years.”

In those talks, no one on the GHURC board, which included the then Bishop of Gloucester; my predecessor as MP for Gloucester, for quite a lot of the time; councillors from all parties; leading businessmen; and people from the voluntary sector, demurred from the decision that was made. Indeed, no other decision could have been made, given that no one—those who were to operate the trains, those who owned the land or those who were responsible for the rail services—wanted a new station and the Government of the day did not wish to provide any money. However—this is the crucial point that the Department for Transport must grasp—the corollary to that decision is the need to recognise that trains have to come off the main line to get into Gloucester station and then go out on to it again.

The situation is different for services to Wales, because Gloucester is on the way to Wales for trains from Bristol and from Birmingham and Cheltenham. That is a different issue, and I should make it clear that CrossCountry runs a good service to Wales and that all those trains pass through Gloucester. That is not the issue. The issue is the inter-city trains, many of which call at a huge number of stations. The longest such service is, I think, the Aberdeen to Penzance route, which goes through the cities—I re-emphasise “the cities”—of Britain. However, only three of the 63 inter-city services between Birmingham and Bristol stop at the city of Gloucester.

My crucial point today is that if the capital city of Gloucestershire is not allowed to have a new station on the main line, as was decided some years ago, before both the Minister's time here and mine, we must accept that trains have to stop at the city of Gloucester, coming off the main line route and up the railway triangle. That is the core issue at stake with CrossCountry today. Great Western Railway long ago accepted that, and every service on its London to Cheltenham route comes into Gloucester. That will continue to be the case when the operator expands its services, with more direct trains to London in 2017, and more trains to Swindon thanks to the redoubling of the Swindon to Kemble line by the coalition Government, about which people across the county of Gloucestershire are pleased.

Why, therefore, does CrossCountry find it so difficult to stop at Gloucester? I believe that there are two key reasons. The ostensible reason is that the additional time the stop would take would mean that passengers travelling from Birmingham and Bristol would be delayed and might be tempted to travel by car instead. Anecdotally, I understand from people who work in the rail industry that, interestingly, when the services to Gloucester were taken out, mostly between 2003 and 2006 under the

Virgin franchise, the amount of time scheduled for those trains to get from Birmingham to Bristol was scarcely altered.

The Department for Transport will be able to look into that in detail, but I was emailed this morning by someone who looked at the train schedule for a CrossCountry service yesterday on the Aberdeen to Penzance line. The train that was highlighted to me arrived a few minutes late at Cheltenham and left nine minutes late, but arrived at Bristol Temple Meads absolutely on time. I gently put it to the Minister—the Department will be able to do its research—that it looks to me as though the time scheduled for the Gloucester stops was not taken out of the schedule when the Gloucester stops were taken out. Effectively, it acts as a buffer for creeping delays on the service as it comes from north to south. The avoidance of Gloucester enables the operator to ensure that by the time the trains arrive at Bristol, they are on time. If that is the case, that would be a shocking example of how train operators are treating the city of Gloucester. Even if that is not the case, the operators' approach to Gloucester is revealing.

On Radio Gloucestershire this morning, I was asked a series of questions by the journalist, who was effectively reading from a script provided by CrossCountry. They asked, "Why is it not acceptable just to go to Cheltenham and change there?" Imagine, Mr Ffello, that you are travelling south-east from a certain point. What logic is there in getting on a train that goes west, in order to catch another train that then brings you back past the station from which you started half an hour earlier, as a means of getting to your destination to the south-east? That is the most extraordinary concept. If we did that everywhere, we could reschedule all our train services around the country, taking out a whole number of stops, closing down various stations and inviting people to travel in the opposite direction in order to go back through where they started from.

The journalist also asked, "If the trains stopped at Gloucester, what about other passengers from other cities trying to get to their destination as fast as possible?" Well, what indeed? But hang on—if we started taking that approach, we would start ruling out a whole series of cities so that we could cherry-pick which passengers from which cities we wanted to arrive at their destination fastest. There has to be equality of treatment for all cities on an inter-city service. That is my fundamental starting point.

To be fair, the Government have been extremely helpful on the wider issue of growth and regeneration. I referred to that at the beginning of the debate. The chief executive of the GHURC said:

"Network Rail has said that the future of Gloucester central station is not in doubt and confirmed its intention to retain the station and invest in improvements".

The Government have done that. Most notably, the previous Secretary of State for Transport reached an agreement with Great Western Railway in the previous Parliament. One of the crucial issues about that agreement was an investment by Great Western Railway in a new, additional car park on the south side of the station. For the first time in the station's 150 or 160 years, it got a new entrance from the south side. It links the hospital on Great Western Road and my constituents who live on the south side of the city. That was a considerable step forward.

Additionally, during the last few years, thanks to co-operation with Great Western Railway, we have a new lift for disabled passengers, the elderly and those with heavy baggage. For the first time, they can cross from platform 2 to platform 4. We have a canopy on the bridge that crosses the railway tracks, again for the first time in the station's history. We are also looking at a series of improvements to the station infrastructure, including the underpass that goes under the railway lines, the nature of the forecourt and a new exit out of the current car park on to Metz Way. There is an application in for the next round of the growth fund.

I am confident that we will be able to achieve more improvements to the station infrastructure, but no station is better than the trains that arrive there, and that is the crucial issue that is missing. CrossCountry has no intention of delivering more services. The managing director said in his letter of 15 December that

"as has been explained before, at this time it is neither operationally possible nor commercially viable to increase the number of CrossCountry services at Gloucester station...it was apparent that the current railway infrastructure could not accommodate the inclusion of more stops at Gloucester".

One of the reasons that the Department gave was that work at the Filton end of the entrance to Bristol station would impede additional stops at Gloucester. In fact, there are two lines there. They have been there for ever—there will always be two lines there, and there will be two more once the electrification has taken place. A stop at Gloucester should not impede anyone operationally from being able to go into Bristol. Indeed, Network Rail confirmed to me on the telephone that in the grander scheme of things, two additional stops a day would be frankly a relatively minor tweak to the operational schedule.

I want to leave a key point with the Minister today. He has been extremely helpful and has seen me several times, as did his predecessor. He wrote to me:

"I can assure you that there are two additional calls at Gloucester in the new Franchise Agreement which CrossCountry are funded for, and obliged to deliver, as soon as they are able to do so."

That is very reassuring; two extra services a day means 730 extra services a year. That would hugely help my constituents in getting to work and traveling north and south with much greater ease. However, I do not have confidence that CrossCountry will live up to the Minister's expectations. The crucial words in his letter are "as soon as they are able to do so."

I am afraid that CrossCountry's letter makes it absolutely clear that it has no intention of doing so. In my last debate before Christmas, I finish with the irony of CrossCountry's slogan, which is: "Going that bit further". On this occasion, it has absolutely gone the opposite way.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello, I think for the first time. I had not even taken on board that you were in such an august position. I am delighted to see you there. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for calling this debate and for being such a persistent advocate on behalf of the people of Gloucester. He is a textbook example of persistent, gentle, non-stop

[Paul Maynard]

lobbying on the causes on which he is rightly passionate. We can all learn a lesson from him on how never to give up and how to persist on issues.

My hon. Friend raised this matter at Prime Minister's questions recently. He regularly updates me on his offline conversations with Network Rail and CrossCountry. No one could be more helpful in ensuring that I get the full range of views on what is going on. Both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) have been sensible and pragmatic in how they have approached the issue. They recognise that no solution is viable that sees any diminution in services to Cheltenham or Gloucester, and that is an important baseline from which we have to start.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester rightly points out, one only has to compare the flows of trains stopping at Gloucester when travelling from south to north with those when one is travelling north to south to see that we have an issue. Of the 63 trains that travel each day from Birmingham to Bristol, only three call at Gloucester. It is therefore of no surprise to anyone that his constituents are frustrated by the lack of provision for those who travel from Gloucester. All cities, no matter how large or small, should benefit from good transport connections, and Gloucester is no different. As a Department, we are well aware of that and are doing all we can to put this right.

That is why, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, we asked CrossCountry to explore the potential for additional Gloucester calls from December 2017. As he knows from the correspondence, CrossCountry has confirmed that, in its view, that is not deliverable, operationally or commercially, at present. Crucially, the requirement to run two additional services, should it become operationally possible to do so, is included in the CrossCountry franchise agreement. It is not a matter of whether CrossCountry would like to do so in an ideal world, but of whether it is possible for those services to operate on the network. I understand that it is impossible to find a workable solution that would allow the extra services to be deliverable in December 2017. I will explain the reasons shortly. We will continue to work closely with CrossCountry to see what can be done in the short term, should circumstances change; in the medium term, we will try to bring forward the extra services as soon as possible.

As my hon. Friend has set out, Gloucester has very well timed connections into and out of the main line of the long-distance inter-city CrossCountry network. There are 36 services from Cardiff to Birmingham, Derby and Nottingham, all of which stop at Gloucester. It is in the southern direction that there is a problem. Sheffield, Leeds, Newcastle, Manchester and Edinburgh can all be reached hourly with one change on the same platform at Cheltenham Spa and a 10-minute wait. The same applies for trains to Bristol and Plymouth, but with a 10 to 15-minute wait. One still has to change trains, and take luggage off and put it back on; it is by no means ideal. For Birmingham to Bristol services to serve Gloucester, trains need to be diverted off the main line. If those services called at Gloucester, it would increase the overall journey time by approximately 10 minutes.

My hon. Friend described the email he received on the punctuality of services. I was interested to hear about that. I am sure my officials have taken note of the

details. If he will share the email with me, I will look carefully into that, because he put forward a persuasive narrative about punctuality and a buffer that was built in. I would be concerned if that were the case, and if it were an obstacle to further services calling at Gloucester. After extensive research, which included modelling timetable options with Network Rail, the latter has formally advised CrossCountry that it will not be possible to deliver additional station calls for Gloucester from December 2017 as there is not enough capacity on the network to accommodate the trains at present.

Richard Graham: The Minister is being very gracious, but has he been able to confirm Network Rail's view of the CrossCountry comment that it is impossible to do this? As he rightly says, the business of whether there is time built in to allow for delays on that service may provide part of the answer to his question.

Paul Maynard: It may well do, although I should point out that I think he has misconstrued some of my previous comments on Filton Bank and the operational bottleneck that occurs there. The work that is ongoing at Filton Bank to double the track capacity from two tracks to four is about enabling extra services by expanding track capacity. That work is not an impediment to the extra two services; it is what will enable them. That is why Network Rail is saying to the Department that there is not sufficient capacity on the network. Given that I have been in the debate since I heard the news, we have not had a chance to put the points about the timetable to Network Rail to get further information. That could change the situation, and we will get back to my hon. Friend if it does.

CrossCountry is a second-tier operator on all parts of the network; it is not the dominant franchise holder. That makes flexibility in its timetables significantly harder to achieve, because it answers to the dominant operator on any part of the network, particularly in and around Bristol and Birmingham. In a sense, the start and end points of its flows from north to south are determined by the wider national timetable. That can make it difficult to alter its timetables. We have to be certain that the intermediate stops and timings are robust and accurate, as my hon. Friend points out. The delay to those already on the train is a material point when considering a business case for altering service levels. Although the benefit-cost ratio for any intervention is merely a number and is not the entire story, it is part of the story that the Department and train operators have to take into account.

The blockage to providing additional station calls at Gloucester is predominantly a lack of network capacity and fixed capacity constraints at either end of the line in Birmingham and Bristol. I understand that my hon. Friend's preference is for CrossCountry to offer a good service to his constituents who commute to and from Bristol. Not only should they be able to rely on local Great Western Railway services, but they should have access to a faster non-stop alternative to existing services. It is important that we look at what more GWR can do to increase capacity on that important commuter flow. CrossCountry has already had discussions with Network Rail on the improvements in Bristol and the impact that they can have on its potential to deliver more services. We will continue to work with both CrossCountry and Great Western to see how the service that Gloucester receives can be improved in the short term.

In the longer and medium term, we still need to work closely with CrossCountry to see whether passengers at Gloucester can get more frequent calls in the day. This will include looking at a full reworking of the timetable as part of the impending refranchising process. Post High Speed 2, a reduction in services through Birmingham New Street may open up the possibility of revised timings and more capacity. That is a priority for the Department. We are engaging our own technical advisers to look in further detail at operational deliverability and the financial and economic business cases, so that more can be done for the people of Gloucester.

With more and more people using our railways since privatisation 20 years ago, passenger journeys have doubled. That is also true for CrossCountry, which has seen growth from 32 million passenger journeys in 2007 to 37 million in 2015, leading to demand outstripping capacity in a number of places. We need to ensure that demand meets capacity, both on the CrossCountry network, and more widely across the national network. That is why the new timetable proposed from December 2017 seeks to provide additional annual seats, improving the journeys for passengers up and down the land.

As my hon. Friend knows, we recently announced a new direct award for Arriva to operate the CrossCountry franchise. This will deliver additional benefits for passengers: free wi-fi; upgrades to 4G connection, which will increase download speeds; improved access to better information systems; and 24/7 customer services. I recognise that all that is of benefit only if there are trains that passengers can board at the stations where they want to board them, and that includes Gloucester.

In conclusion, I note that CrossCountry has continued to do extensive research at the Department's behest to try to find ways of calling at Gloucester on the Birmingham to Bristol CrossCountry route, but that has not been possible in time for the December 2017 timetable.

Richard Graham: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will, happily, in the remaining minute and a half.

Richard Graham: The Minister is very kind. As he said in his letter, CrossCountry is funded to deliver extra services in the new franchise agreement, which has already started, and the new timetable comes in in December 2017. I understand from Network Rail that the new timetable is not yet finalised, and will not be until March. Does he agree that there is still an opportunity for Network Rail to work with CrossCountry to identify how the timing of the trains—we are not talking about additional trains—can deliver the services in the new timetable from December 2017?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is essentially right. I will try to answer that point, but it deserves far more than a minute. The crucial phrase is “operational capacity of the network”. If the service can be delivered within the network's operational capacity, it should be delivered. As it stands now, I do not believe there is operational capacity, but I need to test that theory against the points my hon. Friend has made regarding the timetable to see whether that frees up any space on the network. If it does not, there is an ongoing CrossCountry consultation on the new timetable. Unless there is physical space on the network between Birmingham and Bristol to run the extra services, I do not see how they can be introduced to the network merely because both he and I wish that they could. I commit to keep working hard on this matter on his behalf, and to delivering on this as soon as I possibly can.

Robert Ffello (in the Chair): Order. Merry Christmas!
Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Child Poverty

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered child poverty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Let me share with the House my reasons for tabling this debate. My passion for campaigning against child poverty stems from the reasons why I stood for Parliament. It is a motivation that I know is shared right across this Chamber, because we all serve in politics to change lives. For me, that means that no child in Britain should grow up in poverty. We should not simply accept a situation where luck of birth can hold a person back throughout their lifetime. Those who grow up in poverty are more likely to fall behind in school, less likely to secure a stable job in the future and more likely to suffer from ill health in later life. This debate is about making sure that Britain is a country that gives every child the opportunity of the best start in life.

I want to rebuild a cross-party consensus and to welcome the sentiments expressed by the Prime Minister as she stood on the steps of Downing Street. She signalled a fight against “burning injustice”, with an unambiguous pledge to

“do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.”

I agree, because to succeed in the future we must create a country that makes the most of all our talents. That is the task facing all of us in this place. We should be judged by whether we do right by the next generation.

In my Barnsley constituency, more than one in four children grow up in poverty, so I stand here today to give a voice to those 5,114 children. The Minister will know that in her constituency, too, more than one in four children grow up in poverty. Surely we can find common ground on the need for a target to change those alarming figures, so that the children we represent here today can have the brightest possible future.

In Britain today, an average of nine children in a class of 30 grow up in poverty. For those nearly 4 million children, that can mean living in a cold and cramped home, falling behind in school and not being able to join in activities with friends. The Children’s Commission on Poverty empowered young people to share their own experiences of poverty. Over 18 months, the commissioners investigated how poverty affects their peers at school, and I want to give them a voice here today and share some of the findings.

The commissioners were shocked and moved by what they found. Luke, aged 17, said:

“I am surprised that even in the 21st century, children and young people are being subject to the harshest injustice in society even within schooling. This should never be right in one of the world’s richest countries.”

Poverty means children often have to dress differently and therefore stand out. A classmate described the situation:

“I saw some kids that didn’t have blazers or coats in winter and I could see they couldn’t afford it”.

Pupils shared how those in poverty do not all qualify for free school meals if their parents are working. When that is the case, a meal at lunchtime may not always be affordable, a situation that one child describes:

“It depends really on what my mum’s situation is. If I don’t have the money, I normally just wait until I get home [to eat].”

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing an excellent job setting out the problem that we sadly still face with child poverty in this country. Is he aware of the work of the holiday hunger campaign? Children who have free school meals during term time have a six-week-long summer holiday where they do not have access to those free school meals, and many of them go hungry. The campaign is doing excellent work.

Dan Jarvis: I am aware of that campaign, which is doing incredibly important work in providing food and nourishment for children during the school holidays. I will be saying a little more about the problem she raises later in my speech.

For those who do receive free school meals, their poverty status can be highlighted by how they are required to buy their lunch with a token, which can hold up the queue as their card is inspected. Those children’s experiences should give us pause, for a renewed focus on child poverty, that understands the experience of those who live it every day.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that schemes such as we have in Scotland, where all children in primary 1 to primary 3—aged five to seven—are given a free school meal, help get rid of some of the stigma attached to school meals.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely agree. Just as I am seeking to build a cross-party consensus in the campaign against child poverty, I am seeking to build a consensus in every corner of our country. Again, I will say a little more about that later.

By seeking to understand the experiences of those who live in poverty every day, we can help to build a fairer country—one that delivers the vision set out by the Prime Minister as she took office. Let us be clear: that is now urgent. The Institute for Fiscal Studies projects the biggest increase in relative child poverty in a generation: the number of children growing up in poverty is expected to grow by 50% by 2020.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am really pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this debate, because it is very easy at Christmas-time for there to be an orgy of consumption and we need to think about the families who are not going to share in that. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about what is coming down the tracks. Does he share my concern that, having dissed the idea of relative poverty, the Government have been trumpeting the fact that relative poverty did not fall in the last five years? More important, does he share my concern that changes made in the Budget by the previous Chancellor after the general election mean that every family in the bottom third of the income distribution is going to be worse off?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. I know that she has a long-standing interest

in the subject of child poverty, which I will refer to a bit later in my speech. She raises the issue of poverty being relative, which reminds me of a quote:

“Even if we are not destitute, we still experience poverty if we cannot afford things that society regards as essential. The fact that we do not suffer the conditions of a hundred years ago is irrelevant... So poverty is relative—and those who pretend otherwise are wrong.”

That quote was from David Cameron.

I was reflecting on the projection from the Institute for Fiscal Studies of the biggest increase in relative child poverty in a generation, with the number of children growing up in poverty expected to grow by 50% by 2020. The Government have a choice to make and the power to stop that increase happening. Their decisions will shape what kind of country we live in.

Yet what have we recently learned of the Government's approach from their response to my parliamentary questions? We have learned that the child poverty unit has been closed. Eliminating child poverty is no longer the goal of policy. The Government admit that no money is being directly invested by the Department for Work and Pensions to develop evidence on what early interventions best support children and that a maximum of only seven civil servants support the Government's Social Mobility Commission. That is not a record that matches the Prime Minister's rhetoric.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I am very pleased indeed that it is taking place. There is another aspect of this, which no doubt he will touch on in the course of his speech. This is not just about children living in poverty now and the projected increase of 50%, which is very alarming news, although the Government do not seem to be concerned. It is likely that the children who are growing up in poverty now will themselves have children who will live in poverty, so the problem will continue through successive generations unless firm steps are taken to decrease substantially the number of children living in such conditions.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend speaks with great experience of these matters. He is absolutely right: this is about investing in the future not just of those young people but of our country. By ensuring that young people get the best possible start at the earliest of ages, we ensure the best possible life outcomes not just for them and their families but for us as a society and a country.

Clearly, the reasons why people live in poverty are unique to each individual, but there are shared experiences and similar causes. At the most basic level, it is about families and individuals simply not having enough money to cope with the circumstances in which they find themselves. We cannot be serious about tackling the problem unless we include income in our analysis of child poverty and our policy response. Getting this right will mean that families have greater security in their home and at work, and that all families have an adequate income to avoid poverty and live decent lives.

That a family's income shapes the quality of childhood is easily understood. Every family wants the very best for their children, and parents often go without to achieve that. Research from the Trussell Trust shows that one in five parents in the UK either skipped meals or relied on friends or family to feed their children last

year. Of course, money is not everything—we all know that the most important factors are love and attention—but that does not mean it is nothing. Income is a central factor in meeting children's needs, and the Government's forthcoming social mobility Green Paper, a successor to the long-delayed and unpublished life chances strategy, cannot be adequate without addressing child poverty.

Tackling in-work poverty is critical. Two in three children in poverty grow up in a household in which a parent works, so the reality is that work no longer provides a guaranteed route out of poverty. Our response must be to have a wider approach to tackle insecurity at work, to better understand the increase in zero-hours contracts and to deliver a real living wage for more workers. To support people on low incomes, we need to do more to provide opportunities for progression.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Has the hon. Gentleman considered a universal basic income as part of a package of support for those at that end of our society?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman tempts me down a road, but I will resist the opportunity to get into that slightly different debate. He may seek to make further points later.

I ask the Government to look at the success being delivered at a local level through programmes such as the Workplace scheme in Newham, which identifies the needs of employers to upskill local residents so they can increase their earnings. Childcare must be more flexible and available when and where parents need it. It is one of the biggest tolls on families' budgets: the cost of childcare pushes an additional 130,000 children into poverty.

The Government's forthcoming Green Paper must cover income, child poverty and other structural determinants of children's chances. It must recognise that childhood is a key stage in everyone's lifetime, making up a fifth of the average lifespan, so it must be about ensuring a good and nurturing childhood as well as what happens next. I hope the Government will take the opportunity to change course so we do not continue on a path that will see more than 1 million children living in poverty over this decade.

Ever-increasing child poverty is not inevitable; it is the result of political choices. We have seen that before: child poverty rose sharply in the 1980s and peaked in the late 1990s, before falling significantly. The previous Government, who happened to be a Labour Government, showed us how that can be achieved. We should recognise the work of my right hon. Friends the Members for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who took the Child Poverty Act 2010 through this House.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate. Will he acknowledge that one of the reasons why the Labour Government were able to maintain progress was the very precise and well tracked measurements and targeting arrangements, which ensured that when

[Kate Green]

policy was not delivering the required outcomes it was possible to take adjusting action and bring things back on track?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend speaks with real authority and experience. I am delighted that she is here to support this debate. She has been incredibly helpful and generous with her time in supporting the work that I have been doing recently. I am very grateful for that point. She is absolutely right. As somebody said to me just the other day, “If it doesn’t get measured, it doesn’t get done.” If we are serious about achieving something, it is important that we set a target.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to refer to the previous Labour Government, who put children first and delivered the biggest improvement in tackling child poverty of any EU nation. In 1997, more children were living in poverty in Britain than in almost any other industrialised nation, but by 2010 we had lifted 1 million children out of poverty. That happened not by accident but because the Government set themselves a target and made achieving it a priority. Investment in higher-quality early years education, childcare and Sure Start centres was expanded fourfold. Support for families was expanded to enable them to enjoy greater control over their lives and greater security in their finances. The tax credit system was introduced and maternity leave was doubled.

We should pay tribute to the leadership of Gordon Brown—I know that will give you particular pleasure, Mr Davies—who legislated for a child poverty target with support from parties across the House. I am reminded of the former Prime Minister’s memorable observation that

“children are 20% of our population but 100% of our future.”

We have a duty to this generation to make progress on addressing child poverty once again, because it should scar our conscience as much as it does our children’s futures.

I genuinely believe that all of us in this Chamber feel that responsibility and want child poverty to fall but, as in life, if the Government want to achieve something, it is useful to set a target. The focus of debate should be what that target is and how it should be met, not the principle of having a target itself. No political party in this House has suggested abolishing all Government targets. As the House of Commons Library noted:

“A target is a clear expression of a policy priority, setting out exactly what the Government wants to have done and by when. Targets let those responsible for delivery know what needs to happen, so that they can plan, monitor and deliver”.

The Library goes on to explain that targets

“allow organisations to be held to account on whether they meet the targets, including by Parliament. They can provide a focus on long-term strategic goals in areas where short-term pressures would otherwise mean that these goals might not be achieved.”

That is why I believe that setting a target can help to realise a common purpose to tackle child poverty that includes communities, employers and government at every level.

My private Member’s Bill provides the House with an opportunity to make that intention clear. It will receive a Second Reading on Friday 3 February and I hope that

it earns the support of Government. Parliament has a strong record on working across parties on the issue, most notably in passing the Child Poverty Act 2010, which committed the Government of the day and future ones to take action to eliminate child poverty. With my Bill, I do not seek to be prescriptive about what the target should be. Rather, we should be clear that our goal is that no child should grow up in poverty and that we will measure our progress with a target.

I hope that the Chair has noted my repeated efforts to convey that my private Member’s Bill is not politically motivated. It is too important and too urgent for that. In your constituency, Mr Davies, about one in five children grow up in poverty—3,743 children. Simply put, the present situation is unacceptable and without action what will follow will be worse still. Outside Parliament, consensus is growing that the Government need to do more and quickly.

I take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to those charities and stakeholders that recently attended a round-table event I hosted here in Parliament. We should all recognise the vital work that the sector undertakes every day to help those living in poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group has long campaigned on the issue, and I am proud to have its support for my Bill. Barnardo’s, the Children’s Society, Buttle UK, Gingerbread, the Family and Childcare Trust, Save the Children, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation or JRF, and the Equality Trust all have my profound thanks for their input. I hope that there will be others.

I am happy to meet the Minister or one of her colleagues in the new year to share the extent of support for a target among those who know the most about the issue. It is a concern, however, that the Government have been active in seeking to change how we understand child poverty while also removing a duty to reduce it. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 replaced the reporting obligations of the 2010 Act, bringing in the life chances measures of worklessness and educational attainment. The Child Poverty Commission became the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and is now just the Social Mobility Commission. In answer to a parliamentary question, we have learned that its crucial work is supported by only seven civil servants, at most, and this week we learned, with some concern, that the child poverty unit has been quietly abolished, without adequate information on that fact being provided to Parliament.

No child poverty target, no child poverty unit, no staff resources and no stated intention to end child poverty—no matter how many children are set to grow up in poverty in the years ahead, we can and must do much better than that. We can see that from projects all over the country, because local communities have not been able to wait for the Government to take action. In my Barnsley constituency, we have a campaign bringing together members of the community and the local council to take action.

As part of the campaign, we asked the public to name just one thing that could make a difference to children locally. Ideas ranged from new requirements to develop affordable housing or to expand childcare, to the great example set by retired teachers lending their expertise to tutor local students. That has informed the ongoing work of Barnsley Council’s anti-poverty board. The campaign brings local partners together to support

residents affected by Government spending cuts and welfare reforms. They have been working hard to identify families most in need and to target resources to provide debt advice, information on fuel policy initiatives and healthy eating programmes.

We recently opened a community shop in my constituency. It has agreements with many of the largest food manufacturers in the local area, redistributing good quality surplus products at much more affordable prices.

Mr Winnick: In a number of boroughs—certainly mine, which has a good deal of child poverty, unfortunately—the provision for nursery education means that we have very good schools for under-fives. Those schools are much appreciated, because many of those who attend come from households with low incomes. Is my hon. Friend aware that so many involved in nursery education have written to us to express deep concern that funding arrangements will so alter in the next two years that some of those nursery schools and classes will have to either close down completely or reduce the number of children attending?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to draw our attention to that pressing concern. One of the primary motivations for the debate is to draw attention to the fact that the plight of almost 4 million children in our country is set to get worse, not better. That is a matter of profound concern to all of us. We all believe that child poverty should and must be reduced and that we have a responsibility to work together in order to achieve that stated aim.

Earlier, hon. Members drew attention to projects that seek to provide food for children during the school holidays. The community shop proposal that I mentioned might be of benefit in that and, as I said, one such shop has just opened in my constituency. After agreement with local food manufacturers, the community shop can sell good quality food at affordable prices to people on low incomes, and it can also help local people with other issues that might be holding them back. It can provide advice on financial matters, or train individuals to prepare for job interviews.

The community shop, brilliantly led by John Marren, is only one example—but a good one—of the crucial work going on around the country to support families living on low incomes and in poverty. Lives are changed by such initiatives, in which people come together to speak up for the less fortunate and to share their time and expertise to be good neighbours in the service of others.

I take this opportunity to recognise the efforts in this area of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). As hon. Members know, he has a long-standing interest in understanding poverty and remains a powerful advocate. He has championed the Feeding Britain project, which works to reduce food poverty at local level. In the new year I look forward to welcoming Rosie Oglesby, its chief executive, to Barnsley to discuss the matter further.

I have made the point that across the country, in all our nations, we see ongoing work that makes a difference. The Scottish Government are consulting on proposals to establish a Scottish child poverty target. The Welsh Government have a responsibility to report on progress

towards achieving their child poverty objectives. In Northern Ireland, the Executive's child poverty strategy commits them to eradicating child poverty in the future. Those efforts must now be backed by the UK Government.

I shall briefly set out the reasons why the Government should prioritise early years interventions. Too many children are stuck following a path that was set for them in their infancy. The importance of children's early years in forming their life chances is well understood. The House should note the longstanding contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Mr Allen) in campaigning for better early-years provision and conducting an independent review in the previous Parliament.

Today, a child born in a deprived area is likely to die nine years earlier than someone from a wealthier postcode across town. To put that right will require us to bring together Government, campaigners and educationalists to learn from best practice internationally. Theirworld's 5 for 5 campaign is leading a global effort to do just that, focusing on the five things that shape a child's basic care: good nutrition; healthcare; learning; play and protection; and, of course, a loving home environment. We should recognise the ongoing work of Theirworld and its president, Sarah Brown. By the time a child reaches the age of five, about 90% of their brain development is complete. We will best tackle the growing gap between the richest and the rest, both in and out of school, by thinking bigger about how to reinvigorate early-years provision through programmes such as Sure Start, rather than by accelerating the cuts we have seen since 2010.

Just as quality teaching makes all the difference in the classroom, a well-skilled nursery workforce led by early-years teachers is proven to help to prevent the poorest children from falling behind. One in five children, and a third of the poorest children, arrive at primary school having fallen behind in the key elements of school-readiness, and we should recognise Save the Children's campaign to address that. I ask the Minister to lead discussions with colleagues across Government on how every child can benefit from an early education led by qualified early-years teachers.

In my Barnsley constituency, three in five children who attend an independent nursery do not have access to support from a qualified early-years teacher. A child's education can provide a route out of poverty, building on a foundation that is laid in the early years. That is why I am so proud to champion City Year UK, a charity that empowers young people aged 18 to 25 to serve others in tackling educational inequalities. Through spending a year volunteering in disadvantaged schools, those involved develop lifelong leadership skills and become role models to raise the aspiration of others.

The current evidence demonstrates how the Government are not getting it right—by investing in a new generation of grammar schools, which the evidence shows do not deliver; by not investing enough in building the evidence base for early-years interventions; and by accelerating the closure of Sure Start children's centres, which work so well. Policies across Government must seek to make a difference to children. Changes to tax and benefits over the next four years will take more than £1 in every £10 from the pockets of the poorest families, and that is why the Government should end the freeze on working-age benefits.

[Dan Jarvis]

The four-year freeze promises to be the primary driver of increased poverty. Ending it would be not only morally right, particularly with prices at the tills set to rise, but sound economics. Less well-off households spend more of the money they have than better-off ones so, as well as a clear moral case for action on poverty, there is a sound economic one. It is estimated that £1 in every £5 of public spending is associated with poverty, and that that costs the UK taxpayer £78 billion. As well as redirecting public spending, poverty worsens the key economic challenges we face. It lowers productivity and limits spending power, which undermines the strong economy we need for the future. But the human cost is the greatest of all, which is why the Government's penny wise but pound foolish approach to investing in children must end. Poverty destroys childhoods and limits futures. Stopping that, as the Prime Minister has pledged, should be the defining mission for this and for any Government. In times of profound change, those with privilege and wealth have a security that is not afforded to those without.

In setting out the reasons why child poverty should be prioritised, I have sought to take a constructive approach and find common ground. I have detailed the case for a target to reduce child poverty and highlighted the support of organisations with real experience and expertise. Will the Minister tell us the Government's position on establishing a child poverty target? We can end child poverty so that every child can realise their potential. That has to be our ambition and it should be a challenge that unites us all. Through that effort, we can provide security, opportunity and hope to those who need it most. If the Prime Minister's words in Downing Street mean anything—and we will judge this Government by their actions, not their rhetoric—the Government must set a target.

I am very proud to represent Barnsley, and I see at first hand the difference that the Government's policies make to so many of my constituents. In standing up for them and their futures today, I am reminded of our Barnsley motto, "Spectemur agendo" or "judge us by our actions". That will be my guiding principle today, as we hear the Minister's response, and in the coming months. It would be an historic mistake to abandon the battle against child poverty, so let us set ourselves a target and take action.

3.6 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate. I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for introducing it and for his work on the issue.

Everyone in this House knows why child poverty matters. My hon. Friend explained the reasons: it blights childhoods, damages children's long-term outcomes and potential in adult life, and brings a heavy cost to society in the loss of skills, in the loss of contribution to our economy and in the cost to our public services of putting right the damage that is done. The experience of child poverty is felt in a number of different dimensions, including children's educational experience and participation, their physical and emotional health and wellbeing, the quality of the housing and environment

in which they live, and the quality of their social and family lives. That was explicitly recognised in the Child Poverty Act 2010, which included an obligation for the Government nationally and for local authorities to bring forward child poverty strategies to address the different dimensions of child poverty. Indeed, I hope those dimensions may be replicated in strategies that our new metropolitan mayors will develop on a larger geographic footprint. I invite those who are putting themselves forward as potential candidates for that office to think about the options and opportunities to develop child poverty strategies for their city areas.

We have had many measures and indices across the broad experience of poverty. I will mention just two. The Labour Government's "Opportunity for all" included a set of indicators introduced in 1999 that was mysteriously—and, in my view, regrettably—abandoned by the Labour Government some years later. "Opportunity for all" was not focused specifically and exclusively on outcomes for children, but it presented a range of dimensions of poverty, exclusion and disadvantage, which I invite the Government to consider as they reconstruct their approach to measuring and identifying poverty and disadvantage. There was much to commend in "Opportunity for all" and I hope that the Minister is prepared to look at it.

More specifically in relation to children, the excellent UNICEF child wellbeing report card has been produced by the Innocenti Research Centre over recent years. It has looked again at a range of dimensions of child poverty and child wellbeing. What the indices have particularly highlighted and what commentators and researchers have asserted for many years is that, alongside all those different dimensions of poverty, as my hon. Friend has said, it is important for us to recognise that adequate income is key.

Adequate income is key for a number of reasons. Family income and the incomes that children enjoy within their family circumstances can be correlated with a range of other socioeconomic outcomes, over the range of indicators that I described a moment ago. Poor children and children in low-income families, as my hon. Friend has said, suffer poorer educational outcomes, poorer health outcomes and poorer social participation, and less potential is realised in adulthood. It is important, therefore, that we focus on the correlation between low income and a range of other disadvantages.

It is also important to measure income and relative income, as my hon. Friend said, because it is a measure of social participation and a way of ensuring that the poorest in our country do not get left behind as society becomes more prosperous and developed. If we were unwilling to look at a progressive measure of poverty, such as the measure of relative poverty, we would leave families and children behind in the context of social progress. For example, when my grandparents were children, it was considered perfectly acceptable not to have an indoor bathroom, which was not a measure of poverty. In a developed economy such as ours, we would consider that an absolute outrage today.

Relative income poverty is also an aspect of the measurement of equality. There is cross-party concern about the need to narrow inequality gaps. I hope that the Minister will comment on that helpful dimension to tackling inequality.

Measuring income enables us to compare and track our progress internationally. That will be particularly important because the UK, along with other countries, has now signed up to sustainable development goal No. 1 to halve poverty among women, children and men. It will be important for us to have measures of poverty to show our progress against that goal, which applies as much within the UK's domestic context as it does to the UK's seeking to eliminate poverty in developing countries around the world through its international aid efforts.

Most importantly, in a market economy such as we live in, income confers choice, dignity, autonomy, and status. It is humiliating—children feel the humiliation—for parents not to have enough money for their children to have the same experiences as their peers. When low-income parents have more money at their disposal, they spend it on things that are good for their children: on fresh fruit, vegetables, educational activities, outings, and on improving the quality of home life through paying off debt and improving the condition of the family home.

It is regrettable that the focus on income poverty that was explicit in the Child Poverty Act—not exclusively the focus of the Act, as some have liked to suggest, but exclusively in the Act—has been removed from statute by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, as my hon. Friend said, and replaced by measures in relation to educational attainment and worklessness. Those are, of course, both important to improving family income and addressing family poverty, but, as the majority of poor children are now growing up in working households, focusing on worklessness and not on in-work poverty misses the point and ensures that we overlook the necessary policy change.

As I often hear Ministers say, work should be the best route out of poverty, but too often today it is not. We have an obligation as a society to look after those who cannot work or who perhaps cannot work enough and cannot secure enough from earnings to provide and secure the necessities for their children.

The Welfare Reform and Work Act has diverted attention from the importance of income, and it is doing so at a time, as my hon. Friend said, when things are about to get a lot worse. In 2017 we will see very acutely the effect of rising prices, particularly for essentials: food and necessities of the household budget. We will see wages stagnating and both in-work and out-of-work benefits frozen and capped. We will see the effects of the erosion of the value of benefits specifically designed to support parents with the additional cost of raising their children. For example, we have seen the two-child policy, which the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has rightly campaigned assiduously on over the past year or so.

We have seen the restriction of child benefit and fees are now required to enable single parents to access child maintenance. We have also seen ingrained design faults in universal credit, which affect family poverty. For example, the benefit is designed to disincentivise second earners or lone parents from improving incomes through earnings. It is regrettable that in his autumn statement last month the Chancellor did not address the glaring problem that arises from the insufficiency of the earnings disregard.

The policy measures that have been adopted by the Government to address family incomes, such as the national living wage and the increase in the personal tax

threshold, do not adequately address the problem that we have. The national living wage increases have been countered, as I have said, by the failure to maintain the value of in-work benefits, so that, as wages rise, the in-work financial support provided by the benefits system is being more or less commensurately reduced, leaving families pretty much at a standstill as a result. The raising of the personal tax threshold is increasingly a poorly targeted mechanism for supporting the poorest families, including those in paid employment. Most of the benefits of the continuing increases in the tax threshold, Mr Davies, go to better-off earners like you and me.

So what do we need instead of the approach that we have today? First, we need policies that specifically address the incomes of the poorest families. I invite the Minister to look again at the way in which universal credit can be redeveloped to return to its original purpose to incentivise and reward work and increase amounts of paid work. We should reprioritise the financial support specifically designed to meet the needs of parents in raising their children. That means that the restrictions on benefits for children that we have seen in recent years must be reversed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central has rightly said, we need a much more determined strategy of investment in the services and support to help to produce the best long-term outcomes. I strongly endorse the call for a focus on early years childcare and education and for a cross-government approach.

I also support my hon. Friend when he says that we must reinstate meaningful and relevant targeting and tracking of progress. The social justice Green Paper offers Ministers an opportunity to bring forward targets that will focus attention properly on the problem and enable us to assess the efficacy of potential solutions that capture all the dimensions of child poverty, family income and the wider outcomes that we have discussed.

Finally, I suggest we need to underpin our ambitions with clear, firm and focused legislation. I greatly regret the watering down of the Child Poverty Act. As my hon. Friend said, that was put in place with cross-party support. It had support within the Westminster Parliament, in the Parliaments of Scotland and Wales, and across local government. It would be good to return to that consensual approach. If Ministers do not feel that they want to reinstate the Child Poverty Act, which I wish they would, but I fear they may not, may I at least invite the Minister to consider the potential for finally enacting section 1 of the Equality Act 2010? That would bring attention to bear on the wider dimensions of poverty. It could be readily picked up in the social justice Green Paper. I hope the Minister will consider that.

We need a real focus on what works, what makes a difference and how we know we are making progress. We cannot have the pick and mix approach that we have had over the past few years, because times are about to get so much worse for our poorest children. It would be a dereliction of duty on the part of all of us not to take action now to prevent that.

3.19 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this important debate, which is a timely one. Most of us will of course celebrate Christmas with extravagance and excess. It is important to consider

[Carol Monaghan]

the fact that many people will struggle through the festive season. The Social Mobility Commission has said that in Glasgow more than a third of children live in poverty. In my constituency there are certainly areas where that figure is one in two children. In this day and age that is frankly scandalous.

I was a teacher before I came to this place and I saw at first hand the effect of child poverty on children's education and life chances. It is almost impossible for a hungry child to learn, and difficult to concentrate when all they have had that morning is a can of juice or a packet of sweets. How can a child from a deprived background hope to compete educationally with their peers? They may not have a bag in which to carry their essentials to school. As the hon. Gentleman has already mentioned, with poverty comes stigma, which can further exclude children from the educational chances that may allow them to progress.

Education should be an enabler, and a way to allow all young people to reach their potential, but the reality is that by the age of three children from deprived backgrounds can already be nine months behind average development, and by the time they start school the difference can be as much as 18 months. For young children that can mean an inability to communicate, vocally or in other ways. They may not understand the simplest instructions. They may have issues with going to the toilet. Poverty has all sorts of impacts on children at that stage. The factors that contribute—poor diet, a difficult home environment, and parents juggling work and child care—show no sign of abating.

I hope that increases in early years education provision across the UK will make a big difference. However, I keep hearing the word “childcare”. In Scotland we talk instead about early years education. In Scotland education starts formally at the age of three. I do not mean learning to read and write; I mean learning to communicate, learning about relationships and starting to work through a simple curriculum. There is a subtle but fundamental difference between childcare and early years education. Childcare is about the parents. It is about supporting them, benefiting them and making their lives more convenient. Of course, it benefits the children as well—I will not deny that. However, early years education is focused 100% on the children. It is about improving their life chances.

There are differences between the early years packages that will be offered across the UK. In Scotland, all children will be entitled to 30 hours of early years education. In England, 30 hours will be offered to children only where both parents are working. That calls into question the purpose of the provision. We should also think about different parents and home environments; what about parents with disabilities or health issues that prevent them from working? Their children, who may already be socially excluded, will be further excluded if they do not have access to their 30 hours, and will miss out on chances that could raise them out of poverty and make a vital difference when they start school.

Other groups also need consideration. Grandparents play a massive role in helping with childcare. Some are the main carers for young children, but no provision is made for them in the 30 hours rule. In fact, they would

also need to be in work to get access to the 30 hours of childcare. The Government need to rethink the 30 hours restrictions, and open the provision up to all children, if they are to make a difference in tackling the attainment gap at the very beginning of school.

We need to look at how poverty can be alleviated completely. That means a realistic welfare system that actually allows young children to flourish. As a teacher, I know that young children from deprived backgrounds are a massive untapped resource. They have great potential. The UK has skills gaps in the areas of science, technology, engineering, maths, digital skills and construction. Those skills shortages could be tackled in a serious manner if we created an environment that allowed young children from deprived backgrounds to achieve success.

In Scotland, we are committed to eradicating child poverty. The recently announced baby box will be a box of essential items given to every child born in Scotland, to help to level the playing field at the earliest stages of life. In Scotland, education maintenance allowance is still in place for young people in the later stages of secondary education. We still have free university education, which many of our young people can use. Certainly there will be no return in Scotland to selective education, which locks in inequality, scars children and prevents them from achieving their full potential. No child should have to grow up in poverty in the 21st century in the UK. I should like the Government to take a realistic approach to that problem. Many hon. Members now look forward to spending Christmas in comfort with their children, and we need to think realistically about how to allow all children in the UK to enjoy Christmas.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): If each of the two Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen and the Minister stick to 10 minutes each, there should be a little time at the end in which the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) can wind up the debate.

3.27 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for obtaining this important and timely debate and for his sterling work in pursuing the issue of child poverty. His written parliamentary questions and private Member's Bill have been important in keeping child poverty on the agenda and making sure that, although it is the last day of term here, we are debating a subject crucial to the children in our constituencies.

At this time families are preparing for Christmas at home, getting the tree ready and wrapping presents, but that is something not available to everyone. Some of my constituents recently got in touch for assistance because they have no money for Christmas presents for their children. Such families are dependent on the charity of organisations such as Glasgow's Spirit of Christmas, the Salvation Army, and groups working in the Gorbals. There are many voluntary groups in constituencies which people have to approach to ask for gifts for their children. I cannot imagine the heartbreak it must cause parents to know that they just do not have the money—that Santa will not come to their door and their kids will wake up on Christmas morning with perhaps nothing at all.

The way those families have now been stigmatised in this country and been allowed to reach such a situation is nothing short of appalling. One of the families I

mentioned has no recourse to public funds—the mother is working but just cannot work enough to bring in enough money to pay the bills, put food on the table and provide Christmas presents for her children. That is the reality today for families in the UK—the sixth richest nation on earth.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central is correct to point out that the debate is about political choices and Government decisions that affect people in this country. He rightly quoted his town's motto about judging people by their actions; it is a crucial point that we should take forward. He is also right to point out that the Labour Government made significant progress on child poverty, and I pay credit to them for that. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) correctly mentioned the significance of tracking, targets and actually having something to work towards. Without that guiding principle, how will we know whether we are making progress? How will we know whether lives are being improved or getting worse?

Let me talk a little about the impact of child poverty beyond the bald statistics, which can be pretty dry. Child poverty is about stigma and isolation, and there is a compounding impact that makes it difficult to escape from the cycle of poverty. In 2010, back when I was a councillor in Glasgow, Save the Children ran a series of events about the lived experience of children in poverty. It created what it called a museum of poverty, which contained things that it wished to banish from reality and ought to be things of the past. Those included pawn tickets, unaffordable fuel, benefit forms, homelessness, cheap, crap food that does people no good, and dinner tickets and tokens, which the hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned. Those are all stigmas that people in poverty have to carry around with them. We do not necessarily see them, but those people have to see and feel them every single day.

Things have got worse since 2010. We have let children down. The children who participated in those events may now actually be parents themselves. We now have brutal sanctions, the two-child policy and the rape clause, which will not only stigmatise the families it impacts but hurt them deeply. We have the benefit cap, there are people with no recourse to public funds, and delays in benefits leave people with no option but to go to food banks and rely on the charity of friends, family and strangers.

Kerry McCarthy: Does the hon. Lady agree that unless the Government finally acknowledge that delays to benefits and benefit sanctions are major causes of people going to food banks, we will never reduce food poverty in this country?

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. The evidence that the National Audit Office and charities across the country have produced on this issue makes that absolutely clear. I spoke to an organisation from Castlemilk, which is not in my constituency but has been working with food banks in my constituency. It had spoken to people who came to the food banks and tried to help them with their issues. Its evidence showed clearly that food poverty was about delays, some of which are built into the system. The six-week wait for universal credit claims leaves people with nothing until that comes through. That is absolutely unacceptable. Most worryingly, that organisation also found that people did not want to

challenge things because they were worried about getting into trouble with the Department for Work and Pensions, their job coach or whoever they had spoken to. It is deeply disappointing that that service does not support people but punishes them.

A lot of very good work has been done on poverty in Glasgow. The poverty leadership panel has done a great deal of work. Glasgow City Council, in partnership with Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Glasgow Centre for Population Health and a host of other organisations, produced an excellent report about the cost of the school day that is similar to some of work that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke about the developmental lag in education, which has an impact. There are things inherent in the education system that perhaps not everyone sees but are very important to people living in poverty. That report looked at the stigma about things such as clothes, transport and learning resources, and the impact of poverty on friendships, people's ability to go on trips, food, and in-school events such as non-uniform days, fundraising events and clubs. People in poverty cannot participate in a great many of those things, and that has a huge impact, particularly on young children. Other children in a class can tell that a child is in poverty, no matter how they might try to cover that up.

The Conservatives in this place are reluctant to see "I, Daniel Blake", but the example in that film of the wee girl whose shoes had been glued back together but kept falling apart, and the family who could not afford to put shoes on that child's feet, is heartbreaking. Such experiences are damaging to a child's health, wellbeing and very sense of identity. My son went through three pairs of school shoes and two pairs of trousers last year in primary 1. I was able to put shoes on his feet, but if I was not able to do that, what impact would going around in Scotland in the rain with wet feet every day have on him? That would be appalling, and many families are left in that situation. Schools in Glasgow have to buy outdoor clothes for kids who cannot afford warm jackets or welly boots so they can participate in outdoor play. So many families are close to crisis—they are an unexpected bill away from crisis—and the benefits system has left them in that situation. There is no dignity or respect there. We need to look at the root causes of poverty to deal with that.

I am glad to be able to say that the Scottish Government are taking action. They have a child poverty Bill out for consultation just now. Our ambition is to achieve change, but we cannot do that on our own. We have access to only 15% of the benefit system. We will do what we can with that 15%—we are committed to bringing in maternity and early childhood benefits to help with some of the expenses of starting school—but although that can be significant, it is only a small part of the picture. We need to look at the root causes.

Peter Kelly of the Poverty Alliance spoke about the missed opportunities in the autumn statement and said it was akin to

"being pushed off a cliff with only a pillow to absorb the landing."

Families are still in very stark situations. It is estimated that because of cuts to tax credits, 200,000 more children

[Alison Thewliss]

will be in poverty by 2020. The two-child policy and rape clause will trap people in a situation that they just cannot earn enough to get back out of. CPAG estimates that due to cuts to universal credit, families will have to work a 13 to 14-month year to earn enough money back just to stand still in a situation where what they have is not great to begin with. Trussell Trust figures show that food bank usage increased in the first half of this year, and it distributed 500,000 three-day emergency food supplies across the UK, more than 188,000 of which were for children. That is pretty stark.

We can do a great deal to make change, and I absolutely agree with the hon. Member for Barnsley Central and other Members who have spoken that this Government should be doing so much more. They need to join the dots, they need a holistic strategy, and they need to play their part in resolving child poverty.

3.37 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this debate and his long-standing commitment to this issue. He made an excellent speech highlighting the scale of the crisis. The fact that, typically, nine children in a class of 30 are growing up in poverty is a stark image indeed. I wholly concur with his assertion that no child in Britain should grow up in poverty and that should be a priority for the Government. I hope that the Minister will respond to his key question and say what the Government's position is on establishing a child poverty target.

Many other Members also made excellent contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who has a great deal of experience in this area, made a compelling speech. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) alluded to the problems with funding for nursery education, which is certainly an issue in my constituency, and several Members mentioned the importance of early intervention and early-years education. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) made a good speech about the impact of the changes made by the last Chancellor in the last Budget on people in the bottom third of the income distribution. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke about her personal experience as a school teacher of poverty's detrimental impact on children's ability to learn. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) mentioned the school holiday programmes that provide food for children in poverty who would otherwise go hungry during the summer weeks.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central made clear, we face a child poverty crisis under this Government. Today, 29% of children in the UK live in poverty. That is not just about not going on holiday or not having treats; it is about not having enough to eat or get by, being cold in winter, not having shoes that fit and struggling to survive. The Resolution Foundation estimates that in 2016 alone 200,000 children, predominantly from working households, will have fallen into poverty. That is on top of the Institute for Fiscal Studies' projection, which has been alluded to, that the falls in

child poverty that a Labour Government achieved at the beginning of this century risk being reversed.

There was a comprehensive strategy to tackle child poverty across the last Labour Government, which is something that our party is proud of, with interventions such as Sure Start and increasing existing social security and new, child-targeted assistance and investment in early years intervention, along with programmes to help lone parents into work. That wide range of actions increased incomes and provided tailored services to help families living in poverty. The recent news that the child poverty unit, set up under the previous Labour Government in an effort to eliminate child poverty, has been abolished is very concerning indeed. That shows that child poverty is becoming far less of a priority for this Conservative Government. Surely we can only tackle child poverty effectively through a concerted strategy across Government.

The Child Poverty Act 2010, brought in by the Labour Government, set four key targets to be met by 2021. They ranged from reducing the proportion of children who live in low-income households to reducing the number of children who experience persistent poverty. However, counterproductively, the current Government decided to abolish the numerical targets based on household income in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 and replace them with a life chances strategy, which has measures such as educational attainment and family breakdown. By removing income targets and focusing on life chances, the Government are failing to tackle the cause of child poverty: lack of money. Growing up in poverty affects children for the rest of their lives. It is in every sense a life sentence.

The life chances strategy was scheduled to be published as far back as June. Now, questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central reveal that the Government will not publish it at all but will instead publish a Green Paper on social justice in the new year. Does the Minister agree that measuring household income is an important means of assessing the prevalence of child poverty across the UK? Will she assure the House that in any new proposal she will retain recognised indicators of income-related poverty?

Thankfully, a defeat in the House of Lords forced the Government to retain a legally binding commitment to measure and publish the number of children living in families on low income. However, that does not mean that they are required to publish a child poverty strategy every three years. Now we learn that it is no longer Government policy to try to eliminate child poverty at all.

The Government have introduced major changes to the social security system that have hit families with children hard. Supporting families to achieve and maintain an income that enables them to meet their needs is a vital element in giving children a good start in life. The major change to the social security system will be the reduction in the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit starts to be withdrawn. Single parents will be hit particularly hard. For example, from next year a single parent with two children working full time on the national living wage will receive £2,586 less a year under universal credit than someone claiming tax credits. The Child Poverty Action Group estimated that a single parent working full time on the national living wage would effectively have to work an extra two months

each year to make up for that loss in income. It is utterly impossible for them to do that.

The cuts to work allowances are significant because of their impact in increasing in-work poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the proportion of people in poverty in a working family is 55%, which is a record high. Four fifths of the adults in those families are themselves working—some 3.8 million workers. Those adults who are not working are predominantly looking after their children. Is the Minister concerned that, as a result of her Government's cuts to universal credit, the huge gains the Labour party made in lifting more than a million children out of poverty will be undone? The Government's tinkering with the universal credit taper rate at the autumn statement will not address the losses incurred as a result of their previous changes to work allowances.

The Government have promised to make work pay, but that is not happening for the three quarters of children in poverty who are in working families. Will they now reverse cuts to in-work support through universal credit? There is overwhelming evidence that child poverty has a direct causal impact on worsening children's social, emotional and cognitive outcomes. Anyone who has been a teacher—many in the House have been—will have direct experience of that. The very wiring of the brain is affected when children are brought up in poverty. A hungry child cannot learn.

A British Medical Association report published in September highlighted the impact of austerity on children's health, from increased mortality rates to the likelihood that children growing up in poverty may face greater health problems in later life. A secure, warm home and healthy, nutritious food are basic physiological needs. When those needs are not met, people's health suffers both physically and mentally. That is particularly the case for children as they are still developing. Being in work or well educated cannot guarantee those essential needs will be met, but having money can.

If the Government will not be moved by moral arguments, perhaps they will be by the economic arguments. The failure to tackle the root causes of child poverty will result in losing a whole generation of future talent and untapped potential. The implications for these children and their families, but also for the country, are stark, yet the Government have cut the staffing of the Social Mobility Commission to the point that it now has more members than staff.

The Prime Minister has abandoned her pledge, made on the steps of Downing Street, to support families who are struggling to get by. I urge the Government to rethink their position on child poverty and reinstate the targets before it is too late.

3.44 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this debate on child poverty, and all Members from across the House who contributed to the discussion. Let me assure all that tackling child poverty and disadvantage and delivering real social reform is a priority for the Government. Our Prime Minister has set out clearly that she is committed to that. That includes taking action that addresses the root causes of child poverty and disadvantage, not just the symptoms.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the tone that he struck during the debate. This is about not just Government policy but everyone, whatever their political hue, at a local level working to combat these issues. That includes Members of Parliament, councillors and, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, many organisations in our communities. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) made excellent points about the consistency required on targets and the opportunities that come from devolution and local mayors. Those points are well made.

Before I turn to targets, let me briefly touch on the child poverty unit, which was mentioned. The unit's main function was to support Ministers in exercising their duties in relation to the income-based targets set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and the associated child poverty strategy. Following the repeal of those targets, which was explicit in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, responsibility for child poverty policy and analysis transferred to the Department for Work and Pensions. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission secretariat continues to be based in the Department for Education, and the Secretary of State for Education is the lead Minister for that commission.

The Government want to take a fundamentally different approach to child poverty from the one driven by the Child Poverty Act measures and targets. Our approach will tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage and drive continued action in the areas that will improve long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children, now and in the future. It is for that reason we rejected the narrow, income-based approach to poverty incentivised through the 2010 Act. In place of that, we have, through provisions in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, introduced two new statutory measures that will drive action on parental worklessness and on children's educational achievement. Those are the two areas that we know can make the biggest difference to improving children's long-term outcomes.

The 2016 Act puts a new duty on the Government to report annually on the proportion of children living in workless households, the proportion of children living in long-term workless households, and attainment at GCSE for all children and for disadvantaged children. The groundbreaking analysis conducted by my Department means that we now have a clearer understanding of disadvantage than ever before. We know that children affected by parental worklessness and its associated risk factors, such as family instability, drug or alcohol dependency and poor parental mental health, are disproportionately likely to experience poorer outcomes.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry; I would like to make progress, and I do not have much time. I will try to address all the points raised.

It is worth noting that the old Child Poverty Act targets were based on defining a household as being in poverty if its income was below 60% of median household income. That remains the basis for the "households below average income" survey, which is still the definitive source of data on poverty and low income; during the passage of the 2016 Act, the Government made a commitment to continue to publish the data.

[*Penny Mordaunt*]

I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston about some of the obstacles to women in particular working, and working more hours, such as bunching around 16 hours, multiple caring responsibilities and so forth. We recognise that, which is why the Minister of State who holds this portfolio is undertaking a range of work to tackle those issues.

We also know—the evidence is clear—that work is the best way out of poverty. Working-age adults in non-working families are almost four times as likely to be living on a low income. The “Child poverty transitions” report published in June 2015 found that 74% of children in workless families that moved into full employment exited poverty; that 47% of children in workless households were in relative low income before deducting housing costs, compared with only 8% in households in which all adults were working; and that there are 100,000 fewer children in relative low income since 2010.

Kate Green: Will the Minister give way?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry; I want to address these points. The Government’s record on employment speaks for itself. The latest figures show the employment rate at 74.4%, unemployment at an 11-year low and 2.8 million more people in work than in 2010. That is important, because we know that being in work has wider benefits beyond financial ones. There is clear evidence that good-quality work is linked to better physical and mental health and improved wellbeing, and that better parental health is associated with better outcomes for children. That is why we are getting people into employment and working to change attitudes.

We are also introducing reforms to ensure that work always pays and to allow people to keep more of what they earn. We are cutting income tax for more than 30 million people this year and taking 4 million of the lowest-paid people out of income tax completely. By 2018, a typical basic rate taxpayer will pay more than £1,000 less in income tax than in 2010. We are also making sure that people working 30 hours a week on the national minimum wage do not pay any income tax. Together with the introduction of the national living wage, that will give full-time low-paid workers previously on the national minimum wage a pay rise of more than £15 a week. Under universal credit, people are moving into work significantly faster, and staying in those jobs for longer. That crucial welfare reform also increases support for parents; universal credit now provides up to 85% of childcare costs, meaning more support for working families.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central is quite understandably focused on what happens next. The Prime Minister has set up—and chairs—a new Social

Reform Cabinet Committee that brings together nine Government Departments to oversee and agree social policy reforms. Its task will be to lead the Government’s work to increase social mobility and deliver social justice. We will bring forward a social justice Green Paper in the new year that will identify and address the root causes of poverty and will build on the two statutory measures we have already set out in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. That is fundamentally different from previous approaches; it is focused on not only the symptoms but the root causes of poverty, and will ensure a clear focus on improving long-term outcomes for the most disadvantaged children.

The Government have a good record on child poverty. There are now 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty than in 2010 and—under Labour’s own poverty measurements—100,000 fewer children in relative poverty. However, we know that we need to do more. To deliver real social change and real social justice, and to make Britain the country that works for everyone, we will bring forward the social justice Green Paper in the new year. That will say more on our approach to tackling the root causes of poverty and disadvantage. I hope that will be something on which we will be able to build common cause and agree for the common good. Our children deserve that.

3.54 pm

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the opportunity to have considered the important issue of child poverty. All of us who serve in this place do so in order to improve the lives of our constituents and the communities that we represent. However, the reality is that an increasing number of children are living in poverty, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies projects that that will increase by 50% by 2020. In practical terms, that means that nine out of 30 kids in every classroom around the country will be living in poverty.

If hon. Members believe, as I do, that that is not only unacceptable but avoidable, all of us—the Government very much included—have an absolute responsibility and a duty to act. It is in our interests to do so. As I said, there is a clear moral argument for doing so, which is frankly enough in its own right, but there is also a clear economic argument for investing in the future and the next generation of talent. Despite what we have heard from the Minister, the reality is that without a target, a clear strategy or a clear focus on making progress, that simply will not happen. The Government are in an incredibly privileged position; they have the opportunity and the power to act. I hope that they will do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered child poverty.

Brandon Rayat

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the case of Brandon Rayat.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am very pleased to see the Minister here. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the case of Brandon Singh Rayat of Leicester today.

Brandon tragically took his own life at the age of 15 on 9 August this year, just 132 days ago, after what has been described by his parents as systematic, appalling and torturous bullying. He was a pupil at Judgemeanow Community College in Evington in my constituency. We are joined today by Brandon's mother, Mina; his father, Rajinder; and his younger brother, Jaydeep.

Mr and Mrs Rayat have informed me that, in the 16 months leading up to his death, Brandon was subjected to repeated physical and psychological abuse by his peers. Because it is so shocking, I will not repeat in great detail the abuse. However, children—children, Mr Hollobone—who used to be Brandon's friends started calling him terrible names. They set up a fake Facebook page, through which they repeatedly sent threats to sexually assault both him and his mother. He was also physically assaulted while at school. No one in this House would disagree when I say that that kind of activity is completely reprehensible.

In May 2015, Brandon was diagnosed as suffering from an acute stress reaction as a result of the bullying. Last November, the abuse became so bad that Brandon stopped attending school altogether. His anxiety turned the mere act of going to school each day into a phobia. He became lonely and isolated, and despite being prescribed antidepressants, his condition did not improve.

Two months before he took his own life, Brandon started to give away all his possessions and money to his loved ones. Brandon's family tell me that despite what had happened, their urgent calls for help went unanswered. In the 16 months leading up to his death, Brandon tried to take his own life on a number of occasions. His parents begged doctors to transfer him to a secure medical unit, but the request was denied by local health services. Brandon repeatedly told his parents that he wanted to take his own life and attempted suicide in both March and July of this year. Despite that, still nothing was done.

Brandon's family spoke to the child and adolescent mental health services, his GP and psychiatric services at the Leicester Royal Infirmary, yet none of them took the action that was necessary to prevent his death. Will the Minister tell the House when she responds what would have been enough—what threshold needs to be crossed—for someone like Brandon, or indeed his family, to access the care that he and they so desperately needed?

I have visited Judgemeanow Community College many times during my 29 years as an MP, and until now, I have never received a complaint about something that has happened there. Mr and Mrs Rayat have told me that Judgemeanow Community College was informed of the bullying in November 2015. Mrs Rayat also had

a meeting with the school to discuss the abuse and the pupils who were orchestrating this campaign of hate. Indeed, I understand that some of the text messages were shown to the people in authority. Unfortunately, that did nothing to prevent or stem the abuse that Brandon was receiving.

It would be extremely helpful if the Minister told the House what criteria or guidance exist for schools in circumstances of this kind. When did either she or the Secretary of State last write to various local authorities, or perhaps directly to schools, to give them information and guidance as to how they should react in particular circumstances? Not all schools experience activities of this kind, and therefore I would not expect every school and every teacher in the country to be expert in dealing with such matters.

Mrs Rayat has informed me that she also had no success when she approached Leicester City Council. She was told she needed to ask for a health and educational support plan. To get that, she went to the information, advice and support services. Her inquiry was then passed to the council's education team, which said it would need to go to the school to get even more information. After literally running around in circles, Mina Rayat then waited for months without a substantive response. During that time, Brandon was awaiting an evaluation for suspected autism.

That looks to me like bureaucracy failing to act, which affected the reaction times. I am worried about future cases such as this. That is why Brandon's parents wanted me to raise this case in Parliament today. His case should have been a priority. However, I fear there are other examples of the buck being passed between various authorities.

Judging from my meeting with the family at my surgery, it seems that more should have been done to help both Brandon and his family with the events leading up to his death. An inquest into Brandon's death will begin in January, and it is not appropriate for me, Ministers or Parliament to apportion blame to any individual until that has been completed. That is the system we have in this country, and it is one that the family respects, which is why they are prepared for the inquest. However—I speak not as an educationalist but a layperson—it is clear that Brandon was subjected to a barrage of abuse over a long period. It is my understanding, from what his parents have said to me, that the very institutions that are supposed to act as a safety net in situations such as this did not do so.

I do not have all the facts. Those will emerge when the inquest takes place, as well as a possible inquiry, which the family believe is extremely important. However, it seems that the system has failed this young man and this family. Will the Minister outline how this system could be made more effective and easier for families to navigate? These are not people who have had much contact with the education system prior to this occurring, so they do not know how to go through it.

As Members will know, it was National Anti-Bullying Week last month. Mina Rayat launched a campaign to ensure that no other young person or parent goes through the sheer hell that Brandon and his family were subjected to. I would like to put on the record the shining and admirable example of Mina Rayat and her family. She wants to ensure that, although her son has passed away in these tragic circumstances, no other

[Keith Vaz]

family will endure what they have had to endure. Despite being grief-stricken, there is nothing more she could have done. She tried to push a broken system to save her child. To lose a child is the worst pain any parent could imagine, but to use her grief as a force for good is heroic.

What is most worrying is that Brandon's story is not a one-off. Thousands of children in the United Kingdom are suffering from bullying, both at school and online, and this is contributing to a mental health crisis. This year, 87% more children than last year told Childline that they struggled to access appropriate professional support for their mental health problems. Some 72% of children have reported being bullied online and a quarter of a million children are currently receiving help from NHS mental health services. One third of these cases are related to bullying. These are frightening statistics, but we must bear in mind that many cases are not reported and, in reality, the figures are likely to be much higher.

Some parents may say to their children, when they come home and complain, "You just have to shout back at someone who is attacking you and stand up for yourself, or report it to a teacher." Parents themselves may not understand the serious nature of what is going on.

Yesterday the Health Committee released its interim report on suicide prevention. It stated that 4,820 people died by suicide in England in 2016. But again, in reality, this figure is likely to be much higher. Suicide remains the biggest killer of men under 49 and the leading cause of death in people aged 15 to 24. My father committed suicide when I was 14. He was just 49 and to this day, all these years later, I still remember the knock on the door, answering that door and being told the news.

The circumstances that give rise to someone taking their own life are a personal issue for some of us, but also a matter of deep public concern. It should be a concern of Parliament and Government. We are in the midst of two separate crises. We have a crisis in youth mental health and a pandemic of bullying in our schools and online. To address this, we need a revolutionary change in the way the authorities provide support to victims.

Can the Minister please tell us that, when the Government refresh—that is the word used in the document—their suicide prevention strategy in January 2017, included in that strategy will be a section on how to address bullying? Will she also ensure that guidance on cases like Brandon's is at the heart of the strategy across councils and NHS services in the United Kingdom?

Another issue is the bullies. All bullies believe they can push their target to the very edge and suffer no consequences. They may delight in the misery they cause—who knows? Under the current law, sustained harassment and intimidation, including verbal abuse, threats, abusive phone calls and sending abusive emails or text messages are all crimes. However—we have heard this so many times—the internet companies must be held to account even more than at present. They never seem to respond quickly enough to cases of online bullying like Brandon's. When someone seeks to make a complaint, it is usually found that they are

based in another country in some other part of the world, and trying to get to someone to deal with the issue is complicated.

As is all too common, no charges or investigations have been launched against Brandon's bullies. Perhaps a more serious risk of prosecution would have deterred them. Had Brandon been murdered, criminal charges would have been a certainty. Mina Rayat and her husband have put the implementation of a specific cyber-bullying law at the heart of their campaign to achieve justice for Brandon and others who have found themselves in this terrible situation. Will the Minister give the Government's view on those proposals? Will she also tell us what further action the Government are taking to deal with internet companies?

I shall end by saying that 2016 has been an unimaginably tragic year for the Rayat family. Unfortunately, Mrs Rayat is not the only mother in my constituency to have approached me this year about the death of a son. I pay tribute to Cheryl Armatrading and Amy Morgan who both lost their sons to knife attacks in Leicester. Cheryl's son, Antoin Akpom, was brutally murdered in September 2013. His family has yet to receive compensation for his death or an explanation of why his killer was transferred to Leicester by the authorities, which allowed the killer to meet Antoin in a car park and to stab him to death. Cheryl is being supported by the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), who is working hard on her behalf and is her local MP. I am acting as the constituency MP for Antoin's son, Aquil.

Amy Morgan lost her son, Tyler Thompson, to a knife attack in November 2015. Last month, I attended a ceremony marking the first anniversary of his death at the City of Leicester College, hosted by headteacher, Anne Gregory, in Downing Drive in my constituency. Since Tyler's death, Amy has worked in collaboration with Leicestershire police on their "Lives not Knives" campaign. Some young men in my constituency and across the country are facing a crisis of violence and intimidation, leaving behind them grieving families and broken communities. This violence must stop.

What sort of country do we want to live in? Do we want a country where our children are safe from the kind of bullies and actions that Brandon had to face, or a country where the actions of bullies remain unchecked? We want a country where these issues are raised and bullies are stopped in their tracks before it is too late. When children are suffering bullying to the point where they take their own lives, we need to change our response radically. The system failed Brandon this year. Please, let us ensure that no other child is failed in this way.

4.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for securing this very important debate, for the way he presented this tragic story to the House and for always standing up for his constituents with great dedication and passion. He is a great credit to them.

I express my deepest sympathy to Brandon's mother, father and brother and to all his family and friends. His untimely and utterly tragic death is the reason why we

are having this debate. We must do all that we can both to stop bullying happening at all and, crucially, to recognise and support the victims.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly asked what we could have done to prevent this tragedy. When children are victims of bullying, it is vital that professionals listen to them and their families and take seriously what they say. The bullying of Brandon and its consequences were not missed—not by his parents, his school or other services. His family tried and tried to get help, and the school and child and adolescent mental health services were involved. All of that needs to be investigated very carefully.

However, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, Brandon's tragic death will be the subject of a coroner's inquiry in the new year. I cannot pre-empt the findings and say at this point what specific organisations such as the Judgemeanow school should have done; that will come out of that inquiry. But whatever comes out of the inquiry, we must ensure that the vital lessons are identified, learned and put into practice to help prevent such a devastating event from happening again and families from suffering in a similar way.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of important issues and questions that I would like to address. First, let me say that bullying, for whatever reason and in whatever circumstance, is absolutely unacceptable and has no place in our society. As we have seen, it has had a devastating effect on Brandon's family, but it has also blighted the lives of many other young people. We cannot simply dismiss bullying as part of growing up. Even when it does not have consequences as appalling as those that we have heard about today, it can have a profound and, in many cases, very long-lasting effect on the lives of children and young people and affect their education and long-term mental health.

The Government have sent a clear message that bullying is not to be tolerated in our schools. Every school is different, and individual schools are best placed to decide how best to tackle bullying as part of a wider set of activities regarding behaviour and discipline. We have trusted our headteachers and school staff to identify the circumstances surrounding bullying in their schools, to prioritise those issues, to drive their own improvement and to share best practice among themselves.

Schools have a specific legal duty to have a behaviour policy, which must include measures to prevent all bullying among pupils, including cyber-bullying. Teachers have powers to tackle cyber-bullying by searching for and, if necessary, deleting inappropriate messages or files on electronic devices, including mobile phones. The role of schools is so important. They must absolutely be held to account for how well they tackle and respond to bullying. That is why Ofsted inspections now look specifically at what schools do, examining their records and procedures and what pupils and parents say about how the issue of bullying is dealt with.

We must ensure that schools are supported to tackle bullying and that they can learn from one another. I was fortunate enough to meet during Anti-Bullying Week a couple of weeks ago some really inspiring teachers who have made a real difference to children's lives through the way they have addressed the issue. My Department has provided £4.4 million of funding to tackle bullying. That includes £1.6 million for four anti-bullying organisations to support schools in tackling the issue,

programmes to look at how incidents can be reported to schools more easily, and training for 4,000 young people to become anti-bullying ambassadors in schools and lead campaigns to empower others. We also recently published dedicated cyber-bullying guidance and an online safety toolkit for schools. Those resources will help schools to understand, prevent and respond to cyber-bullying, and can be accessed on the UK Safer Internet Centre website.

Beyond school, social media bring new challenges for young people. Bullying now goes beyond the school gates, which is why we have given schools greater power to deal with incidents outside school. The Government are absolutely clear that what is illegal online is illegal offline. Whomever bullying is aimed at, it is totally unacceptable. I can fully appreciate the desire of Brandon's family for a change in the law to make cyber-bullying a specific offence. At the moment, the law does not differentiate between criminal offences committed on social media and those committed anywhere else. That means that the actions are illegal wherever they are committed, whether online, in the street or at school. The law as it stands can be used to prosecute online abuse. It is imperative that the individuals committing criminal offences, whether they are making threats of violence or sending grossly offensive messages, are caught and punished appropriately.

Any death by suicide is an absolute tragedy. Suicide is a leading cause of death among young people, and particularly among young men. Our challenge is to recognise the factors that pose the greatest risk and identify those most at risk, so that we can intervene effectively.

We recognise that our services that provide young people with access to specialist mental health support are in need of transformation. Too often when seeking help, children and their families are passed from service to service and face a succession of barriers and thresholds. The right hon. Gentleman rightly asked what threshold Brandon needed to meet and what an effective service would look like. The challenge to us all is to ensure that services come together to provide effective support to those who need it. The question should be not "Do you qualify for my service?" but "What can we best do between us to provide the support that you need?" To support that transformation, we have made £1.4 billion available to ensure that clinical commissioning groups develop local plans detailing how they will improve all aspects of mental health provision.

Our refreshed suicide prevention strategy will, as the right hon. Gentleman asks, acknowledge bullying as a potential contributing factor to suicide in children and young people and will therefore reference the importance of schools and links with schools. It is vital that schools and mental health services work more effectively and more closely together. We have recently been running a series of pilots on that, and we plan to learn from them. We are also taking forward a range of projects across Government on online mental health safety, including funding research into the effects of the internet on mental health and suicide risk, developing digital resilience strategies for children and young people and working in schools to improve mental health awareness and promote mental wellbeing.

The right hon. Gentleman rightly paid tribute to Cheryl Armatrading and Amy Morgan, who tragically lost their sons to knife crime. The Government's modern

[Caroline Dinenage]

crime prevention strategy sets out a range of measures to strengthen our response to knife crime, including working with the police and industry to ensure that there are effective controls on the sale of knives, spreading best practice and delivering measures designed to deter young people from carrying knives. We will continue to work with the Home Office to ensure that every step is taken to protect children from violence. We know that intervening early can help to prevent young people from becoming involved in gang and youth violence in the first place. That is one of the priorities in our approach to ending gang violence and exploitation, and we are working with partners to take that forward.

I am really pleased that the right hon. Gentleman has raised this incredibly important issue today. Bullying is completely unacceptable in any circumstances, but especially when it leads to unspeakably tragic events such as those that we have heard about today. It is vital that everyone is aware of their responsibilities and acts accordingly when they see or hear about bullying, in whatever form it takes. When everyone plays their part in tackling bullying, we will have a society that is respectful and tolerant of all—a place where everyone feels safe and valued. I hope that we can continue to work together to ensure that we build such a society.

I pay tribute to Brandon's parents and brother for coming here today. I am a mother of two sons and I can only imagine the horrific pain that they have gone through this year. The fact that they have come here to campaign to ensure that other parents do not have to experience the same suffering is incredibly admirable. To do them justice, it will be incumbent on all of us—the Government, councils, health services and schools—to look very carefully at the outcome of the reviews of Brandon's case and ensure that we all, at every level of the system, make the changes necessary to put the lessons into practice.

Question put and agreed to.

Jobcentre Closures: Glasgow

4.29 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered closure of jobcentres in Glasgow.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Hollobone. I wish to take you and other Members back to 8 June 2010—at the time of 7.34 pm, to be precise. That was a big moment in the Minister's parliamentary career, because it was then that he uttered his first words to the House as a new Member, in a Queen's Speech debate on the economy and welfare. Tucked away within that speech was a line that I happen to agree with. Talking specifically about welfare, the Minister said then that prevention is “better than cure”. Those are such wise words from six years ago, but what a turnaround in approach we have today now that he is a Minister of the Crown. I accept that the Minister will not share my analysis. I accept that he probably—almost certainly—believes that he is on the same trajectory as he was back in 2010 when he advocated prevention with such eloquence. So I and some of my hon. Friends wish to adumbrate to him this evening the error of his ways.

I wish to start with the sham of a consultation that the Government have been dragged, kicking and screaming, to finally publish on their website. The Minister and his officials know, because we have told them on several occasions, that the basis on which they are proceeding with the consultation is a sham. There are 16 jobcentres in the city of Glasgow; the Minister wishes to close eight. He will consult on only three, because he believes that the rules surrounding this matter—the ministerial criteria—allow him to do so. However, he has been told by myself and several of my hon. Friends who represent constituencies that will be affected that the information the Government have used to calculate the distances between opening and remaining jobcentres—an incredibly important part of the rules governing the ministerial criteria—is flawed, because they have relied on Google Maps. Now that is fine for the average holiday traveller—indeed, I even use it myself—but the idea that a Minister of the Crown or a Government Department, no less, would use something as simple as an iPhone app to determine how they deliver services in Scotland's largest city is nothing short of a shambles and a slap in the face to Glaswegians. We are clear that the consultation needs to be on the full package of closures—not on three, but on eight—and to give due consideration to the wider impact on the remaining jobcentres and how they will absorb staff members and all the extra people who will require their services.

The other thing that I wish to highlight, before giving several of my colleagues enough time to talk about their constituencies, is the specific impact that the closures will have on my constituency. The Minister wishes to close two of the three jobcentres that serve my constituency, which is the largest in the city of Glasgow in geographical size and population. Yesterday I spoke with the staff at Castlemilk law centre, around the corner from the Castlemilk jobcentre, which the Minister wishes to close. They told me in no uncertain terms that the closure of Castlemilk jobcentre will inevitably lead to more poverty, more exclusion and more disengagement with the services that are currently available. The law centre does excellent work in ensuring that people are as engaged as possible

with jobcentre services if they have physical or mental disabilities or are presented with other challenges. However, with the removal of the centre from Castlemilk, the staff fully expect their workload to increase and for people to disengage. They and I can foresee, in a way that the Minister perhaps cannot at this stage, the disproportionate impact on some incredibly poorly off people and some people who are incredibly challenged with physical and mental disabilities. I return to his words in his maiden speech: prevention is better than cure.

The Minister is aware, because I wrote to him, of a specific proposal by the management of Castlemilk jobcentre whereby they will agree a lower rental rate for the Department, if this is about saving money. They do not want to see the jobcentre go. Will the Minister address that issue for me? Langside jobcentre is right across the road from a college campus, in the second most densely populated council ward in all of Scotland. I cannot think of a better place for a jobcentre to be.

The Minister has not just managed to unite the Glasgow MPs and Members of the Scottish Parliament—including the two from his own party who represent Glasgow—against these plans. He has united the Church of Scotland, the trade unions, the Catholic Church in Scotland and two very large communities in my constituency against them.

I will sum up now, to allow as many of my colleagues as possible to speak. My ask to the Minister is very simple: halt these proposals right now, talk to us in a meaningful fashion about how to deliver a proper welfare service to the people of Glasgow, and engage with people in Glasgow by visiting the city during the consultation period. I know that he is coming to Scotland sometime next month to meet Ministers in the Scottish Government, so I seek an assurance that he will also use that visit to come to Glasgow and speak to some of those affected in some of the poorest communities in Scotland's largest city.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can run until 5.30 pm. The guideline limits for Front-Bench contributions are five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesman, five minutes for the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister, with three minutes for Mr McDonald to sum up at the end. That means that I need to start calling the Front Benchers no later than 5.7 pm.

I see before me some of the most talented and best looking of the SNP's representation in Parliament. Five of you have indicated to Mr Speaker that you would like to speak. I intend to call you in the order on the list given to me by the Speaker's Office—I suspect that the order is to do with who got their application in first. Because you are all on the same side, I hope that you will not speak for too long and deny the person at the bottom of the list the opportunity to speak. You have about five or six minutes each, and Natalie McGarry is going to lead off to show us all how it is done.

4.38 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): I commend the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing this important debate. It is

indicative of the strength of feeling among Glasgow's MPs that we have almost the entire cohort here, as well as the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). We are all here to speak to the Minister about the issue and to raise it in the House. Our constituents are watching, because they are concerned about the impact on their communities.

Almost two weeks ago, I was shocked, like my hon. Friends, to learn through the press of the UK Government's decision to earmark eight jobcentres across Glasgow for closure. That decision would close half of the city's jobcentres. Two are in my constituency, while a third will close in the neighbouring constituency of Glasgow Central. That impacts on a fourth, Shettleston—the lone jobcentre in the east end to be free from the threat of closure. The plans lack logic and local knowledge and clearly lack input from local stakeholders. For those reasons and a whole host of others, they are inherently short-sighted.

The jobcentre closures in Glasgow are part of Department for Work and Pensions plans to cut its estate by 20%. However, the plan in Glasgow will see a 50% cut in our jobcentres. That prompts the question: why are the Government disproportionately focusing on Glasgow? The Minister pre-empted that point in his letter to Glasgow MPs by saying that Glasgow “is in a unique position within the DWP Jobcentre Plus Estate as it has a greater density of small offices compared to other large Scottish towns and cities.”

I think that he meant that Glasgow is in a unique position, from the view of the DWP, in being convenient for an ideologically driven cost-cutting exercise.

In fact, Glasgow is indeed in a “unique position,” for want of a better phrase: almost half of Glasgow's residents stay in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland; the city has been labelled the “jobless capital of Europe”—not a claim that I am happy with, but it is unfortunately a reality—and the unemployment claimant counts in areas of the city and my constituency are double the UK national average. The so-called “unique” position that Glasgow finds itself in, through no fault of its own, illustrates that the UK Government should be doing more to help, not less.

Another issue that the DWP must consider seriously is the increase in demand for a reduced number of Jobcentre Plus offices. For example, Shettleston jobcentre—just down the road from my office—currently serves 1,025 welfare recipients. If we added in the areas of Parkhead, Easterhouse and Bridgeton, that figure would more than triple to 3,210, making it one of the biggest jobcentres in the UK, in one of the most deprived areas with some of the highest levels of unemployment. That does not make sense. It would add insult to injury if the Government forced people to travel further, at additional cost, to be inconvenienced in longer queues to receive a poorer service.

What assessment have the Government made of the potential delays for service users? What provisions are in place to ensure that the service provided does not suffer? I fear that if those questions are not answered and the concerns are not adequately addressed, we will be back in this Chamber or elsewhere in the House debating the reforms again. We will say that the Government's failure to prepare properly and their failure to take heed of our warnings have led to people suffering unnecessarily, with more sanctions and less support.

[Natalie McGarry]

The hon. Member for Glasgow South made very clear our opposition to the way in which the consultation has taken place. Neither jobcentre in my constituency that is due to close is included in the consultation, but I have grave concerns about those closures, which I spoke to the Minister about in our meeting last week. I raised with him some of the unique challenges in the east end—the hon. Gentleman has also addressed those concerns with him.

Territorialism and the historical gang culture are existing issues in the east end of Glasgow. I believe that the Minister and the DWP flippantly dismissed those serious concerns by pointing out that Shettleston had served as a youth hub jobcentre for four years, ignoring the extensive preparation and engagement work that was done with the police, stakeholders and the jobcentre. The same work has not been done in this situation, when it is more critical given the ages of the claimants, the historical nature of gang violence and the levels of unemployment among the mainly men involved. It is not sufficient to say that in extreme cases, remote sign-ons would work.

Further, I also brought up with the Minister, as did colleagues, the harm and undue impact on communities such as Easterhouse. Indeed, that area caused the former Secretary of State to have an “epiphany”. Easterhouse is isolated on the edge of Glasgow with inadequate public transport and an already failing town centre, and such communities cannot afford the loss of more infrastructure. Unemployment there is high but there are services nearby, including libraries, the citizens advice bureau and other stakeholders. Removing the jobcentre will destroy that joined-up thinking and make it harder for people to access services.

I do not want to take up too much more time, because everybody has the right to speak, but let me be clear: closing half of Glasgow’s jobcentres is a cack-handed plan, and it is being done in the most cavalier way. Ripping jobcentres out of the most deprived areas of the country—ripping them from the heart of communities and away from the people who need them most—is tantamount to social and economic vandalism. Glasgow is not the guinea pig of Westminster or Whitehall, so scrap these punitive plans now, Minister.

4.44 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to be able to speak in this debate, Mr Hollobone, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for bringing us all together.

The letter that the Minister sent to MPs said that the plans were

“right for the city, its customers and our people”,

but I see scant evidence from the people I know in Glasgow that the decision would be any of those three things. The decision seems to have been made entirely in isolation by DWP officials, without speaking to anybody else in the city. They have certainly not spoken to stakeholders in Glasgow, Glasgow City Council, which has condemned it, or the Scottish Government, who are not keen on it at all either. They have not spoken to the most important local partner in Bridgeton, Clyde Gateway,

which has done a huge amount in the area to reduce the overt claimant count from 39% in 2009 to 28% in 2015. They know that that is due to the huge amount of work it has done in the area to improve the life chances of people in that community, but it has not been consulted. Clyde Gateway is a linchpin for the community in terms of economic regeneration, and it needs to be part of the process.

In Bridgeton, around the corner from the jobcentre, there is a citizens advice bureau, which does a huge amount of work to support constituents. The credit union is across the road. The Olympia is right there, with its newly refurbished library, which has computers and classes that help to support local constituents. The Glasgow Women’s Library, which helps vulnerable women with literacy and to improve their self-esteem, is around the corner.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that another vulnerable group that we must take into account is disabled people? It is absolutely disgraceful that people with disability will have much further to travel to find jobs. Has any impact assessment been conducted in that regard? The Government have pledged to halve the disability employment gap; surely these plans undermine that policy.

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree: the plans entirely undermine that ambition. Bridgeton CAB has been collecting evidence for the public consultation—my area is one of the few that will be consulted on—and it is very concerned that people accessing disability advisers will have much further to travel and that it will be much harder for them to get there.

To touch on transport, the Minister has stated that it takes 11 minutes by car to get from Bridgeton to Shettleston, but that entirely ignores the fact that nearly two thirds of households in the most deprived communities of Glasgow do not have access to a car, so they will need to get two buses. The Minister reckoned that it would take people 29 minutes to get there, but the two buses do not arrive in a neat 29-minute slot; one arrives much more regularly than the other. People trying to get there who have children to drop off at nursery or to pick up from school will find it more difficult to fit that into their day.

The consultation that Bridgeton CAB has done this morning highlighted that the time, date and frequency of appointments can be changed. The bus that someone got last week that worked out okay may not be the one they get this week, because the appointment time has changed. That adds a great deal of uncertainty and stress to the situation, because people are faced with the prospect of being sanctioned for being late. That is a huge fear for people. My experience in my constituency office—this is also the experience of the citizens advice bureau and other agencies in Glasgow—is that people are afraid to challenge even the first sanction. They do not want to get into conflict with people from the jobcentre, so they are not challenging the sanction. They think that they will be able to ride it out, but then something else happens at another time and they end up losing their benefits for even longer, which has a huge impact on their family income.

The fact that people have very limited means also means that they will be walking from one jobcentre to the other. It could take nearly 50 minutes to go from

Bridgeton jobcentre to the Shettleston jobcentre. That has another impact. People are not walking from one jobcentre to another. That brings me on to my next point. We need to see in the consultation the catchment areas for the different jobcentres. People might be walking from Calton to Shettleston, or Dalmarnock to Shettleston. They could be going any distance to get there. We do not know what the distance will be. We do not have a full idea of what the actual impact on our communities will be without that information.

That is in huge contrast to the types of consultations that Glasgow City Council puts out for its schools. If it wants to close a school or move it somewhere else, the council puts out a map showing where each school pupil lives, or where the people travelling to the new school and new catchment area live, which makes the impact of changes on individuals very clear. We have not had that information at all.

The consultation process has a particular weakness. The Minister has told us that posters and leaflets will go out in the jobcentres, but the Department holds all the details of every single claimant. It could do a whole lot more to contact every claimant and ask them what the impact on each individual will be. I urge the Minister to do that and to come to Glasgow when he is in Scotland, so that he can come on the bus with us to see what the journey is actually like.

4.50 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I have three brief points: on how the closure will affect my constituents in Maryhill; on the Government's interaction, or lack thereof, with the Scottish Government; and on the bigger questions regarding the Department for Work and Pensions estate and the ongoing review of premises.

The latest figures show that in November 2016 the total number of unemployed claimants in Glasgow North was 1,509. The unemployment rate of 4.1% is the 90th highest of the 650 UK constituencies. As my hon. Friends have said, we do not know exactly how many of those people use the Maryhill jobcentre—at least I have not yet been able to find the numbers—and we do not know exactly where they live, because we have not seen the maps or the catchment areas. Along with my colleague Bob Doris, the MSP for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn, I had the privilege of speaking to a few of them outside the Maryhill jobcentre yesterday morning, and I later met representatives of one-parent families. I, like other Members, encourage the Minister to come to Glasgow to meet some of those people and to hear about it at first hand. The online petition is important, and it is good to see, but nothing beats hearing people's experiences first hand.

We heard from someone who travels from Acre, at the far end of my constituency, to the relocated jobcentre in Springburn. That is a journey of an hour, and two buses, each way—a total of four buses and two hours' travel time—at a cost of £4.30 for an all-day ticket, which represents 46% of the daily allowance from their £72.40 weekly jobseeker's allowance.

Another concern that users raised with us is the impact that the closures will have on the relationship between claimants and their work coaches. A number

of the users to whom we spoke had developed positive and constructive relationships with their advisers, who want to help the claimants get back into work. The claimants were concerned that merged centres would mean a less personal service, the risk of a lack of understanding of individual circumstances and, in turn, increased fear of the risk of sanctions in the event of missing or being late for appointments because of, say, childcare responsibilities. Those are not just theoretical concerns; they are what we heard first hand from service users.

The Government's consultation says:

"The city of Glasgow is split into 4 geographical areas—north, south, east and west."

Well, that is true of every point on the planet, with the possible exception of the north and south poles. It gives the lie to the idea that a great deal of thought has gone into these consultations, particularly the consultations with stakeholders. I have asked the Minister and his officials on several occasions about the discussions with the Scottish Government, so it would be helpful if he could confirm or admit that he has not met his Scottish Government counterpart, Jamie Hepburn. Has there been any kind of discussion, beyond a formal exchange of letters, since the announcement of the closures?

In his letter of 7 December, Mr Hepburn told the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that the lack of communication has been

"wholly contrary to the spirit of the Smith Agreement, and in particular, paragraph 58, which while recognising Jobcentre Plus would remain reserved, calls for our Governments to 'identify ways to further link services through methods such as co-location wherever possible and establish more formal mechanisms to govern the Jobcentre Plus network in Scotland.'"

It is simply not good enough for the UK Government to keep the Scottish Government out of the loop like that. There is supposed to be a respect agenda between the Governments, as is written into the Edinburgh agreement and the Smith commission. Will the Minister now commit to fully engage with the Scottish Government on these closures and on any other proposals for the DWP estate in Scotland?

There are more questions to be asked about the DWP estate at a different time and in a different situation, but it is interesting that, in the consultation, the DWP admits that it does not own any of the buildings it occupies. Who has the upper hand in the negotiations with the contractors? What happens if the company that owns Caxton House in central London, where the Minister has his office, decides that, actually, it would be much nicer as luxury flats? Where would he go then? Perhaps the DWP can disperse some of its staff from central London to the Maryhill jobcentre.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on another point that was made, without prompting, by one of the people who Bob and I met yesterday. Such decision-making processes increase the distance that people in communities like Glasgow North feel from the Westminster Government. In 2014 we were promised a partnership of equals—a UK that Scotland should lead, not leave. As in so many areas of policy, the UK Government need to live up to that rhetoric. If they do not listen when Scotland speaks, they should not be surprised if people decide that perhaps full control of our jobcentres, and of all the other policies that are currently reserved, would be better coming back to Scotland.

4.55 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing this important debate. The last time the Minister and I met, I had lost my voice due to a bad cold. I am not sure whether he will be happy to know that it has returned.

Before I address the impact on my constituency, I express my dismay at how the closures have been handled. After the news broke in the press, it took the Department seven hours to write to us. We were not the only ones left in the dark, though. The Secretary of State for Scotland refused to give me a proper answer when I asked whether he knew of the plans. Even if he had, it would not have made a difference, as demonstrated by his shocking silence on the matter.

The doors of Cambuslang jobcentre are to shut without consultation. I do not think that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions comprehends what that will mean. The jobcentre is my neighbour—it is less than a minute's walk from my office. On a daily basis, my team and I see how busy the jobcentre can be and how people rely on its services. People are required to actively look for work each day, with most of it done on computers. Some constituents have trouble with that and rely on assistance from jobcentre staff.

Although parts of Cambuslang are prosperous, some areas suffer from pockets of real deprivation. One such area is Halfway, which I have been proud to call home for almost two decades. There is a fantastic local community, but there are also deep-seated problems related to deprivation and poverty. It takes about 30 minutes for a fit person to walk from Halfway to Cambuslang jobcentre. Once that jobcentre closes, the round trip to Rutherglen jobcentre would involve walking for two and a half hours. Public transport links are good, but traffic is sometimes an issue. I have serious concerns about an increase in sanctions once Cambuslang jobcentre closes, particularly for those in Halfway who will be travelling the furthest.

There is also a lack of resource in the area. If someone does not have access to a computer, they might need to use one in the library to look for work. Like many other libraries, the one in Halfway has restricted opening hours—it is not open at all today, for example. There is also an effect on local government services, such as Routes to Work South, which is based in Cambuslang and happens to be the landlord of my constituency office. Will the jobcentre closure create extra strain for which South Lanarkshire Council will be expected to foot the bill?

Those are just some of the issues that the Department has failed to take into account, and I regret not having more time to go into greater depth. I urge Ministers to think again, to stop the plans and to engage in meaningful dialogue with the relevant Members so that they, the Ministers, can fully understand the impact of these cuts. Glasgow may be the first, but which city, town or community in Scotland or the UK will be targeted next? We shall see.

4.58 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak here today, although it is not a

pleasure to speak on this subject. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for securing this debate.

In my constituency of Glasgow North West, the proposals include the closure of Anniesland jobcentre, which serves not only Anniesland but Temple, Knightswood, Whiteinch, Scotstoun and Yoker. The latest statistics indicate that more than 16% of those of working age in the constituency are in receipt of out-of-work benefits, which is considerably above the Scottish and UK averages. People currently using Herschell Street jobcentre in Anniesland will be transferred to Benalder Street, Partick—the street has recently become famous for its graffiti about the Foreign Secretary.

The consultation says that it will take people 13 minutes to travel between the old and new locations. That figure, as my hon. Friends have said, is lifted directly from Google Maps. However, that does not reflect the day-to-day reality of the time involved in travelling between those two locations. In fact, no impact assessment has been done, so I decided to carry out one myself.

To see how the proposed changes would affect my constituents, I picked a street at random. By no means was it the most remote or furthest away; it was Banner Drive, a typical street in Knightswood. Thinking of a typical constituent, possibly one with childcare responsibilities who had to drop off a child at school or nursery, I looked for the local nursery, which happened to be Rowena nursery, a 20-minute walk from Banner Drive. Getting from Rowena nursery to the new location in Benalder Street will take 30 minutes by bus if the bus comes instantly. If the bus does not come instantly, that figure rises to 40 and possibly even 45 minutes. If we multiply that by two—the person will need to get back in order to pick up their child in time—it starts becoming extremely tight and problematic for someone with childcare responsibilities.

We have all heard of constituents who have been given unsuitable but inflexible reporting times. If someone is given a time that does not work for their personal circumstances—they may also have been kept waiting—they are faced with two choices. Either they go and sign on to avoid sanctions, in which case they might have to take their child out of nursery or even school for the day, or they take their child to school or nursery, potentially losing money for a long time. Unless jobcentre staff have been instructed to take childcare and caring responsibilities into account, it is a serious problem, and I worry that sanctions will increase as a result.

My colleagues and I first found out about the proposed closures when we read about them in the local paper, but it took a further seven hours before the Minister informed us. He told us in subsequent meetings that it was because he had a duty to let staff know first, and none of us would argue with that, but it has come to light that the Government had plans in place well before any announcement to staff. On 12 February 2016, plans were submitted to Glasgow City Council to convert the Anniesland jobcentre into private flats. Those plans were approved on 6 March, nine full months before either we or staff were informed of the proposals. Can he explain why staff and the local community have been deliberately excluded from the process, which has clearly been in motion for a long time?

It is time for the Minister and his Department to come clean about how wide-reaching and advanced the plans are across the UK. I cannot imagine that Glasgow

is unique in finding out such things at the eleventh hour. The Government have indicated that they do not plan to consult on the majority of the closures, including Anniesland. That is not good enough. For changes so dramatic, there must be a full public consultation, including an impact assessment. When the Minister comes to Glasgow in January, I hope that he can join me on the bus journey that I took, to see what my constituents will have to do.

5.3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a privilege, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to represent the Scottish National party and the city of Glasgow on this issue. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who spoke with passion and dedication on behalf of his constituents.

I will address some general issues first. The decision to close offices will result in the poorest communities not being served by a jobcentre, making it even harder for those seeking employment to get support. Last year, one in three children were living in poverty in Glasgow, which has consistently the highest rate in Scotland, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. At 7.7%, Glasgow's unemployment rate is one of the highest in Scotland, and it suffers high levels of deprivation. By closing offices in its most deprived areas, the Department for Work and Pensions risks reducing access to support for those who need it the most.

The Government cite the fact that claims can be made online, but Citizens Advice Scotland has made it clear that a large proportion of sanctions among its clients arise from problems accessing information technology, often because a claimant does not have the skills or IT access to meet the jobcentre's requirements. The closures represent 50% of Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow, a much larger cut than the anticipated 20% cut to the estate announced in last year's autumn statement. Tens of thousands of people will now have to travel further and incur additional cost to attend their required appointments.

The Government must be mindful that people travelling to jobcentres to seek work and employment support are doing so on very low incomes. Making them travel further can be financially costly and have health implications for the sick and disabled. Those attending jobcentres will have increased transport costs and travel time, particularly those required to register daily or weekly. Someone who must use a taxi for even three or four miles could have to pay up to £14.70, according to the website taxifarefinder.com. Additional costs will be involved for those unable to access jobcentres: the Department for Work and Pensions continues to use a high-tariff phone service that increases costs for customers, known locally as the telephone tax. Many people in Scotland are still unable to access digital services.

I have a number of questions that I hope the Minister will answer. The first involves the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). We have been advised in previous meetings with officials and the Minister that Telereal Trillium owns all the buildings, but is that the case? As has been pointed out, a planning application—I have it here—was submitted to Glasgow City Council for

21 Herschell Street, which is the Anniesland jobcentre office, by Holmes Miller Ltd. Can he confirm that the land ownership certificate on that planning application says that the building is owned by Mactaggart and Mickel Group Ltd? Such examples show that a genuine public consultation must be undertaken, not one that just pays lip service.

While the Minister considers that, let me remind him of the concerns about the jobcentre closures, expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South, among organisations such as Disability Agenda Scotland and One Parent Families Scotland. Their concern involves the lack of an equality impact assessment. To be told that one will be done at the end of the process is, frankly, not good enough; a proper equality impact assessment should be carried out now, so we can see what the effects will be on women, those with disabilities and those whose primary language is not English.

The assessment requires accurate information, not the information in Google Maps, which is inaccurate—for example, it advertises bus services that no longer operate in the city of Glasgow. What advice has the Minister received on the possible outcome of a judicial review for a claimant who goes to a jobcentre earmarked for a closure that has not been publicly consulted on? Will he agree to put all eight closures out for public consultation? The proposal is city-wide and must be consulted on as such.

The full impact of the closures has not been vetted or tested. We believe that the full impact on claimants will be considerable, and it should not be undertaken for commercial reasons. The jobcentre closures are unnecessary and unwanted, and should be halted. The plans are regressive and morally outrageous. It is clear that the Westminster Government intend to make Glasgow a guinea pig, and to use it as a template for further closures across Scotland and the UK. I ask the Minister to give Glasgow an early Christmas present by halting the plans for jobcentre closures in the great city of Glasgow.

5.9 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this debate on the disgraceful planned closure of half of the jobcentres in Glasgow, which has drawn contributions from so many Members who represent the people of Glasgow. I commend them on their focus and on getting to grips with the detail of the geography and with what the plans mean for those who will be affected.

On 7 December this year, the Department for Work and Pensions announced its proposal to close eight of the 16 jobcentres that serve the city of Glasgow by no later than March 2018. The proposal is part of the "People and Locations" office closure programme, which the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), announced in the autumn statement in November 2015. We have no doubt that it is the wrong approach. The reduction in employment support in Glasgow will deepen hardship in many areas of the city.

A recent study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that looked into disconnected communities used Glasgow as an example to demonstrate the increasing scarcity of local employment opportunities, thus reinforcing the

[Margaret Greenwood]

importance of local employment support services with contacts and knowledge of a local area. The study's report noted the challenging combination of people's reluctance to leave more geographically isolated neighbourhoods around the city and the withdrawal of the vital transport services that help them to get around. Those realities make having an accessible and well distributed employment support network all the more important and offer only evidence against the Government's failed austerity approach, as does the higher unemployment rate in Glasgow. According to the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics, the unemployment rate in Glasgow as a whole was 7.1%—1.9 percentage points higher than the UK rate of 5.2%, and 1.6 percentage points higher than the overall rate in Scotland of 5.5%. The latest claimant count shows 5,810 people registered as unemployed at the jobcentres threatened with closure.

The Government's plans are shameful—they are nothing more than the continuation of the Tories' failed austerity agenda. There is no evidence to suggest that they will enhance the support on offer; indeed, they will diminish what is available, while ramping up pressure on employment service staff in other offices and on claimants. The demands on staff have already increased significantly as a result of changes such as weekly signing for new claimants in the first 13 weeks of their claim, changes to single parent conditionality, the roll-out of universal credit and the reduction of more than 6,200 in the overall number of work coaches between 2011-12 and 2015-16—a cut of 35%. The pressures on staff are likely to increase further with the introduction of in-work conditionality under universal credit; the remaining jobcentres in Glasgow will have to deal with twice the volume of claimants. That is a particular concern for the Shettleston jobcentre, which will be taking on the case-load from three of the jobcentres that are closing.

What assessment has the Department made of the impact of the closures on travel times for claimants and associated additional costs? What breakdown can the Department provide us with of the expected increase in case loads for the jobcentres that will remain open? Can the Minister guarantee that the 236 staff who work in the eight jobcentres that are due to close will be offered posts in the remaining jobcentres? What about travel time for claimants? How accessible will the remaining jobcentres be? The DWP does not appear to know, although I understand that, as a number of hon. Members have mentioned, it has been using Google Maps to try to check. The DWP work services director for Scotland apparently told Radio Scotland:

“We're not clear yet how many of our customers will have extra travel costs. That's part of the consultation.”

Three of the jobcentres earmarked for closure fall outside the criterion of 15 to 20 minutes' travel time to the nearest jobcentre, so the DWP has to carry out a public consultation. The consultation document, which was put online only yesterday, gives the shortest journey time by public transport as 30 minutes from Bridgeton to Shettleston and from Maryhill to Springburn, and 45 minutes from Castlemilk to Newlands. A return trip with First Bus in Glasgow costs £3.75, while an all-day ticket costs £4.50. That is a major slice out of the jobseeker's allowance of £73.10 a week for someone over 25, and an even bigger slice from the £57.90 that a

young person aged 18 to 25 receives. First Bus does offer discounted bus fares for claimants, but only after the first 13 weeks for JSA claimants, during which, somewhat ironically, they will be signing on weekly.

When will the Minister publish the impact of these proposals on equality issues? We are particularly concerned about the impact on women, children and disabled people. In 2015 the Government set a target to halve the disability employment gap by 2020; how can that be squared with increasing the distances that disabled people need to travel to get employment support?

It seems that once again the Tories are pushing ahead with their failing austerity agenda, which flies in the face of evidence, thought or reason. Clearly the Government still have no plan. Instead, they are asking the most vulnerable to pay for their economic mismanagement. We stand against these poorly thought out proposals, and we hope that the Government finally see sense and scrap them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): May I ask the Minister to conclude his remarks no later than 5.27 pm?

5.14 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) on securing this debate. I also congratulate his colleagues who contributed: the hon. Members for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier)—I am glad that she has her voice back—and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who not only represents his Glasgow constituency but speaks for the Scottish National party from the Front Bench.

The Department for Work and Pensions delivers critical services and support to tens of thousands of customers across Scotland, England, and Wales every day, and our network of jobcentres is at the very heart of that. In all our constituencies, jobcentre staff are hard at work helping people to access the support they need and move into employment. As society has changed, so have our jobcentres. We have moved a long way from the caricature of jobcentres and the welfare system that was presented 20 years ago in films such as “The Full Monty” and “Trainspotting”.

Reforms such as universal credit are revolutionising the relationship between claimants and work coaches, ensuring that the support we offer is more personalised and better suited to claimants' needs. That includes enabling claimants to access our services in ways that suit them. At the heart of reforms such as universal credit is a digitally focused approach that is more secure, more accessible and more efficient. The claimant count has dropped from almost 1.5 million in 2010 to around 800,000 now.

The background to this set of changes to the DWP jobcentre estate is that after 20 years, the private finance initiative contract that covers many DWP offices is nearing an end: it will expire at the end of March 2018. That provides us with an opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, saving the taxpayer money while ensuring that our clients are able to access the support they need. When considering that question,

our overriding priority has been the future services we will offer our claimants. In every case, we have sought to minimise disruption, moving existing jobcentres into nearby sites and co-locating with other services wherever possible.

The UK labour market is in the strongest position it has been in for years, but we cannot predict the exact path that it will take in the future. I reassure hon. Members that these changes will continue to ensure that we retain sufficient flexibility and spare capacity in the system. Let me be clear: our aim is to reduce floor space, not to reduce the workforce who are so important in supporting claimants back into work. Staff and services in jobcentres that are being closed are being transferred into nearby sites. In answer to the question asked by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), there are no planned job losses among jobcentre staff as a result of these closures.

When a jobcentre closes, the Department will consider what outreach services we can expand and what facilities may be suitable. The Department supports outreach activity at community and partner facilities right across the country, which allows our work coaches and partner organisations to support the shared needs of claimants. By working with a range of partners, including local authorities, we are able to expand the range and offer of our services. In Glasgow we work closely with organisations such as Anniesland College to offer such services, including helping claimants with their job search and offering benefit advice.

Chris Stephens: The Minister mentioned co-location and working with public sector partners. Now that we know that there was some discussion with Glasgow City Council about the Anniesland site, will he tell us whether there were any discussions with the council about the other seven sites earmarked for closure?

Damian Hinds: Through the course of this process, there have been many, many discussions about many, many potential options and permutations of site movements, co-locations and different sorts of arrangements. As we enter the consultation period, there is a further opportunity to talk about outreach facilities; no doubt some of those discussions will include consideration of local authority-run premises and so on. The process involves having lots of discussions about lots of potential ways of organising things.

For those claimants who are unable to attend a jobcentre because of their vulnerability, or because of the complexity of the transaction required with the Department, we have in place robust procedures. DWP Visiting undertakes home visits, or occasionally visits at an alternative agreed address, if appropriate. Travel expenses are refundable in certain circumstances, including when claimants are required to attend a jobcentre more frequently than every two weeks.

Dr Cameron: Will impact assessments be undertaken for people in the affected constituencies who have disabilities and may not be able to travel the further distance to the new jobcentre locations?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady asked about that in an earlier intervention, and I was coming on to address it, but as she has asked again I will answer now. Yes of

course the consultation will consider the entire client population, including the particular needs and requirements of people with disabilities.

In certain circumstances, claimants are able to maintain their claim by post, including if they live more than an hour from the jobcentre, door to door, by public transport—I should say that right now I am speaking not specifically about Glasgow but about the general arrangements—or if they have caring responsibilities for a child and it is not possible for them to make arrangements for short-term childcare. Claimants can also choose to attend an alternative jobcentre to the one allocated to them if the one they have been allocated is not the easiest or least costly to attend.

Our jobcentres in the quarters of Glasgow have built up over time, primarily within large housing estates. If we look at employment trends, we can see that the claimant count in Glasgow has fallen from 24,200 in 2010 to around 13,500 today. The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned unemployment statistics from her constituency; she will know that the claimant count in Glasgow East is down 47% since 2010. As the count has dropped across the city, so has the use of some of the smaller jobcentres. In some cases, the change has been so dramatic that we are now using only 25% of the space we are paying for under the Private Finance Initiative contract that was agreed by the then Government back in 1998.

Our proposals seek to bring the smaller jobcentres together into larger existing sites in the same area, thereby reducing our rents and freeing up funding for our services while still ensuring that our claimants are able to access them. The reduction in sites in Glasgow is in line with our spending review 2015 announcement that we would reduce our overall estate by some 20%. The number of jobcentres proposed for closure reflects the prevalence of smaller jobcentres in Glasgow and the large amount of space we are underusing in the city. It does not reflect a cut in our investment. In fact, between April and September 2016, we recruited 122 additional work coaches in Scotland. That number is set to increase further over the coming months.

When deciding what changes to make, we have carefully considered the impact on our claimants, including travel times, about which several hon. Members asked. We feel that asking someone to attend a new jobcentre which is either less than three miles or less than 20 minutes by public transport away from their existing jobcentre is a reasonable ask. Many claimants already travel much further than that, as do many people in work to get to their place of work. There are three proposed closures in Glasgow that are outside those criteria: in Bridgeton, Castlemilk and Maryhill. In such cases, it is crucial that we fully understand the implications for our claimants before any changes are made, which is why we are holding a public consultation—as we do for all similar cases throughout the country—to seek the views of elected representatives, local authorities and community bodies.

Chris Stephens *rose*—

Damian Hinds: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, but I want to respond to some of the points made

[*Damian Hinds*]

by his colleagues. If it turns out that I have done so comfortably within the time remaining, I will of course give way.

Having heard the specific concerns raised by hon. Members present in the meeting we held a few days ago, I have decided to put the specific consultations we are discussing online. They were uploaded to the gov.uk website yesterday and will now run for an extended period, up until the end of January 2017. As I said, I recently had that opportunity to discuss matters with hon. Members directly, and I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate. A number of points came up in the debate; I am not sure I will get through them all, but I shall try to get through as many as possible.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North spoke of worries that the changes may affect the positive relationships—I was encouraged that he called them that—between claimants and work coaches. I reassure him that one of the important things we are doing is to change the work-coach model to one where they have a mixed case load and can maintain contact with a client, even if the benefit they are on or their circumstances change. Making those relationships richer and longer lasting is absolutely with the grain of what we are trying to do.

The hon. Members for Glasgow East and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West mentioned having heard about this announcement through the press—we had an opportunity to speak about that last Thursday. I am sure that hon. Members understand that we are unable to share details about plans for specific sites until commercial negotiations are complete. To do otherwise would risk our negotiating position with the landlords of the sites we wish to retain. Once we have finalised our proposals, our priority is to speak to staff. As hon. Members appreciate, that can take time, because we also have to get to people who might be absent on the day. In this case, the *Daily Record* published the story at 9:30 in the morning, while many of our staff were still in the meetings, which had only started at 9.15 am. The Department put out a press release in response to the article—it did not initiate making an announcement before telling hon. Members—and later that day I wrote to all the MPs for affected constituencies.

Several hon. Members asked about engagement with the Scottish Government. The Department has been involved in discussions about the related issues, including co-location, with the Scottish Government, local authorities, Skills Development Scotland and others for some time. Because of the commercial sensitivities that I mentioned, it is not possible to talk about specific site proposals in advance of any announcements.

I regret that I am out of time. The rationale for the proposals is clear: we have seen a sharp fall in claimant counts in the city of Glasgow. There are no planned job losses for the jobcentre network in the city, which is important. We will continue to offer the full complement of support to help claimants back to work, and we have a clear set of outreach and support measures to be consulted on.

5.27 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I thank you, Mr Hollobone, and I thank my hon. Friends for their contributions to the debate. I wish to say one or two things to close.

The Minister referred to the fact that the claimant count in Glasgow is down and so is use of floor space. In my constituency, the Government want to close Castlemilk jobcentre, but it is in a town that was once larger than the entire city of Perth. That gives an idea of the geographical and population size of the community that that jobcentre serves. The Minister also wants to close the jobcentre in Langside in my constituency, although it serves the second most densely populated local authority ward anywhere in the country of Scotland. That gives an idea of what is meant by the small, out-of-town jobcentres that the Government are seeking to close.

Only this Government could ask people in a consultation about travelling for more than 20 minutes when they themselves deem that to be unreasonable. The Minister said that the Government think 20 minutes is a reasonable ask, so they do not consult on that, but they do consult when travelling for more than 20 minutes is involved, in spite of the fact that they think that is an unreasonable proposal in the first place. The Minister is all over the shop.

We heard about the situation in Anniesland, where the Department must have known as far back as February last year that not only had discussion taken place, but planning permission had been granted. A formal, legal process had been gone through. Staff were not told, and neither were Members. The Minister picked this fight—we will pick it up after the Christmas recess.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered closure of jobcentres in Glasgow.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I wish everyone a merry Christmas.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 20 December 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Public Bodies 2016

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): Public Bodies are a crucial part of how Government deliver their priorities. Well-governed, effective and efficient public bodies help contribute to building public trust in Government at a time when this has never been more important.

CO is collaborating across Government, engaging with senior leaders and non-executive directors from Departments and arm's-length bodies to promote good governance, disseminate best practice and drive reform. Together, we aim to deliver a more cost-effective, transparent and simplified landscape that is better able to meet the needs of the people it serves.

“Public Bodies 2016” is an annual directory which provides a single source of top-level cost and non-cost data on all executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and non-ministerial departments. It also sets out the Government's strategy for public bodies reform for the remainder of the Parliament.

The Cabinet Office will today publish “Public Bodies 2016” and I am also placing it in the Library of the House.

[HCWS384]

TREASURY

Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): At Budget 2013, the Government announced they would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represent a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 76 decommissioning relief deeds. Oil & Gas UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked more than £5.9 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament every year on progress with the deeds. The report for financial year 2015-16 is provided below.

The number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into no decommissioning relief agreements in 2015-16.

The total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of that year: 72 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the year.

The number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: no payments were made under any decommissioning relief agreements in 2015-16.

The total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: no payments had been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2015-16 financial year.

An estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government have not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury's 2015-16 accounts recognise a provision of an aggregate £327 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of a company defaulting on their decommissioning obligations. The majority of this is expected to be realised over the next five years.

[HCWS393]

Economy

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Today I can inform the House that I will deliver my spring Budget statement on Wednesday 8 March 2017.

[HCWS394]

DEFENCE

Afghanistan: Locally Employed Civilians

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): The UK remains committed to supporting our current and former local staff in Afghanistan. They played a vital part in our efforts towards a more secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan, and our well-established redundancy and intimidation schemes recognise their contribution and the debt of gratitude we owe them.

During the past 12 months, our cross-Government ex-gratia redundancy scheme has continued to see real progress, with around 130 former local staff being relocated to the UK with their immediate families. Since the start of the scheme, we have relocated around 350 former local staff and their families, more than 900 people in total, and there are a number of cases currently going through the relocation process. Around 20 local authorities across the UK have supported the relocation of these families.

There are fewer than 100 local staff still to be made redundant as a result of the drawdown of UK forces. We expect these redundancies to be complete by the end of 2017. It is estimated that around half of these will be given the option to apply for relocation to the UK, with the remainder being eligible for the in-country training or finance options.

There are currently over 100 local staff who are benefiting from our in-country option which offers up to five years of training and financial support. These scholars are undertaking a range of courses such as high school diplomas, and qualifications in engineering and law. Around 20 former staff have gifted the training and support to eligible family members, in many cases to daughters who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to attend higher education.

Under a separate Government initiative, a dedicated in-country team has supported almost 400 local staff who have raised concerns about intimidation as a result of their employment with us. This has ranged from providing bespoke security advice, to providing financial support to over 30 staff to help them relocate to safer areas within Afghanistan. We have also provided interim

payments in a number of cases to allow individuals assessed to be at high risk to move to a safe location whilst a full investigation is completed. The levels of intimidation faced in these cases has not so far been such that we have had to relocate individuals to the UK to ensure their safety, but we keep the security situation in Afghanistan under careful review.

Over the past year, we have seen the number of claims of intimidation reduce from around 15-20 cases to about six cases per month. Notwithstanding this, I am still committed to ensuring that investigations into claims of intimidation are conducted in an effective and professional manner, and the safety of our former staff remains the paramount consideration.

A Danish military legal adviser has provided a non-UK perspective to the decision-making process. In addition, we have put in place a number of measures to provide outside assurance of the intimidation policy: a randomly selected 20% of case decisions are subject to legal review to ensure that the policy is working as it should; and, as announced in November last year, a Committee has been established to provide additional external assurance of the delivery of the policy.

The Locally Engaged Civilians (LEC) Assurance Committee, which I chair, has oversight and scrutiny of the intimidation policy. We have held four meetings this year. Each Committee member has been selected to ensure they can provide expert, independent and impartial advice on the application of the policy. They include advisers drawn from the House of Lords; the Intimidation Investigation Unit in Kabul; and HM Forces. Additionally, I am pleased to confirm the appointment of a former LEC as an adviser to the Committee. He brings with him a first-hand perspective of the issues, and provides invaluable insight into the genuine threat faced by local staff in Afghanistan, as well as the viability of the proposed mitigation measures. These Committee members are supported by representatives from the Government Departments involved in the policy.

The Committee has agreed a robust set of terms of reference that empower us to identify areas where the administration of the policy could be improved. We have so far reviewed the application of the policy in three closed cases, and some areas for improvement are being addressed as a result. These include a review of the guidance provided to those involved in the decision-making process, to clarify inconsistent or ambiguous language.

We believe our schemes compare well with those provided by other nations that have operated in Afghanistan. On termination of employment, other nations generally offer either a financial lump sum or a relocation package. However, unlike our ex-gratia redundancy scheme, most nations also require staff to prove they are at risk in order to relocate. The UK is the only nation with a permanent team of trained investigation officers in country to investigate claims of intimidation.

I am confident that the UK's arrangements meet our commitment to protecting our locally employed staff when their safety is at threat as a result of their work for us.

[HCWS388]

Future Nuclear Deterrent

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): On 18 May 2011 the then Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), made an oral statement to the House, *Official Report*, column 351, announcing the approval of the initial gate investment stage for the procurement of the successor submarines to the Vanguard class ballistic missile submarines. He also placed in the Library of the House a report, "The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: The Submarine Initial Gate Parliamentary Report".

As confirmed in the 2015 strategic defence and security review, and in accordance with the motion approved by this House on 18 July 2016, this Government are committed to publishing an annual report on the programme. I am today publishing the fifth report, "The United Kingdom's Future Nuclear Deterrent: 2016 Update to Parliament". A copy has been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS383]

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that I have sent to Lt Gen (Retd) Brims, the Chair of the Future Reserves 2020 External Scrutiny Team to update him on the programme, and particularly on the recommendations that his team's report made. I am grateful for their work.

[HCWS385]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Avian Influenza

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): The chief veterinary officer has confirmed a case of avian flu in a turkey farm in East Lindsey, Lincolnshire.

Test results have confirmed the presence of a high pathogenicity H5N8 strain of the disease. This is the strain currently circulating in Europe. As a result, the Animal and Plant Health Agency has raised the risk of an incursion into wild birds in the UK from medium to high and into poultry from low but heightened to low to medium, dependent on geographic location.

While this disease affects birds severely, the advice from Public Health England is that the risk to public health from this strain of bird flu is very low with no human cases ever reported, and the Food Standards Agency has said there is no food safety risk for consumers.

We have taken robust action, imposing a 3 km protection zone and 10 km surveillance zone last Friday to limit the risk of disease spreading. The birds on the farm have either died or were humanely culled. All carcasses have been removed and rendered under strict biosecurity standards. Cleansing and disinfection of the site has commenced.

We have tried and tested procedures for dealing with such animal disease outbreaks and a strong track record of controlling and eliminating previous outbreaks of avian flu in the UK. We are working closely with operational partners, devolved Administration colleagues and the industry to deal effectively with this outbreak.

My Department continues to carefully monitor the situation in the UK and Europe. Following my statement of 7 December where I announced the mandatory housing of poultry and other kept birds, and as a result of the increased risk to UK poultry, I have today announced a change to the licensing of bird gatherings including sales and auctions. This prevents until further notice, gatherings of domestic poultry, and places enhanced biosecurity requirements on gatherings of other species including aviary birds, pigeons and raptors. This follows veterinary advice on the risk of disease spread through such gatherings.

I continue to urge bird keepers to be vigilant for any signs of disease, ensure they are maintaining good biosecurity on their premises, seek prompt advice from their vet and report suspect disease to their nearest APHA office.

[HCWS386]

EDUCATION

Schools Revenue Funding Settlement 2017-18

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb):

Today I am announcing details of schools revenue funding for 2017-18. This announcement includes the dedicated schools grant (DSG), the education services grant (ESG) transitional grant and the pupil premium.

The distribution of the DSG to local authorities will continue to be set out in three spending blocks for each authority: a schools block, a high needs block and an early years block.

The schools block has been allocated on the basis of the schools block units of funding announced in the Secretary of State's statement to the House on 21 July 2016. To protect schools from significant budget reductions, we will continue with a minimum funding guarantee that ensures no school loses more than 1.5% per pupil in its 2017-18 budget—excluding sixth-form funding and ESG—compared to 2016-17, and before the pupil premium is added.

We have been able to provide an additional £130 million for the DSG high needs block. The high needs block supports provision for pupils and students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), up to the age of 25, and alternative provision for pupils who cannot receive their education in schools.

The DSG early years block comprises funding for the 15 hours' entitlement for three and four-year-olds: the additional 15 hours for three and four-year-old children of eligible working parents from September 2017; participation funding for two-year-olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds; the early years pupil premium; and the disability access fund. The provisional allocations for this block were announced in the Secretary of State's statement of 1 December 2016.

The ESG transitional grant for local authorities will be set at a financial year rate of £66 per pupil and paid for the period April to August 2017. We will also continue to provide a protection to limit the reduction of academies' budgets as a result of the ending of ESG from September 2017.

The pupil premium per pupil amounts for 2017-18 will be protected at the current rates, which are:

<i>Pupils</i>	<i>Per pupil rate</i>
Disadvantaged pupils: primary	£1,320
Disadvantaged pupils: secondary	£935
Pupil premium plus: looked after children (LAC) ¹ and those adopted from care or who leave care under a special guardianship order or child arrangements order (formally known as a residence order).	£1,900
Service children	£300

¹A looked after child is defined in the Children Act 1989 as one who is in the care of, or provided with accommodation by, an English or Welsh local authority.

Pupil premium allocations for financial year 2017-18 will be published in June 2017 following the receipt of pupil number data from the spring 2017 schools and alternative provision censuses.

Details of these arrangements have been published on gov.uk.

[HCWS389]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 12 December 2016

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan

Duncan): I attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 12 December. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:

<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/fac/2016/12/12/>

EU-Africa relations

The Council discussed EU-Africa relations in preparation for the EU-Africa summit in November 2017. Ministers discussed priorities in the EU's relations with Africa, as well as how those relations should evolve in the light of emerging economic, security, demographic and migration challenges. I encouraged the EU to fulfil its security commitments, whilst supporting capacity building and African ownership of African challenges in the longer term.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Council adopted restrictive measures against seven DRC officials, and had a short discussion on the situation in the country. Ms Mogherini set out the clear aim of the measures: to deter a violent response to likely protests on 19 December when President Kabila's mandate would come to an end.

Syria

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the situation in Syria in view of the latest developments, in particular in Aleppo. I stressed the severity of the situation in Aleppo, underlining the role of Russia and Iran as well as the Syrian regime, and the importance of holding to account those responsible for the appalling situation.

Migration

Ministers discussed migration issues ahead of the European Council on 15 December. The Council took stock of the progress made on the migration partnership framework approach; and on the country-specific compacts with the five priority countries (Mali, Niger, Senegal, Nigeria and Ethiopia).

Any Other Business (AOB)

France raised the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, noting the importance of swift implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2270 and encouraging consideration of further EU autonomous measures.

In the margins of the Council, Ms Mogherini, EU Foreign Ministers and the Cuban Foreign Minister, Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla, signed the EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Co-operation Agreement. After the Council meeting, Ministers had an informal discussion with President Santos of Colombia. The EU and participating member states then signed the constitutive agreement of the EU Trust Fund for Colombia.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

Council conclusions on South Sudan.

Council conclusions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

A protocol to the framework agreement on comprehensive partnership and co-operation between the EU and Vietnam, to take account of the accession of Croatia.

The EU position for the 3rd meeting of the EU-Ukraine Association Council in Brussels on 19 December 2016.

Prolonging the mandate of the EU monitoring mission in Georgia for a further period of two years (until 14 December 2018) and allocating to the mission a budget of €18 million for the period 15 December 2016 to 14 December 2017.

Prolonging the mandate of the two common security and defence policy missions in Somalia, the civilian capacity-building mission (EUCAP Nestor) and the military training mission (EUTM), until 31 December 2018. The Council renamed EUCAP Nestor capacity-building mission "EUCAP Somalia".

Renewing for two years the declaration on the common funding of the deployment of EU battlegroups, until December 2018.

[HCWS391]

Travel Advice

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Travel advice is one of the most important public services which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) delivers. Its purpose is to give British nationals the best possible understanding of the context, threats and hazards they face overseas, in order for them to make informed decisions about travel. It draws on a range of sources, including intelligence assessments, open source and media reporting, the local knowledge of our overseas posts and their diplomatic reporting. Travel advice is, however, precisely that. A decision on whether to travel to a specific country or area has to be for the individual concerned.

The FCO provides travel advice notices for 225 countries and territories worldwide. There were more than 40 million individual hits on the online travel advice service in 2015. The FCO in London and all posts throughout our diplomatic network overseas actively monitor safety and security issues on a 24-hour basis and we made 2,200 updates to our travel advice in 2015. Where possible, we publish country maps to help communicate this advice. In some cases we will advise against travel or all but essential travel to a country or region as a result of terrorism, security concerns or other risks. We know that when we advise against travel it can have an impact on individuals and business, but the safety of British nationals is our overriding concern.

The threat from terrorism is evolving. Despite the pressure of military action in Syria and Iraq and concerted and sustained counter-terrorism action globally, the main terrorist groups—Daesh, Al Qaeda and groups associated with them—continue to pose a threat to UK interests globally, including British travellers. Since 2012, there have been more than 25 major terrorist attacks resulting in the deaths of at least 300 tourists around the world, including 31 British nationals. In particular, we have seen the growth of so called "lone wolf" attacks, which are difficult to predict and disrupt and could take place in almost any country.

In response to the changing nature of the threat the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), commissioned a review to assess whether changes in how we present travel advice might help us reflect the evolving threat from terrorism, while providing the clearest possible advice to the public. This included a public consultation to help consider potential improvements to the travel advice service. One thousand and nine people responded to the online consultation in March and April 2016. The consultation team met stakeholders, including the travel and insurance industries; encouraged written feedback; and consulted other Government Departments, including the Department for International Development and UK Trade & Investment, as well as several other countries whose travel advice systems are comparable with our own. The aim of the public consultation was to make sure British nationals continued to have information that was readily accessible and easy to understand so they could make informed decisions whenever and wherever they travel. The consultation sought to find out how people used the travel advice service; whether they found it useful; and whether the way information was presented could be improved to make it more accessible. It also looked at whether changes could be made to provide a greater level of detail and better understanding of the level of risk travellers face in any given country.

Taking all of this in to account, I have decided to make a number of improvements to the travel advice service. I want British nationals to be able to travel abroad for business, study or pleasure, but with a clear personal understanding of the risks entailed in doing so.

While the principles of travel advice set out in the 2004 review (Review of Foreign and Commonwealth Office travel advice, Cm 6158) in relation to the threat from terrorism remain unchanged, we shall now describe the threat in greater narrative detail, moving away from simple descriptors (e.g. "there is a high threat from

terrorism”). This is to provide a greater level of information to the public, helping them to understand better the levels of risk in their travel plans. The new expanded text will describe the threat in terms of its predictability (whether attacks are likely to happen), extent (targets and locations of previous attacks and methodologies employed), context (which groups are responsible, and the history of attacks) and, where appropriate, mitigation (where host nations are actively countering the threat, including through publicly avowed counter terrorism measures and arrests). During the consultation, the public and travel industry said they would welcome this approach. We will also make design improvements to travel advice pages so that users can more easily find the information relevant to them. These changes will be introduced over the coming months, building on work that officials have already begun to increase the amount of detailed information about terrorism in our advice.

I am confident that these changes will ensure our travel advice continues to provide effective information to help British travellers make informed decisions about their personal travel plans and security overseas. Our travel advice will continue to reflect the best judgements we can make on the information available to us at the time.

[HCWS390]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Policing and Crime Bill

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I will shortly be placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order No. 83 O of the Standing Orders of the House of Commons relating to public business in respect of the Lords amendments to the Policing and Crime Bill.

[HCWS387]

PRIME MINISTER

Parliamentary Delegations

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) and the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) have been appointed as full members of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in place of the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (David Jones) and the hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). The hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) has also been appointed as an alternate member in place of the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith).

The right hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Cheryl Gillan) has been appointed as a representative member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in place of the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb). The hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray)

has been appointed as a substitute member of the delegation in place of the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Virendra Sharma), who has been appointed as a representative member in place of the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). The right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) has been appointed as a representative member of the delegation in place of the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) have been appointed as substitute members of the delegation in place of the hon. Member for Newport East (Paul Flynn) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Bar (Khalid Mahmood). Lord Wilson of Tillyhorn has also been appointed as a substitute member of the delegation in place of Lord Wright of Richmond.

[HCWS382]

TRANSPORT

Road Freight

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I chaired a roundtable on 2 November about roadside facilities and parking for lorry drivers. This followed an Adjournment debate, secured by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), on 7 September about fly-parking in Kent.

Key issues identified at the roundtable, which could be considered in the Kent context and which will have wider applicability and interest, are:

- the join up between national and local planning frameworks;
- provision of lorry parking facilities
- minimum standards at such parking facilities;
- payment systems for facilities; and
- when facilities are supplied ensuring there is enforcement against lorries stopping in the wrong place (including achieving that without a proliferation of signs and lines).

In due course I will set out actions to tackle each and all of these.

Some of these issues as they relate to Kent, in particular, were discussed at a meeting of the Kent Strategic Freight Group on 2 December, chaired by the County Council. I am urgently considering how they can be progressed, including how enforcement against fly-parking can be made to work better.

A contract was awarded last week for an extensive national survey of lorry parking to be completed by the spring will add to the evidence about what should be done where.

Work is also under way to encourage private sector distribution centres to allow drivers to have access to decent facilities when supplying them.

I chaired another roundtable on 17 November about recruitment into the logistics sector. Better lorry parking and facilities can contribute to improving the recruitment and retention of drivers. However it is one of many issues where Government working with the private sector can contribute.

Already waiting times for lorry driving tests have been reduced substantially at a time of increasing demand for tests, through the recruitment of more examiners. Processes for licence renewals are being streamlined. Apprenticeships for lorry driving and other jobs in the road haulage and logistics industry start early next year through the new trailblazers scheme.

I look forward to working with Members of Parliament (including the All Party Parliamentary Group on Freight), local authorities, the haulage industry, the trade unions and all other interested stakeholders to develop our plans.

[HCWS392]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 20 December 2016

EDUCATION

Technical and Further Education Bill

The following is an extract from a speech by the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), on Second Reading of the Technical and Further Education Bill on 14 November 2016.

Robert Halfon: 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.—[*Official Report, 14 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 79.*]

Letter of correction from Robert Halfon.

An error has been identified in my speech.

It should read:

Robert Halfon: A lot has been said about FE funding, but by 2020 more will be spent on **adult** FE and skills participation than at any time in **England'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.

Education provision: 16 to 19-Year-Olds

The following are extracts from Questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 14 November 2016:

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. [*Official Report, 14 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 16.*]

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.

[*Official Report, 14 November 2016, Vol. 617, c. 17.*]

Letter of correction from Robert Halfon.

Errors have been identified in the responses I gave to the hon. Members for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and for Wallasey (Ms Eagle).

The correct responses should have been:

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 number of those not in education, employment or training.** This shows that our investment in further education is working.

Robert Halfon: As I said, by 2020 we will be giving more funding to **adult** further education than at any time in **England'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 number of NEETs on record.** The hon. Lady should be celebrating that.

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