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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 2 February 2017

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Crown Prosecution Service: Victim and Witness Support

1. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support victims and witnesses giving evidence in court. [908564]

4. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Crown Prosecution Service is taking to support victims and witnesses giving evidence in court. [908569]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): Prosecutors can apply for special measures to allow victims and witnesses to give evidence in court unseen by the defendant. The Government are making available the opportunity for vulnerable witnesses to give pre-recorded evidence without going into a courtroom at all. In addition, recent CPS guidance, now implemented nationwide, makes it clear what prosecutors can do to explain what is likely to happen at court, so that victims and witnesses can better understand the trial process and give the best evidence they can.

Tim Loughton: I am encouraged by the Attorney General's words, but half of all cases going through the courts at the moment are connected with sexual abuse, and with police investigating no fewer than 70,000 claims of historic child sex abuse this year alone, that figure is likely to remain high. Given the traumatising impact on historic survivors and children especially of reliving their experiences in the witness box, what additional measures are being taken to make the process less intimidating and ensure that appropriate counselling services are readily available?

The Attorney General: I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that the system does all it can to reduce the effect, particularly on vulnerable witnesses, of giving evidence in these difficult cases. That is why I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor has decided to extend what I believe was a successful pilot of pre-recorded cross-examination. It means that vulnerable witnesses, particularly children, can give their

evidence outside a courtroom environment and have it all done and dusted before the trial begins, which also means that they are not affected by any delays that the trial may then be subject to. That is hugely important, as is the opportunity for prosecutors to speak to witnesses and explain what is going on, and I am pleased to say that that has resulted in much improved satisfaction rates among witnesses for the support they get from the CPS.

Nigel Huddleston: Will the Attorney General join me in thanking the NSPCC and Esther Rantzen for their campaigning work to reduce the intimidating environment in courts for children, and will he confirm how many children give evidence in court?

The Attorney General: I will have to write to my hon. Friend with the figure he asks for, but I entirely agree with his comments about the NSPCC. It is worth noting that a variety of organisations assist tremendously in the work of the criminal justice system in making sure that all witnesses can give their best evidence. That is in the interests of the whole system, and it is particularly important when we are dealing with children.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have only attended one trial—a murder trial—where, in the summing up, the family of the young lady who had been brutally murdered had to listen to an absolutely appalling character assassination. It was totally fraudulent, but they had to sit there and listen to that. Has anything been done to stop that horrible practice?

The Attorney General: I understand entirely the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. He will recognise that in a criminal trial it is necessary that the defence case is put. That is what we need to see to make sure that the process is fair, but we are doing what we can to ensure that the experience of those who are in court not of their own volition—because they are the victim of an offence or a witness to it—is as easy as it can be, although we accept that it will never be wholly easy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline what steps have been taken to address the 2015 report by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate, which revealed that some vulnerable people are being let down by the inconsistency of approach to criminal case file management, and will he say how successful those steps have been?

The Attorney General: I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman makes. This was a troubling report in some ways. One of the most troubling aspects is the way in which victims of crime in particular are communicated with by the CPS—the language used and the sensitivity shown. My hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General and I have been particularly keen to ensure that the CPS takes those lessons on board and acts on them, and I am confident that it is doing so.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): What steps has the CPS taken to support victims and witnesses with mental health issues?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There are many people within the system, both defendants and witnesses, who have mental health difficulties and it is important that the system is sensitive to that. What we need to do is understand better what the particular needs of each witness may be and then respond to them as best we can. The way to do that is to have the maximum number of tools available and ways in which evidence can be given, whether that is pre-recorded cross-examination, as I have mentioned, or the assistance of others in court who can help those who give evidence.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Attorney General ensure that no witness or defendant can give evidence to a court while wearing a full-face balaclava or the burqa?

The Attorney General: What is important is that the court and in particular the jury can assess the evidence that a witness gives, so it is important that that witness is able to give evidence in a clear way, so that a jury can assess whether they think that witness is telling the truth or not. Anything that gets in the way of that, I am sure the court will wish to consider very carefully.

Unduly Lenient Sentences

2. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): When he plans to extend the scope of the unduly lenient sentence scheme. [908565]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): We committed ourselves in our manifesto to extending the scope of the scheme. As a first step, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced that we would extend it to sentences in the Crown court for terrorism offences, and we are working with her to implement that.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend for confirming that our manifesto commitment is still on track, but I should also be grateful if he was a bit more specific about the dates on which we might be able to make some headway, because these reforms are long overdue.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to press the Government for a commitment to action. Work is being done with the Ministry of Justice, and both the Attorney General and I are committed to ironing out the obvious inconsistencies in the system, which cause understandable frustration among victims and their families.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Over the last 12 months, how often has my hon. and learned Friend been asked to review sentences handed down by the courts?

The Solicitor General: The number of sentences continues to increase. In 2015 we considered 713 requests, but of 80,000 passed in England and Wales in that year, only just over 100 were varied by the scheme. I think that that represents a vote of confidence in our judges and magistrates.

Hate Crime: Non-UK EU Citizens

3. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What assessment he has made of potential trends in the level of prosecutions for hate crime towards non-UK EU citizens once article 50 is triggered. [908567]

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Government are working closely with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and community organisations to monitor any changes in hate crime levels, and we will continue to do so after the triggering of article 50. However, it is not possible to predict prosecution trends, and the data on the nationalities of victims are not disaggregated.

Gerald Jones: What steps is the CPS taking to improve the conviction rate for hate crimes against disabled people? Does he support the call by the shadow Solicitor General, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for parity in the treatment of all protected characteristics in the aggregated offences regime?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Gentleman will be glad to know that rates of disability hate crime prosecution continue to rise. The rise last year was 41.3%, the conviction rate for hate crime being just over 83%. The total number of hate crimes prosecuted last year was 15,442, which is the highest number to date. I do, of course, take very seriously the helpful and sensible submissions made by the shadow Solicitor General.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): What steps is the Department taking to prevent the spread of hate crime by the media?

The Solicitor General: As we know, in an age of social media it has become all too easy for perpetrators to spread hate and intimidation. The Crown Prosecution Service takes very seriously offences which cross the line to constitute grossly offensive communications, and prosecutions take place regularly. We will continue to work with social media to ensure that the detection of such crimes can be improved.

Legal Costs: Article 50

5. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What the cost to the public purse was of fees related to legal proceedings on the triggering of article 50. [908570]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The case that concluded in the Supreme Court last week dealt with an important constitutional issue. It was absolutely right that the Government both defended their position and appealed against the first-instance judgment in England and Wales to the Supreme Court, where the case was heard alongside connected litigation from the Northern Ireland courts. The figures for the total costs of those cases will be published in due course, but I can confirm that the Advocate General for Scotland and I, who appeared on behalf of the Government, received no additional fee for our work on the case.

Justin Madders: I thank the Attorney General for his response, although I am not sure that we have got any closer to learning the figure. Given that every serious legal commentator in the land said that the Government's

appeal was doomed to fail, will he please explain to the House why it was so necessary to waste taxpayers' money on funding the appeal?

The Attorney General: I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's premise. Let me point out a number of things to him. First, I think that the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom is the right place in which to decide a case of such significance. Secondly, if the Government's arguments had been as hopeless as the hon. Gentleman suggests, three Supreme Court justices would not have agreed with them. Thirdly, as I have already pointed out, the case was in the Supreme Court partly because judgments in Northern Ireland cases were appealed against to the Supreme Court, not by the Government but by the other parties. The Government responded to those cases, and, incidentally, were successful. Fourthly, the Supreme Court was dealing with arguments presented by the devolved Governments, which had to be dealt with by the Supreme Court. In that instance, the Government were again entirely successful.

Lastly, let me say this to the hon. Gentleman. I think it is a good thing that, in a system governed by the rule of law, a Government are prepared to go to court to argue their case, to make use of appeal mechanisms like any other litigant, and then to abide by the final outcome. That is what has happened, and I think it is a good example of the way in which a rule-of-law system should work.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that when members of the public bring cases on a matter of this importance against the Government in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales and there are conflicting decisions, our Government have no alternative whatsoever but to pursue this matter to the Supreme Court?

The Attorney General: I do agree. It is important that the Supreme Court resolved this matter and gave us clarity on what should now happen, and it is now for Parliament to decide what to do next—and I am pleased to see that last night Parliament began to answer the question it had been posed.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): When the costs are eventually published, will the Minister ensure that the price that was exacted was for liberty and freedom from the bureaucrats in Brussels, against which it is very difficult to attach any cost?

The Attorney General: I take the hon. Gentleman's point. This will be an expensive case, but the answer the British people gave should be respected and acted upon, and that, as I say, is now a matter for Parliament—it is no longer a legal matter—and I hope very much that Parliament will answer it clearly.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Attorney General maybe needs to think again about some of the dubious shorthand that he uses in respect of the devolved cases. The Supreme Court really only made clear judgments in relation to two of the five matters that were referred in relation to Northern Ireland, and on one of them some of its observations are politically telling in ways that the Government are yet to respect.

The Attorney General: The other three issues were not determined because they did not need to be, as other aspects of the case were decided as they were. But I am afraid the position is very clear: in relation to the arguments being made, particularly by the devolved Administrations, that there should be the capacity for those Administrations to veto the process of leaving the European Union, the court simply did not agree and rejected those arguments unanimously.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: On the subject of the cost to the public purse, I hope, rather than a rerun of all the arguments, which would be very tedious.

Richard Arkless: I think the whole House would like to know that we got value for money in that judgment, and of course there are lots of rights and obligations in many Acts of Parliament and it is the courts' job to interpret them. Can the Attorney General explain why the Supreme Court held that the Sewel provisions in an Act of Parliament were not a matter for the courts?

The Attorney General: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will read the judgment carefully: it says that whereas the Sewel convention might be important politically, it is not a matter for the courts to enforce. That was perfectly properly for the Supreme Court to say. What respect the Sewel convention is given in political terms is of course not a matter for the court. The judgment made that clear.

Mr Speaker: The operative words are “public purse” and “fees”. Can we stick to that? It would be helpful.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): If the Government were genuinely motivated to spend this money by wanting a definitive answer from the courts on a constitutional question, why did they not thank the judges in the divisional court in November for such a clear answer, instead of being in a position where the Justice Secretary had to be pressured into giving a lukewarm defence of them?

The Attorney General: No, the Government have always been clear that, at every level, the courts are entitled to consider the cases brought to them and to reach whatever judgment they think appropriate in the light of the arguments they have heard. That was true in relation to the High Court and it is true in relation to the Supreme Court, too. But the hon. Gentleman knows, as an eminent lawyer himself, that the appropriate thing to do if we disagree with the court of first instance is to appeal the judgment. That is exactly what the Government did, doing exactly what any other litigator would do—and, incidentally, exactly what some litigators in this case did in Northern Ireland.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Is it not absolutely remarkable that we have significant numbers of litigants in person in our courts because of the Government's legal aid cuts, yet when the Government wanted a lawyer, the money was found? Is it not the case in terms of access to justice that there is one rule for the Government and another rule for everybody else?

The Attorney General: I am tempted to point out that, as I said earlier, when the Government wanted a lawyer, two out of the three they used in the Supreme Court did not cost the taxpayer anything. I also point out to the hon. Gentleman that when cases like this one are brought—and I make no criticism of those who brought these cases so that these issues could be resolved—it is important that they are resolved through proper and full legal argument. That was done through the High Court and then the Supreme Court. That is the right way to get to the answer the Supreme Court has now given, and, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I have made clear very many times that the Government will honour and respect the judgment of the Supreme Court.

War Crime Investigations: Syria and Iraq

6. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): How the Government collect evidence for use in their investigations into alleged war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide in Syria and Iraq. [908574]

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): UK nationals can be prosecuted in our domestic courts for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes that have taken place abroad. My hon. Friend will know that the UK Government are also working with other Governments to explore international legal mechanisms whereby Daesh can be held to account for its crimes.

Fiona Bruce: It appears that no steps are currently being taken by the International Criminal Court to pursue prosecutions for crimes against humanity or genocide in Syria and Iraq, despite a substantial vote in this House advocating such action. Is the UK taking any steps to use its own legal competences to prosecute UK nationals who might be committing such crimes in those countries?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend will know that the UK Government sought to pursue a route whereby the International Criminal Court would consider offences of this type committed in Iraq and Syria, but that our approach was vetoed by the Russians and the Chinese, so there has been no lack of effort on the part of the United Kingdom. In relation to domestic law, we will certainly pursue those offences as and where we can. She will also recognise that the primary practical difficulty is that of obtaining the necessary evidence, and we are working at international level to determine how evidence can be properly collected and retained in theatre so that it can be used for prosecutions when the time comes.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked— **Statutory Sex and Relationships Education**

1. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): If the Government will introduce statutory sex and relationships education to tackle homophobic bullying and sexual harassment in schools. [908513]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): The Government want to ensure that all schools are safe, inclusive environments where pupils can fulfil their

potential, and we are actively considering how to improve the delivery of sex and relationships education, including updating the existing guidance, which was originally drafted in 2000.

Helen Hayes: New clause 1 of the Children and Social Work Bill would make sex and relationships education compulsory under the safeguarding duties of schools. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will be supporting that new clause on Report so that all our young people can be equipped and empowered to keep themselves healthy and safe?

Justine Greening: I very much appreciate the support around the House for the fact that it is time to look at how we can do better in regard to sex and relationships education, and we are actively looking at how best to improve the quality of delivery and accessibility so that children can be supported. As the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson), has set out, the Government are committed to updating Parliament further during the passage of the Bill.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Police information released today by Barnardo's shows a 73% increase in reports of children sexually abusing other children. We know that children are not being effectively taught in our schools about mutual respect, self-respect and consent. Will the Minister consider particular amendments to the Children and Social Work Bill that would address those issues? We are running out of time and letting children down.

Justine Greening: I have said that we will provide an update during the next stage of the Bill, but my right hon. Friend is right to suggest that a lot of time has elapsed since the guidance was drafted in 2000, and the world is now a very different place. It is time to look at how we can ensure that children have the right access to what I might rename relationships and sex education, and to ensure that it is high quality education. That is why it is right to ensure that the next steps we take are the right ones, and that they can move this forward for the long term. We need to ensure that the young people in our education system today leave school with not only the relationships education but the broader life skills they need to lead successful lives.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Lady take on board the fact that successive Select Committees have looked at this matter, and that it is vital not only that every school offers this kind of education but that, critically, we train people to have the right skills to deliver it?

Justine Greening: I have said that we need to make progress on this, and I have reflected on the fact that there have now been 16 years in which we really have not done so. When Ofsted produced its recent report on this in 2013, it identified issues around the quality of teaching. As the hon. Gentleman says, this is not just about what our young people should be taught in schools and their access to that teaching; it is also about the quality of the teaching. This is a broader question than simply one of updating the legal perspective of where SRE is taught.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): There is a worrying trend among people on the left of both sides of the House that things that they do not like should be banned and that things that they like must be made compulsory. What is wrong with the principle of freedom? What is wrong with parents having a role in deciding what is appropriate for their children to be taught?

Justine Greening: I strongly agree that parents' involvement in ensuring that what children are taught at school is acceptable to them and appropriate is vital. However, the most important voices that now need to be listened to are those of young people and children, who say that they do not feel that they are getting the necessary level of education in this area and want a more up-to-date approach to enable them to deal with the world in which they are growing up.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): More than half of lesbian, gay and bi pupils have experienced direct bullying, and LGBT people are twice as likely as heterosexuals to have suicidal thoughts or to have attempted suicide. The Minister will be aware that people are committing terrible homophobic and hate crimes online—crimes for which they would be held accountable offline. The “#no2LGBTHate” campaign is calling on Twitter to take action against users who spread homophobia on the site. Does the Minister support the campaign? What is she doing to tackle homophobic hate?

Justine Greening: It is important that we support campaigns that are trying to play a role in reducing LGBT bullying. In September last year, we set out a £2.8 million programme to invest in charities that are working to prevent and address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools in England. The Government have launched their own “Disrespect NoBody” campaign to help young people recognise and challenge abuse within teen relationships. It is important to work in schools to change attitudes due to, as the hon. Lady sets out, the level of discrimination and abuse that many young people say they have received.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I am pleased that the Government are considering the views of charities, campaigners and Members of this House in introducing statutory relationship education. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on plans to update the statutory guidance, which was last updated when I was the ripe age of 13?

Justine Greening: I did not realise that my hon. Friend was quite that young. He sets out the serious point that the world has changed immeasurably since 2000. Children now learn about relationships in different ways, but the challenge is that they are learning about them in ways that give them a skewed, inaccurate view of what relationships are about. It is important to look at how we can ensure that the guidance genuinely works and reflects the world as it is today, therefore giving ourselves and our children a better chance to get the education that they need.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman's beard is deceptive.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend have a word with our excellent Secretary of State for Education and identify the best schools in the

country that tackle homophobic bullying and sexual harassment together with the parents of their pupils, and roll out that best practice across the country?

Mr Speaker: The Minister is being invited to talk to herself.

Justine Greening: I will not comment on that, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that many schools are doing that—I visited a school in Birmingham that is doing great work in this area. Excellent work is under way, but it is now time to look at how we can learn from what works and see that percolate through our school system so that all schools can do a better job for all children on teaching SRE.

Gender Pay Gap

2. **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle the gender pay gap for women in their 30s and 40s. [908515]

8. **Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to tackle the gender pay gap for women in their 30s and 40s. [908521]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): The gender pay gap is now the lowest on record, at 18.1%, but that is still too high and eliminating it altogether is one of the key targets of this Government. That is why we have extended the right to request flexible working and introduced shared parental leave, and it is why, from September, we are rolling out 30 hours of childcare to the working parents of all three and four-year-olds.

Joan Ryan: I thank the Minister for her reply. Does she agree with the overwhelming evidence suggesting that the £1,200 employment tribunal fees introduced by her Government are creating a significant barrier to women being able to hold their employer to account for gender pay disparities in the workplace? That is all women, not just low-paid women.

Caroline Dinenage: The Government take that very seriously, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for Courts and Justice will be coming forward with more information shortly. The Government are committed to ensuring that people from all backgrounds can access justice. Although we are very keen to see much more in the way of mediation, and ACAS has dealt successfully with more than 80,000 cases without having to go to tribunal, on Tuesday we launched a consultation on proposals to widen the support available to people under the help with fees scheme, following the completion of the fees review.

Julie Elliott: The gender pay gap in the north-east is 28%, some 10 percentage points higher than the national average. What is the Minister and the Government doing to address those very stark regional variations?

Caroline Dinenage: It is vital, now more than ever, that our economy is able to benefit from everybody's skills. We simply cannot afford to waste the talents of a single person. That is why, from April this year, we are requiring all employers with more than 250 staff to

publish those gender pay gap figures. We are great believers in what gets measured gets managed, but what gets published gets managed even better.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Can my hon. Friend tell the House what the gender pay gap is for 30 and 40-year-olds in each Government Department? Does she agree that the Government should be getting their own house in order before trying to lecture others in the private sector?

Caroline Dinenage: I am delighted to tell my hon. Friend that the gender pay gap in the Department for Education is only 5.9%. Although that is 5.9 percentage points too high, it shows enormous progress in the Department for Education. Across Government, the figure is just below 13%, and we will keep working until it has been eliminated altogether.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that it is now 42 years since Barbara Castle's Equal Pay Act, why is there any gender pay gap, not only for 30 and 40-year-olds but for people in their teens, twenties, fifties and sixties?

Mr Speaker: I thought it was 47 years this year, but maybe my maths is wrong. It was certainly a long time ago.

Sir Simon Burns: Wasn't it 1975?

Mr Speaker: I thought it was 1970. *[Interruption.]* Anyway, we are agreed that it is a long-standing statute.

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, I think we can all agree that it has been a long old time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) is right to point this out. We have legislation that stops people being paid differently for doing the same job, but what drives the gender pay gap is the fact that girls tend to go into lower paid sectors compared with men and, of course, the pay gap really kicks in at around 30 and 40 when women leave work to have children and may not be supported back into the workplace as well as we would want. That is why gender pay gap reporting is so vital.

Mr Speaker: We are all now better informed.

Racially Motivated Incidents

3. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps she has taken in response to trends in the level of racially motivated incidents since the EU referendum. [908516]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I hope I can say on behalf of the entire House that all Members are clear that hate crime of any description should not and must not be tolerated. We have been working with the police, EU embassies and community groups to monitor the situation, to provide reassurance and to encourage reporting of racist incidents. Recorded hate crime has now fallen to pre-referendum levels. Police force areas continue to monitor racist incidents on an ongoing basis to ensure that any increases are addressed at the earliest opportunity.

Gerald Jones: I thank the Minister for that answer. Across the UK we saw a rise in hate crime and religiously aggravated offences following the referendum—it was 41% higher in July 2016 than in July 2015. Will he inform the House of what provisions have been put in place to avoid any repetition specifically in relation to the triggering of article 50?

Brandon Lewis: There are a couple of points to make to the hon. Gentleman. We have put in place the Government's new hate crime action plan, which is taking a number of steps, for example, to boost reporting. There is also new guidance for prosecutors and a new fund to ensure that we have protective security measures and additional funding in place for community organisations so that they can tackle hate crime. I also gently say to him that the Labour party should look carefully at this morning's CST report, which clearly indicates a 36% rise in totally unacceptable recorded anti-Semitic crime, related directly to the problems in the Labour party.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for mentioning the CST report. Clearly, the concern of the Jewish community in this country is that hate crime against Jews is on the rise. He has seen the report and the whole community wants to know what he is going to do about it, so that we stamp out anti-Semitism, once and for all.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. As I have outlined, it is important that we stamp out all forms of hate crime, which is why that action plan was put in place in July by the Home Secretary. We also all need to look at ourselves. It is clear when we look at the CST report that although we should be pleased about people having the confidence to come forward to report crime—the increase in recording is good—a rise in hate crime of any description, particularly a 36% rise such as this one, is disgraceful. I hope Members from across this House will be doing all they can to stamp that out.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Minister will be aware that the European Union has been a beacon of hope and a key proponent of equality for citizens' rights across the globe. Will he categorically confirm to the House not only that the discrimination laws and rights bestowed upon people across the UK will be upheld following a UK exit from the EU, but that citizens living in the UK will not be left behind and have their rights taken hostage by Brexit?

Brandon Lewis: We have been very clear all along that we want not only to stamp out hate crime, but to play an important part in this with our partners right across Europe. Indeed, in the autumn, I spoke at the EU Council on this very issue, and aside from the Commission, we were the only ones from any country to talk about it. We should be proud of the fact that this country has some of the toughest laws in the world on hate crime. Just a few weeks ago, on 19 January, we hosted some 19 countries' embassies to talk to them about what we are doing and what can be done further to drive out hate crime.

Violence against Women and Girls

4. **Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): If the Government will support Girlguiding UK's campaign to reduce violence against women and girls. [908517]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): Sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools is totally unacceptable and should not be tolerated, and I pay tribute to the fantastic work of Girlguiding UK, which is tackling this important issue. We are working with it as we take forward the commitment we made in response to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry on sexual violence and sexual harassment in schools to review existing guidance and then to look at what further support we can put in place for schools.

Oliver Colville: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. How much training and emotional support is given to girl guides and other young girls who are bullied online?

Justine Greening: Tackling all forms of bullying, including cyber-bullying, is a priority for us. We are investing £1.6 million over two years directly in anti-bullying initiatives, including via the Diana award project, which has a focus on digital resilience for young people. The Government have also funded the UK Safer Internet Centre to develop new cyber-bullying guidance for schools and an associated online safety toolkit. My hon. Friend's question highlights the fact that the world is a very different place for our young people these days, and our guidance, laws and teaching need to stay up to date.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Government support Girlguiding's "Girls Matter" campaign to update the school curriculum to include sexual consent, online safety, tackling violence against women and girls, and LGBT and healthy relationships?

Justine Greening: I have set out my feeling that it is time we look at the guidance that is in place and how we can improve the teaching. That is the right thing to do. We will set out our next steps at the next stage of the Children and Social Work Bill, but we are already doing other things, too. We have already held our first advisory group on looking at updating our guidance on tackling bullying. Through that and the frameworks we have in place, we hope that we can help schools to develop improved codes of practice to combat bullying, too.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister confirm that there is co-operation at a comprehensive level, particularly with uniformed organisations such as the Girls Brigade, as well as Girlguiding, to combat this pernicious aspect of the 21st century?

Justine Greening: Those sorts of organisations can be vital and incredibly powerful in changing attitudes and helping young girls in particular to understand that they do have a voice and should not accept this sort of behaviour. When I was at the Department for International Development, we worked very closely with Girlguiding on gender equality more generally, and I am pleased that that relationship can continue now that I am at the Department for Education.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): A vital part of fulfilling the aims of Girlguiding's campaign to end violence against women and girls is challenging the attitudes and behaviour of the perpetrators of these crimes. What are the Government doing to ensure there

is national coverage for high-quality, accredited, community-based perpetrator programmes, such as the ones I was involved in—I declare an interest—before I became an MP and came to this place?

Justine Greening: The work that the DFE does is part of a cross-Government programme on tackling harassment, bullying and intimidation. It is about not only supporting people—particularly young people, in the case of the DFE—who are bearing the brunt of that behaviour, but understanding what is driving it and tackling the root causes.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): The Girlguiding survey found that 20% of 13 to 21-year-olds have had unwanted pornographic imagery sent to them, and 5% have had indecent images shared without their consent. If the Government really do want to support the Girlguiding campaign, why is the Department cutting the funding to the revenge porn helpline, which has taken more than 2,500 calls in the past year? How will the Minister ensure that victims of revenge porn have access to bespoke support, as promised in the Government's violence against women and girls strategy, when she is shutting the only helpline in March?

Justine Greening: I do not think the hon. Lady has the right information; in fact, we have not made any announcements in relation to that effect yet. Alongside all the comments made by hon. Members today, it is worth reflecting on the fact that another thing we can do is improve the evidence base in this area, which is why we have included specific questions on sexist and racist bullying in the next wave of the National Foundation for Educational Research Teacher Voice survey. We hope that some of the findings from those questions will be available later this year.

Independent Domestic Violence Advisers

5. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on the Government's plans to continue direct grant funding to support independent domestic violence advisers after March 2017. [908518]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): The Home Office has engaged closely with other Government Departments, through the violence against women and girls inter-ministerial group, to oversee delivery of the violence against women and girls strategy, including the commitment of increased funding of £80 million for the services. We have also engaged closely with commissioners and voluntary sector partners on the support provided for independent domestic violence advisers and our move to support better local collaboration and early intervention through the VAWG service transformation fund.

Mr Cunningham: Some 84% of victims reported feeling safer with an independent domestic violence adviser, and just over 1,000 advisers are needed to support the current number of known victims, yet there are currently only half that number. What steps will the Minister be taking to increase the number of independent domestic violence advisers throughout the country?

Brandon Lewis: As I just said, we have increased the funding to VAWG services to £80 million, and we are working with commissioners in local areas to make sure they can deliver the services that they understand are correct for their area and the women who live there.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I am proud that my local authority, Powys County Council, has become a white ribbon authority. Will my hon. Friend the Minister do all he can to encourage all local authorities to follow that example?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend gives a really good example of where local work is delivering really good local results in a way that others can look at. We have to get better, throughout this country, at sharing best practice, and that is a really good example that others can look at.

Gender Recognition Certificates

6. **Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): What progress the Government is making on reviewing the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the process relating to gender recognition certificates. [908519]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): The Government are continuing our work on our commitment to review the Gender Recognition Act 2004. We have begun stakeholder engagement programmes to look at how the gender recognition process can be improved, as well as looking carefully at international comparisons. We will provide an update later this year.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for her answer. My constituent Rebecca Cook applied for a gender recognition certificate, but her application was rejected on the basis that the statutory declaration was more than six months old and she

“may have changed her mind.”

Given that the statutory declaration is a lifetime declaration, will the Minister confirm that the six-month time limit will be reviewed as part of the overall legislative review?

Caroline Dinenage: I am really sorry to hear that my hon. Friend's constituent has encountered those difficulties, and he is absolutely right to bring that kind of case to the House today. We have committed to review, streamline and demedicalise the gender recognition process, and we will certainly consider evidence of any administrative barriers to people gaining the legal gender recognition that they want.

Personal, Social and Health Education

7. **Neil Carmichael** (Stroud) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential role of personal, social and health education in promoting equality. [908520]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): We want schools to put high-quality PSHE at the heart of their curriculum, ensuring that all young people are prepared for life in modern Britain. Effective PSHE not only helps provide pupils with key life skills, but gives them the knowledge to understand their rights and responsibilities to respect individual differences and to challenge prejudice and discrimination.

Neil Carmichael: Does the Secretary of State agree that embedding PSHE—life skills as she correctly terms it—will help us to deal with social mobility and productivity, and that we should see proper, age-appropriate teaching across the piece in our schools?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to link this matter with social mobility. We know that strong PSHE can make the biggest difference to young people growing up in more disadvantaged communities. It is important not only that we have healthy, resilient and confident pupils coming out of our education system who are better placed to do well academically, but that we improve our non-academic outcomes, as that is also hugely valued by employers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will recognise that the churches play a key role in personal, social and health education. What discussions has she had, or will she have, in relation to that role that churches can play in education?

Justine Greening: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, because we have a large number of faith-based schools. Indeed, the values that we want to give our young people as they come through the education system are not only British but often underpinned by faith values. Coming back to the point on the economy, PSHE can really help students develop their teamwork, communications skills and resilience—precisely the sorts of things that British business wants.

Department for Work and Pensions Estate

9. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect on equality for social security claimants of its proposals on the future of the Department for Work and Pensions estate. [908522]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Government are committed to complying with our public sector equality duty, and we will take account of feedback from our public consultations. We will undertake an equality analysis as part of the detailed planning for service reconfiguration, which will include feedback from public consultations in those locations where this applies.

Gavin Newlands: Last week, the UK Government announced the closure of 15 jobcentre sites in Scotland, including the Lonend site in Paisley. This follows a proposal to close eight jobcentres in Glasgow, which was announced in December. Does the Minister agree that it is a dereliction of duty and an insult to those affected not to conduct an equality impact assessment in advance of these plans, given the hardship that they will cause to thousands of the most disadvantaged people?

Caroline Nokes: The views and opinions from the consultations we are carrying out with claimants who use the services across the country, not simply in Scotland, will be fed into our equality analysis.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): The single biggest boost to equality delivered through our Department for Work and Pensions estate is the introduction of named universal credit work coaches and their personalised support. What is the current roll-out timetable?

Caroline Nokes: The roll-out of universal credit is increasing apace, and from September we expect it to roll out to 43 jobcentres every single month. My right hon. Friend is right to point out that work coaches are a crucial part of getting people back into work. As part of the service reconfiguration, we are working to ensure that individual claimants can maintain the relationship with their work coaches.

State Pensions: Working-Class Women

11. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of recent changes to state pensions on the income of working-class women in retirement. [908525]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): Women reaching state pension age in 2016-17 are estimated to receive more state pension on average over their lifetime than women ever have before. By 2030, more than 3 million women stand to gain an average of £550 a year through the introduction of the new state pension.

Chi Onwurah: Working-class women are more likely to be in manual trades, which take a greater toll on the body as it ages, and to die younger due to the health inequalities from which we still suffer. The Minister did not mention the word “class” in her reply. Will she say right now that she will ensure justice for working-class women and all WASPI women by giving them a fair deal in the spring Budget?

Caroline Nokes: The equalisation of the state pension age has been well rehearsed in this Chamber; and, no, I will not use the word “class” because, to be quite frank, we are all working now.

Topical Questions

T1. [908548] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): The whole House will welcome the fact that the Turing law has now come into effect. Alongside that, Parliament this week approved the regulations introducing mandatory gender pay gap and bonus gap reporting for private and voluntary sector employers with 250 employees or more. Transparency over time can make a big difference. It is one of our key manifesto commitments, and the Government are holding themselves to the same high standards that we expect of others. That is why we have now laid regulations for gender pay gap reporting in the public sector, which we look forward to debating in this House at the earliest opportunity.

Mrs Murray: What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the recent trends in the number of women in work?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend may be aware that the number of women in employment has increased by 229,000 over the past year alone. The female employment rate is now at a record high of 69.8%.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): As of the 2016 autumn statement, 86% of net savings to the Treasury through tax and benefit measures come from women. The Treasury continues to fail to provide any impact assessment of its fiscal policies or to send a Minister to the Women and Equalities Committee to answer questions. Will the Minister therefore commit to ensuring that women do not suffer the same abysmal impact from the spring Budget?

Justine Greening: I have just set out that the female employment rate is at a record high, which is good news and we want it to progress. Indeed, it is the third highest female employment rate in the whole G7.

T4. [908551] **Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What are the Government doing to support men to take a more active role in looking after their children?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): We know that when fathers take an active role in childcare, it is not only great for their relationships with their children; it is also important in eliminating the gender pay gap. That is why we have introduced shared parental leave and extended the right to request flexible working, helping both mums and dads to balance their work life with their family commitments.

T2. [908549] **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the Equality and Human Rights Commission must publish an equalities impact assessment of its planned redundancy programme before that programme proceeds any further?

Justine Greening: The EHRC is an independent body that was established under the Equality Act 2006. It has been subject to a substantial reform programme to ensure that it can carry out its core functions effectively, but it must be able to do that under its own steam because it is an independent body.

T5. [908552] **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): Research by England Athletics shows that more than a third of women have suffered harassment while out running. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for running. What further help can my right hon. Friend offer to challenge that behaviour, which is clearly a barrier to getting more women out running?

Justine Greening: I totally agree that such behaviour is unacceptable, and we should not tolerate it in any form. I regularly go running, and I have been stopped for selfies, but never subjected to any catcalling. We can do more. Sport England's This Girl Can campaign and other initiatives have really helped to narrow the gender gap in sports participation. The new Active Lives survey demonstrates that 59% of women are now doing at least 150 minutes of physical activity a week, which is the amount recommended by the Chief Medical Officer, but we can do much more to ensure that there are no barriers to women participating in sport.

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the Minister has been stopped for selfies because of the quality of her running, her celebrity status or, more likely, both.

T6. [908553] **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Four thousand eight hundred women in my constituency and countless thousands across the United Kingdom are WASPI women, losing out on thousands of pounds that is rightfully theirs. Does the Minister agree that this affects a generation of women who very often suffer from pay discrimination, and that denying them their rightful pension only heaps injustice upon injustice?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Government have been very clear: bringing about state pension age equality was an important principle, and one that we have to maintain. We have made £1 billion of concessions to women in this age group but, as the pensions Minister has made clear, there will be no more transitional arrangements.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Government have been very clear about the fact that they want equality law to be protected when we leave the EU. That is particularly important. Can the Minister update the House on whether that will form part of the White Paper to be published today?

Justine Greening: This is an important point, and it is one of the reasons the Prime Minister set out a number of objectives in her speech recently. I am not going to pre-empt the White Paper, which is being published today, but it is certainly important to ensure that we absolutely maintain—and, indeed, continue to advance—issues of equality and rights.

T7. [908554] **Holly Lynch** (Halifax) (Lab): The Government have said that setting the age threshold for their living wage at 25 creates a financial incentive to employ young people, but given that the Federation of Small Businesses has advised its members that employing a young person on that basis could constitute age discrimination, will the Government review the age threshold and introduce the living wage from 18 to combat age discrimination in the workplace?

Justine Greening: This is an important issue. We have introduced the living wage to make sure that all people get the minimum wage they need to be able to live effectively. We do not have a Treasury Minister on the Bench today, but I will absolutely make sure that one of them responds to the question the hon. Lady raises.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the long-promised consultation on caste discrimination? It was promised by Christmas, and we are still waiting.

Justine Greening: It remains, as my hon. Friend suggests, a work in progress, but it will be published very shortly.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): According to a report by the Trades Union Congress, between January and March 2014, following the introduction of tribunal fees, just 1,222 sexual discrimination claims were made to an employment tribunal, compared with 6,017 in the same quarter a year earlier. Does that not make a nonsense of the Government's supposed concern for gender equality?

Caroline Dinenage: On Tuesday, we launched a consultation on the proposals to widen the support available to people under the Help with Fees scheme, following the completion of the employment tribunal fees review last year. However, it is also important to point out that ACAS has seen the number of people who are able to sort out their differences via mediation go beyond 80,000, and I think a number of people would be much happier going back into the workplace they have come from having sorted out their problems through mediation rather than tribunals.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): This week marks the start of LGBT history month, and, of course, we all celebrate the great achievements the LGBT community has given this country. However, hate crime against the LGBT community remains far too high, with Stonewall saying that one in four LGBT people hide their sexual orientation. Will the Minister take urgent action to tackle that, first by increasing the sentences for those who commit hate crimes against LGBT people?

Caroline Dinenage: We do have a lot to be proud of, and the UK continues to be recognised as one of the most progressive countries in Europe for LGBT rights, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we must not rest on our laurels. We must make sure that anybody who attacks anyone on the basis of their sexual orientation is brought to justice. LGBT history month is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate and recognise the contribution that gay, lesbian, bi and trans people have made to British history, British society and British culture.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—

Great Repeal Bill

1. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If he will bring forward a motion to disapply Standing Orders No. 83J to 83X from proceedings on the Government's planned Great Repeal Bill. [908556]

2. **Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): If he will bring forward a motion to disapply Standing Orders No. 83J to 83X from proceedings on the Government's planned Great Repeal Bill. [908557]

3. **Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): If he will bring forward a motion to disapply Standing Orders No. 83J to 83X from proceedings on the Government's planned Great Repeal Bill. [908558]

4. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): If he will bring forward a motion to disapply Standing Orders No. 83J to 83X from proceedings on the Government's planned Great Repeal Bill. [908559]

5. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): If he will bring forward a motion to disapply Standing Orders No. 83J to 83X from proceedings on the Government's planned Great Repeal Bill. [908560]

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The Standing Orders of the House of Commons will apply to the repeal Bill in the usual way.

Martyn Day: Given the importance of the great repeal Bill to the devolved Administrations, will the Leader of the House give a clear guarantee that all Members of this House will be able to scrutinise and vote on all parts of this Bill to ensure that the great repeal Bill does not turn into the great power grab?

Mr Lidington: Yes, of course. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman himself acknowledges, the so-called EVEL provisions under our Standing Orders do not bar any Member of the House of Commons, from any part of the United Kingdom, from taking part in votes on the different Readings of any Bill and on amendments to any Bill.

Richard Arkless: Given that we cannot categorically rule out EVEL and that the Secretary of State for Scotland has said that a legislative consent motion will be required for the great repeal Bill, what exactly is the Government's position?

Mr Lidington: The Standing Orders of the House apply in the usual way. If any Bill, any clause of a Bill or any amendment to a Bill affects only England, but covers matters that, in Scotland, are devolved, it must, in addition to commanding a majority among Members of the House as a whole, command a majority among those Members representing English constituencies.

Patricia Gibson: The Procedure Committee, on which I sit, produced a report that noted:

"There is an apparent lack of appetite for debate in legislative grand committee at present."

Given that the Government are tabling programme motions that allow absolutely no time for debate, surely the Leader of the House must share my opinion that current EVEL procedures are a piece of nonsense.

Mr Lidington: If the Legislative Grand Committee is proceeding smoothly, it suggests to me that most Members from across the House are satisfied with the way in which our Standing Orders are operating. On the hon. Lady's point about programme motions, may I point out to her that apart from the Division last night on the article 50 Bill, we have had no Division so far in this Parliament on any programme motion moved after Second Reading?

Margaret Ferrier: The UK Government continue to tell us that Holyrood is the most powerful devolved Parliament, yet they are not consulting Scotland on the triggering of article 50. Does the Leader of the House agree that by also refusing Scottish MPs the opportunity to vote on all areas of the great repeal Bill, the Government are doing everything possible to stop the voice of Scottish people being heard on Brexit?

Mr Lidington: Quite the contrary: I think that both my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland have made, and will continue to make, every effort to ensure that the interests of the people of Scotland are fully

represented at all stages of the forthcoming negotiation as part of the package we are seeking for the United Kingdom.

Kirsten Oswald: During the referendum campaign, we were told that all non-reserved powers would return to Scotland. Worryingly, the UK Government have not opened any discussions with the Scottish Government about that. When will the Government discuss with the Scottish Government what additional powers may be devolved to Scotland as a result of the UK withdrawing from the European Union?

Mr Lidington: We have said already, including at the Joint Ministerial Committee, that we are going to talk intensively to the Scottish Government about how to address the issue of powers that return to the United Kingdom from the European Union. If we look, for example, at fisheries—an issue that is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, in respect of UK fisheries policy—we see that that also involves third-country agreements negotiated between the EU and other nation states. It involves United Nations conventions. The Scotland Act 1998 says, in terms, that international agreements are a reserved matter. Those are exactly the things that we need to thrash out in detail in the conversations with our colleagues in the Scottish Government.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How about 83A? I whipped Bills through Committee perfectly effectively before we introduced the dismal practice of routine guillotining, but perhaps we were all better behaved and more reasonable then.

Mr Lidington: I am sure that my right hon. Friend sets an example to all Members of the House with his common sense and good reason. I say again that I think it was perfectly fair and right for this House to change its Standing Orders in response to the different balance of powers that now exists in the United Kingdom as a consequence of devolution.

Restoration and Renewal

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What plans he has for the House to debate and vote on the timetable and budget for the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster; and if he will make a statement.

[908561]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): I am eager to schedule a debate on the Joint Committee's report and recommendation to refurbish the Palace of Westminster as soon as possible. That will be announced in the business statement in the usual way. The Joint Committee's report recommended the establishment of a delivery authority that would develop a business case and budget prior to a final vote in Parliament, following a decision in principle. By its own admission, the Joint Committee was not in a position to provide detailed budgets before the establishment of a delivery authority.

Mr Hollobone: If the Palace of Westminster needs to be renewed and restored, I am pretty sure that my constituents in Kettering would want me to vote for the cheapest option. If that happens to be the quickest, so much the better. Will the Leader of the House make a recommendation to the House ahead of the vote?

Michael Ellis: That is a matter for the House. It is vital that the Palace is safeguarded in the right way for the reasons that my hon. Friend has indicated. The Government want to ensure that the solution is deliverable and value for money, and are taking their time to consider the detail of the proposed recommendations and the implications very carefully.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): “Taking their time” is the understatement of the year! The Joint Committee was chaired by two Ministers, one of whom, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), is sitting on the Front Bench. He was staring at the back of the head of the Deputy Leader of the House, going, “Just get on with it, man.” Get on with it!

Michael Ellis: There are pressures on parliamentary time—I think the hon. Gentleman is responsible for some of those pressures—but the reality is that the matter is of significant importance, and we will proceed as soon as possible.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the fact that the Government are taking their time to consider the best option for dealing with this historic Palace. Given the amount of taxpayers’ money involved, will the Deputy Leader of the House reassure me that such a cost will deliver an effective Parliament and a solution that taxpayers believe is genuine value for money.

Michael Ellis: It is crucial that value for money is safeguarded. Advice is being taken on a range of the technical and governance recommendations made by the Joint Committee report—we have studied it very carefully—and the independent Major Projects Authority is also being consulted.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Deputy Leader of the House says that there is pressure on parliamentary time. We spent 45 minutes trooping through the Lobbies last night and we will spend hours doing the same next week, so if the Chamber is to be decanted, will that not be an opportunity to introduce modern practices, such as electronic voting?

Michael Ellis: I am surprised to hear that Scottish National party Members feel Divisions are a waste of time. I am sure they could avoid Divisions if they saw fit.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it not the case that the large majority of people in the House of Commons are not in fact Members? There is a constant risk not only on health grounds, with asbestos and the rest, but of a fire, and we certainly do not want a repeat of 1834. Should not those who complain about the cost involved—they are quite likely to come from outside—be told that they have such an absolute right to complain because this place exists?

Michael Ellis: I recommend any Member of the House who has not read the report to read it, because it particularises in fine detail some of the concerns that the hon. Gentleman mentions about health and safety and about risk.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): First, people started talking about the great reform Bill—where do all these greats come from?—and now there will presumably be the great reconstruction bill for the House of Commons. All the time I have been a Member we have made do and mended, and we have got on perfectly well. Why do we need to have this reconstruction? Let us just patch things up a bit and carry on as normal.

Michael Ellis: Again, I recommend that the hon. Gentleman read the report. It is decades—in fact, many decades—of patching and mending that has led to patching and mending no longer being practicable in the opinion of the authors of the report, so clearly a number of major issues need to be addressed.

Mr Speaker: We are out of time, but I really want to hear the last question, not least because the hon. Gentleman is a newly elected and extremely keen member of the Committee about whose name he is concerned. I call Mr Philip Davies.

Women and Equalities Committee

7. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): If he will bring forward proposals to change the name of the Women and Equalities Committee to the Equalities Committee. [908563]

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): The Government currently have no plans to bring forward proposals to change the name of the Women and Equalities Committee. I have received no representations from the Committee to make such a change. Should the Women and Equalities Committee recommend such a change, the Government would consider it in consultation with the Procedure Committee.

Philip Davies: Every single departmental Select Committee is named after the Department it scrutinises. I am also on the Justice Committee, which scrutinises the Ministry of Justice. The only exception is the Women and Equalities Committee, which shadows the Government Equalities Office. Surely this Committee should be called the Equalities Committee. If the Deputy Leader of the House does not agree, will he tell us why women’s issues cannot be included in a Committee called the Equalities Committee?

Michael Ellis: I suggest that my hon. Friend approach the Chair of the Select Committee of which he is a valued member and invite her to write to the Leader of the House. The matter will be considered in the normal way.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Is my hon. Friend at all worried that members of, for example, the black and minority ethnic or the gay and lesbian communities, might feel that the title of the Committee suggests it will be giving priority to the concerns of women over their own concerns?

Michael Ellis: I gently say that achieving gender equality is good for everyone. For example, the introduction of shared parental leave allows men to take time away from the workplace to bond with their new children. There are issues to be addressed for women, as discussed

in this place earlier today. Names of Committees are a matter for the House and are considered with the Procedure Committee in the normal way.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister confirm whether he has received any representations from anyone from a BME community

about their happiness or otherwise of the title of the Women and Equalities Committee? As a member of the BME community, may I say that I am very happy with the name of the Women and Equalities Committee?

Michael Ellis: The hon. Lady's contentment has been noted. No such representations have been made. If any are made, they will be considered very carefully.

Airport Capacity and Airspace Policy

10.41 am

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about airport capacity and airspace policy.

In October last year, I announced that the Government had selected a new north-west runway scheme at Heathrow as its preferred scheme for new airport capacity in the south-east. Aviation expansion is important for the UK, both in boosting our economy and jobs, and in promoting us on the world stage. Leaving the EU is a new chapter for Britain and it provides us with a great opportunity to forge a new role in the world. We are determined to seize that opportunity, and having the right infrastructure in place will allow us to build a more global Britain. By backing the north-west runway at Heathrow airport and publishing our proposals today, we are sending a clear signal that when we leave the EU Britain will be open for business.

Today, I lay before Parliament a draft airports national policy statement and begin a period of extensive public consultation on the proposals it contains. The draft airports national policy statement is accompanied by an appraisal of sustainability, which assesses the potential economic, social and environmental impacts of the proposed policy. I have published all this information online to ensure that the process is as transparent as possible.

Over the past 70 years, the UK has failed to build the capacity needed to match people's growing desire for travel. Unless we take action, every London airport is forecast to be full by 2040 and almost entirely full by 2030. Doing nothing is no longer a choice we can afford to make. Without expansion, constraints in the aviation sector would impose increasing costs on the rest of the economy over time, lowering economic output by making aviation more expensive and less convenient to use, with knock-on effects in lost trade, tourism and foreign direct investment.

The Government believe that a new north-west runway at Heathrow best delivers the need for additional airport capacity. The draft airports national policy statement sets out this rationale in full. It is expected that Heathrow will provide the greatest economic and employment benefits, delivering tens of thousands of additional local jobs by 2030 and up to £61 billion of economic benefits, not including wider trade benefits. The scheme will benefit the whole of the UK. I expect Heathrow airport to work with airlines to improve domestic connectivity, including the addition of six more domestic routes across the UK by 2030, bringing the total to 14. This will strengthen existing links to nations and regions, and develop new connections.

Heathrow's location means it is already accessible to business and the rest of the UK. In future, it will be connected to Crossrail, and linked to HS2 at Old Oak Common. We are also bringing forward plans to deliver western and southern rail access to the airport as quickly as possible to provide greater flexibility, accessibility and resilience for passengers. The Heathrow north-west runway would be expected to deliver the greatest support for freight. As we leave the European Union, we will need to get out into the world and do new business with old allies and new partners alike. A new north-west

runway at Heathrow will be at the heart of this. In summary, a new north-west runway at Heathrow would be expected to create new global connections, create tens of thousands of jobs, reduce fares for passengers, provide new capacity for freight imports and exports, and spread the benefits of growth to the whole of the UK. Today we are sending a clear message that the Government are not only making the big decisions but getting on with delivering them.

I am clear that expansion must not come at any cost and that we will meet our legal requirements on air quality and obligations on carbon. The airports national policy statement, if designated, will provide the primary basis for making decisions on any development consent application for a new north-west runway at Heathrow. Heathrow airport would be expected to provide up to £2.6 billion to communities affected by the expansion, including noise insulation for homes and schools, improvements to public facilities and other measures. This includes a community compensation fund and establishing a community engagement board.

For those people whose homes need to be compulsorily purchased to make way for the new runway, or for those who take up the voluntary scheme, Heathrow must honour its commitment of payments of 25% above the full market value of people's homes and its commitment to cover all costs, such as stamp duty, and moving and legal fees. I am also clear that the environmental impact of expansion must be minimised. Industry-leading measures will be required to mitigate air quality impacts, and Heathrow airport will be required to demonstrate that the scheme can be delivered within legal air quality obligations.

The airport should continue to strive to meet its public pledge to ensure that landside airport-related traffic is no greater than today. Measures will also be required to mitigate the impacts of noise, including legally binding noise targets and periods of predictable respite. The Government expect a ban of six and a half hours on scheduled night flights.

Lastly, construction must take place in a manner that minimises impacts on the environment and the local community. Outside of the planning system, I am clear that there must be conditions on cost and that expansion costs will be paid for by the private sector, not the taxpayer. The Government expect industry to work together to drive down costs. I have appointed Sir Jeremy Sullivan, the former Senior President of Tribunals, to provide independent oversight of the draft airports national policy statement consultation process.

The second consultation that I wish to bring to the attention of the House is on UK airspace policy. I am publishing proposals to modernise the way UK airspace is managed, which will be consulted on in parallel. By taking steps now to future-proof this vital infrastructure, we can harness the latest technology to make airspace more efficient as well as making journeys faster and more environmentally friendly. The policy principles set out in this airspace consultation will influence decisions taken later in the planning process for a north-west runway at Heathrow. It is therefore sensible to allow members of the public to express views on both these issues at the same time.

The consultation will set out our plans to establish an independent commission on civil aviation noise and bring forward proposals to improve how communities

can engage and make sure their voices are heard. To complement this, we are proposing guidance on how noise impacts should be assessed and used to inform decisions on airspace options. These proposals aim to strike a balance between the economic benefits of a thriving aviation sector and its impacts on local communities and the environment.

The aviation sector is a great British success story: it contributes around £20 billion per year, directly supports approximately 230,000 jobs across the United Kingdom and supports an estimated 260,000 jobs across the wider economy. I want to build on this success, and this year my Department will begin developing a new strategy for UK aviation generally that will champion the success story of the UK's aviation sector and put the consumer back at the heart of our thinking. I want to make sure that the sector is delivering more choice for consumers and the country as a whole, and I will come back to the House to update you, Mr Speaker, and hon. Members on our plans as they develop.

Finally, I turn briefly to what happens next. These two consultations will start today and last for 16 weeks, closing on 25 May. At the same time, and as required by the Planning Act 2008, a period of parliamentary scrutiny—the “relevant period”—now begins for the draft airports national policy statement. It will end by summer recess 2017. Although planning is a devolved matter, the consultation will be open to the whole of the UK, as additional airport capacity will benefit us all.

Following consultation and parliamentary scrutiny, consideration will be given to the comments and points raised. In the light of those processes, should the decision be taken to proceed, a final airports national policy statement will be laid before Parliament for debate and there will be the opportunity for a vote in the House of Commons in winter 2017-18.

I will place copies of all the relevant documents in the House; they will also be available online for Members and members of the public. I commend the statement and process to the House.

10.50 am

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for Transport for advance sight of his statement.

Aviation is key to ensuring that the UK remains an outward-looking trading nation post-Brexit, and Labour has consistently been pushing for a decision on runway expansion in south-east England, so after years of dither and delay, it is welcome that progress is finally being made. We have been calling for action on airspace modernisation for some time, and although we cannot see it, our airspace network is in dire need of modernisation. It is over half a century old but is still among our country's most vital pieces of infrastructure. Modernising airspace will involve tough decisions, but the benefits are huge. It is in the national interest for the Government to ensure that they deliver a balanced and sustainable airspace solution.

However, there are outstanding issues, including how Heathrow expansion can be squared with meeting the UK's climate change objectives and demonstrating that local noise and environmental impacts can be minimised. This can be achieved, but only in the context of a coherent aviation strategy that works for the country,

not just for London. It starts with confirming our membership of the European Aviation Safety Agency, as well as taking action on cleaner fuels and improving road and rail access to our international gateway airports.

As the Secretary of State knows, business loathes uncertainty, and aviation is no exception. What assurances can he give that the UK's continued membership of the European Aviation Safety Agency is and will remain an absolute priority? What does his commitment to leaving the single market mean for leaving the single aviation market? The Committee on Climate Change cautioned against relying on carbon trading for Heathrow to achieve its emission targets, as that option might not always be cheap and available. Will he provide an update on whether he plans to reject that advice?

There is increasing concern about air quality, which is linked to 40,000 early deaths a year. David Cameron's former aide—now Baroness Camilla Cavendish—claimed that the existing policy on air quality “overclaims and underwhelms”. Given that inadequacy, what further and stringent measures will be proposed to mitigate the expected expansion at Heathrow?

Key to improving air quality, alongside a move to reducing vehicle emissions, is encouraging more people to use public transport to arrive at our airports. Enhancements are needed to Heathrow's rail services if the objective of having public transport usage of 55% is to be achieved. I invite the Secretary of State to outline what progress he is making and how he can ensure that the business beneficiaries of such enhancements will make a fair contribution. If we are to secure the modal shift to accessing airports by public transport and in the context of the aviation strategy, I invite him to confirm that the National Infrastructure Commission will be asked to inquire into the issue of surface access at all our international gateway airports and seaports.

I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to fulfilling our legal requirements on air quality and obligations on carbon, and I note the reference to Heathrow striving to meet its public pledge that airport-related public traffic will be no greater than it is today. But it is not simply about the volume of traffic; it is about vastly reducing the emissions that come from such traffic. Much of that relates to ultra-low emission vehicles, which will be key to securing our shared objectives. The modern transport Bill will hopefully progress the agenda considerably, so, finally, will the Secretary of State tell the House when we are likely to see that Bill?

Chris Grayling: May I start by thanking the hon. Gentleman for his support for my statement this morning? He asked a number of questions, which I shall answer, but I very much welcome the principle of support. This is a long-term project for the country, and a shared vision across this House of the need for expanded capacity is important. I know that there are individual Members who have disagreements, issues and local challenges, but his supportive comments are welcome for the project and I am grateful to him.

Let me seek to answer the hon. Gentleman's questions. First, we have not reached a definitive position on the European issue. Obviously the negotiations have not started and we have not yet triggered article 50. I am acutely aware that aviation is one of the sectors that we need to handle with great care, working out the best way of protecting our sector and delivering the right

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connectivity for the future. I will come back to the House at an appropriate moment and provide more information, but, as he is aware, we are not really in a position to provide detail of the negotiations in advance. However, I appreciate that he will want to understand in due course where we have got to, and we will endeavour to make sure that we keep the House as fully informed as we properly can, given the negotiation process.

As the hon. Gentleman said, aviation is not included in the current climate change target. It is clearly an issue, however, and has been since the recent agreement in Montreal, subject to an international strategy going forward. We are consulting today on things such as the smarter use of airspace. Through airspace reform and the technology that is now available to us, we will be able to avoid, to anything like the degree experienced at the moment, planes stacking over the south-east of England, emitting additional emissions into the atmosphere and using up more fuel. That is one of the benefits that comes from the smarter use of airspace, which will help to make a contribution, as will cleaner, newer generation, more fuel-efficient aircraft, which I think we will see extensively in this country over the coming years.

On the issue of NO_x, diesel and emissions on the surrounding roads, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is much more a car issue than a plane issue. It is about the propensity of congested areas to cause a genuine public health problem, so it is a broader issue for the Government to address than simply the airport. We have already made a start, with the incentives that are in place for low-emission vehicles and the expansion of charging points that we set out in the autumn statement. We will also shortly be seeing the Bill that he mentioned—it would have been here by now, had we not had a bit of other business to deal with in the House. The issues in that Bill will be important, but I am well aware, and the Government are well aware, that we will have to do much more on the emissions front. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will come forward in due course with further proposals to tackle what is a broader issue than just airport expansion. It is one that we cannot possibly wait until airport expansion happens to address, and we will not.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of rail services, and we already have significant plans for their development. The arrival of Crossrail and of HS2 at Old Oak Common will make a significant difference to public transport access to Heathrow, as will the proposed modernisation of the Piccadilly line, which will significantly expand capacity on that route. We are now also starting the development work on rail access to the south and the west of Heathrow airport, and he is absolutely right to raise this issue. It is something that we are now working on and the private sector will make a substantial contribution to the costs.

Lastly, the hon. Gentleman raised the importance of land and surface access to ports and airports around the country. I can confirm to him that we are looking at this in a variety of forums. As we move into this post-Brexit world and in a world where we need to facilitate trade, I am particularly concerned to ensure that where there are blockages, congestion points or limitations around ports and airports, we take the necessary steps to address those, and we will.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his supportive comments, and will obviously try to keep him and the House as informed as possible.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Given that for 70 years we have talked the talk on airport capacity over London, it is welcome that my right hon. Friend is now laying down the plans to walk the walk and get on with building Heathrow's third runway. Given our antiquated planning rules, is he confident that it will be completed by 2040, when the airports reach their capacity? Can he also give a commitment to local communities around all the London airports that the smarter use of airspace will be used in the interim to reduce noise and other disturbance for local communities?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his comments, and I am absolutely clear that we aim to deliver airport expansion long before 2040. What we have now is a much more streamlined process, set out in statute—it was introduced by Labour and I am grateful for that—for securing the initial consents. If, when we reach the end of this year, the consultation confirms the recommendation that the Government are making and this House does the same, I hope that we will have effectively reached a point of outline planning consent that allows the airport to press on with the detailed preparation work for the construction and the detailed planning consents.

I think that airspace modernisation makes a real difference to communities in the south-east, because it enables us to put planes on much more exact paths. Today, sat-nav technology allows a plane to follow a much more exact route than the traditional beacons did. It enables us to manage approaches to airports, airport descent and ascent rates, and the overall use of airports so that we do not experience stacking around the south-east as we do today. I hope that the second part of the process that I have announced, which I believe is as important to communities throughout the country as the airport expansion, will allow us to ensure that the sector becomes much friendlier to the communities that it affects.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of his statement.

We welcome the decision to go ahead with the expansion of Heathrow and the new runway. After many years of waiting, it is time to get on with delivering that, as well as the specific benefits that it can bring. However, building a new runway is meaningless if we do not have access to the air and the EU-US open skies agreement. Does the Secretary of State intend to seek membership of that arrangement?

The Secretary of State mentioned regional airports, which are vital, and I agree that these connections need to be made. What guarantees will he give to regional airports in Scotland, especially the likes of Dundee and Inverness, about routes and slots following the Heathrow expansion? He also mentioned the need to deal with environmental issues and tackle carbon emissions. What targets will he specify to demonstrate ambition above the legal requirements to which he referred?

Chris Grayling: We and the Scottish Government do not always agree on everything, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and his party, and to the Administration

in Edinburgh, for their support for Heathrow expansion. Indeed, following these exchanges, I shall be heading off to the other side of Scotland—to Glasgow—to talk about the importance of my announcement to the United Kingdom as a whole.

The hon. Gentleman asks about regional airports. Heathrow will be under an obligation to fulfil its promises in respect of regional connectivity. I expect this capacity to open links not only between the United Kingdom and the rest of the world, but from within the United Kingdom to Heathrow and the rest of the world. That is important to airports in Scotland, the north of England, and other parts of the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland, the south-west, and so forth.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the open skies agreement. As I said earlier, that will be a subject for negotiation. We will obviously seek to provide the best possible arrangements for the future but, whatever the arrangements, the fact remains that there were flights to and from European Union capitals long before the European Union even existed, and that will continue after Britain has left the European Union. We will have strong aviation ties around the world. Of course, this expansion is not particularly about European Union links; it will open up ties between the UK and markets around the world, including emerging markets. It will provide Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England with links to markets where there is great potential and opportunity for the future.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I believe that the Secretary of State is doing his work backwards. How can you consult on airspace strategy when you do not have a credible policy on how to address current noise pollution levels? How can you offer a consultation on a national policy statement when you have no credible or legal plan for reducing air pollution? How can you have consultations ending on 25 May with no credible or legal plans to address critical noise and air pollution levels?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have no credible, legal, or any other plans or pronouncements to make on this matter at all.

Chris Grayling: I know how strongly my hon. Friend feels about this. I know the concerns that have been expressed in her constituency, and I respect her very much for what she is doing. One of the difficulties involved in a big strategy decision such as this is that it is impossible to make it without some impacts. I simply give my hon. Friend my assurance that we will take all steps we can to minimise those impacts, inevitable though it is that there will be some.

Let me say two things about pollution. First, we made our decision on the basis of recommendations made to us by the Airports Commission, and subsequent work was carried out by the Government in the wake of more recent developments relating to emissions from motor vehicles. We are clear in our view that the expansion is deliverable within the rules, but the Government intend to go much further to tackle emissions from motor vehicles. The issue of NO_x—oxides of nitrogen—emissions is much more about urban congestion than airports. It is something that we have to deal with, and we will have to deal with it much sooner than when we start to expand Heathrow airport in the next decade.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): This is a long-awaited and welcome statement. Heathrow is the right place for expansion to link with emerging markets—that is essential for our future economic success. How can the Secretary of State convince us that this really will be an integrated transport policy and that, at the same time as developing links with emerging markets, it will address critical issues of environmental concern, including air pollution? What can he do to convince us that that indeed will happen?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady makes two points. On connectivity, the plans for improved rail access around Heathrow will completely transform it as an integrated hub. The connectivity that HS2 will bring to Old Oak Common, Crossrail, the expanded Piccadilly line and the connectivity that south-west rail access will bring into Heathrow itself will mean it is much more of an accessible integrated transport centre than it has been, and there will be regional connectivity as well.

On pollution, as I have said, we had detailed analysis from the Airports Commission and, since then, from independent consultants. The Government's judgment is that this expansion is deliverable within air quality rules but, as I have just said, we have a big task in this country to address the much broader issue of air quality. We cannot simply sit with the status quo until the middle of the next decade when this runway opens; we need to have made a big impact before then.

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the Transport Secretary's statement. For my constituents in Esher and Walton, it will be absolutely critical to have tangible reassurances, including on legally binding limits for noise and air quality, the independent verification of both of those things, and a change of policy on flight paths from the arbitrary policy of concentration, which blights communities such as Molesey in my constituency, to a fairer policy of dispersal. Will the Transport Secretary guarantee to work with me to nail down those local reassurances for my constituents?

Chris Grayling: I am happy to give my hon. Friend those assurances. The thing that we share in particular across our two constituencies is the stack south-west of London. The changes that the airspace consultation heralds will change that fundamentally, leading to much less stacking and fuel wastage over south-east England. As a result, there will be less emissions from the aviation flying over south-east England, and I think that there will be a much better experience for my hon. Friend's constituents.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Department's re-analysis of air quality involved a qualitative analysis of air quality showing that it was possible that limits would be breached in the areas around Heathrow when the third runway opened. Will the Secretary of State undertake to do a quantitative analysis before the consultation ends that includes real driving emissions and the contribution to air quality problems that the Volkswagen cheat devices have made? Will he give a cast-iron guarantee today that he will not use Brexit as a means of watering down our EU air quality targets?

Chris Grayling: On the latter point, the Government fully recognise that we have a duty to tackle this problem. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State

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for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will be bringing forward proposals on how we take that further in the future, and the hon. Lady will be aware that my Department has been taking more steps to support the move to low-emission vehicles.

We have carried out further work since the Airports Commission reported, as well as since the Volkswagen emissions issue emerged. It is still the judgment of my team and our advisers that the expansion can be delivered within the current rules but, of course, we intend to go much further than that. We cannot afford not to be much more transformational between now and the middle of the next decade. The problem is to do with not this airport, but our urban areas generally, and we have to deal with it.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I know that it is going to take a lot more than a builder with a bucket of tarmac to do this as the project will involve an investment of not far off £20 billion. It will give a great boost to post-Brexit Britain, on top of the expansion at London City airport. Can the Secretary of State give me his best estimate of when the first plane will take off from the north-west runway?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend and I share an aspiration to achieve that as soon as possible, but the working assumption is that the first plane will take off in the middle of the next decade. Perhaps we should have come to this decision a long time ago, but at least we are doing it now and we will get on with it as soon as possible. However, we have to do it in the right way and sustainably, taking great care of the surrounding communities.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome today's statement, but for this to be a truly national policy, it has to include the interests of regional airports such as Newcastle, which is so important to the economy of the north-east. This is not just about infrastructure; it is also about taxation. Today, the Scottish Government are halving air passenger duty and they will abolish it by 2021. Will the Secretary of State urge his Treasury colleagues to address the question of air passenger duty for regional airports, because it could damage their ability to compete?

Chris Grayling: I know the importance of this announcement for Newcastle. When I made my statement to the House in October about the Government's proposals, I went to Newcastle the following day and met its chief executive. There is clearly enormous support in that area for the expansion of the airport. On APD, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's comments will be noted by Treasury colleagues in the run-up to the Budget.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I thought that one Member who was seeking to catch my eye had exited the Chamber at one point during the statement, but it might be that I was experiencing an optical illusion.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Following the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), I should like to point out that the lethal

combination of the new technology, the much more precise flight paths and the Government's current policy of concentration rather than dispersal will lead to a disaster for the people who are right underneath those routes. It should be possible to use the new technology to create an artificial degree of dispersal, as happened before under the analogue systems. Will my right hon. Friend advance on this consultation with the knowledge that this is a very important issue to address for many of our constituents?

Chris Grayling: To be slightly parochial, I can say that those of us who represent Surrey constituencies are well aware of the issues around Gatwick airport and the flight paths that planes have been using there recently. My hope is that the consultation will lead to a system that will enable us to be much more careful about managing flight paths so that we can provide respite to communities and decide exactly how to handle approaches to airports, instead of having a rather haphazard set of flight paths. I can assure my hon. Friend that I think we will end up with a better system for his constituents and those in neighbouring constituencies.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I should like to ask the Secretary of State about certain references in the Airports Commission surface access strategic road network proposals, which were published by Highways England in October. The document includes proposals to widen the M4. The Government made a statement to the media two weeks ago to the effect that that would not go ahead, but the answers to written questions that I have received have not been so clear. Will the Secretary of State confirm that those proposals will not go ahead, and that there will be no land or property acquisition in Heston?

Chris Grayling: I can be absolutely clear about this. I saw those BBC reports. There is no plan to widen the M4, although there is a plan to create a smart motorway on the M4, as the hon. Lady will be aware. There is no plan that I am aware of—or that I have discussed in any way, shape or form—to start buying houses in her constituency for a wider M4, and I have not seen a budget for that either, so she can take it from me that there is no plan to widen the M4.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I commend and support my right hon. Friend's statement. Will he give me an assurance that the rail link to Gatwick airport will continue to be invested in and upgraded?

Chris Grayling: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. He will be aware that the Government are bringing forward plans to fulfil Chris Gibb's recommendation of spending £300 million on the route in the short term. We clearly have a modernisation challenge beyond that, and we are looking at how best we can fulfil it. The other issue for Gatwick is the station, and we are in discussions with the airport and Network Rail about what we can do with it. Ensuring that Gatwick has proper modern surface access for the future is also our priority.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I welcome the national airport policy, although I note the warning that aviation could become less

convenient to use, lowering economic output. Unfortunately, many airports are turning themselves into long, tedious, meandering shopping malls, which inconveniences travellers. Glasgow airport, for example, has a quarter of a kilometre meander that not only hinders those needing to travel, but inconveniences people with mobility issues, particularly those going to gates for flights to the islands. I exclude London City airport from that criticism, but will the airport policy consider travellers as well as shoppers by at least providing a shorter route for them?

Chris Grayling: I know what the hon. Gentleman means—we do spend a lot of time walking through the shops—but the counter-argument is that shops are one of the factors that keeps the cost of aviation down, making it more accessible. I am unsure whether I can promise him fewer shops.

Mr MacNeil: Will you look at it?

Chris Grayling: We will be holding a consultation on the national strategy, so the hon. Gentleman is welcome to make that point, which we will consider carefully. More important is providing better links through Scotland's airports to Heathrow, and better links to his constituency from airports such as Edinburgh and Glasgow. That is important for better connectivity, which is why the proposal will make difference for him, too.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful for your indulgence, Mr Speaker, for reasons on which I do not need to expatiate. This is a matter of grave concern to my constituents and I want to pick up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), who is no longer in his place—[*Interruption.*] Okay, he has moved to a different place. His point was about consultation and engagement with local communities, particularly in Surrey and the areas around Heathrow. That is vital for what is an excellent proposal. I just want to hear the Secretary of State reiterate his commitment to engage with local communities.

Chris Grayling: A few people have asked why we are holding a consultation at all. Quite apart from the statutory process, we want to hear from people how the proposal would have an impact on them. Regardless of whether Parliament decides that we should go ahead with the proposal, it is essential that, if we do go ahead with it, we listen carefully and, if necessary, refine it to make improvements for those communities. The airspace reforms also provide an opportunity to make a real difference to areas around the airport that are exposed to take-offs and landings.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I continue to support the third runway at Heathrow as the best option for my constituency in Sheffield, but given the delays we are still roughly 10 years away from the runway being up and running. In the meantime, Heathrow is running at around 98% capacity at certain times of day, and demand will continue to increase during that 10-year period. What are the Government's plans to manage that increased demand over the 10 years before the runway opens?

Chris Grayling: The truth is that that is a constraint. There is still capacity around London's airports, and there are some first-rate regional airports near the hon.

Gentleman's constituency. The east midlands and south Yorkshire have access to good airports in Leeds Bradford and East Midlands, both of which have done phenomenally well in recent times and are providing more and more international links. However, we are constrained by the fact that the decision was not taken a long time ago, which is why we need to get on with it now.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I have written to the Secretary of State on numerous occasions, so he will know well that airspace management over parts of west Kent, particularly of night flights, is becoming a serious problem for many constituents. While you, Mr Speaker, can enjoy your nights undisturbed, my constituents sadly do not have that luxury.

Chris Grayling: That is an important point. I have been examining the issue and it is being dealt with in some innovative ways around the country. We will be able to glean from the consultation the public's views on how we can best manage night flights to minimise the impact on communities. Being able to follow more exact flight paths will make a significant difference and will address some of the issues that I have seen in the many communications that my hon. Friend has received from his constituents that have been passed to me.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Since Cardiff airport was rescued from loss-making private ownership by a public-private partnership, it has earned a top environmental award and is now the fastest-growing airport in the United Kingdom, with passenger numbers increasing 16% last year. Will the Secretary of State welcome the Welsh Government's purchase of the airport? The Airports Commission report says that connectivity will be improved between the regions and nations of Britain, so will he also guarantee that one of those links will be with Wales?

Chris Grayling: Cardiff airport has been a great success story, and I pay tribute to all those involved. The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) asked about what will happen in the coming years, and we are fortunate in having some very good regional airports that can not only take up the slack in the coming years but will be a crucial part of our overall airport strategy in the future.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As the Heathrow decision goes ahead, demand and inward investment in the west of England, bringing jobs and growth, will ever expand. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that our excellent west of England mayoral candidate, Tim Bowles, will be able to join me and colleagues from the west of England in expressing our views on joining the western main line to Heathrow?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friend knows, I have received extensive lobbying from his constituency and elsewhere, and from Tim, saying that that is an important part of what we are doing. Rail access to Heathrow will be a crucial part of ensuring that we can deliver the growth that we anticipate without having the impacts on the local environment that massively increased road traffic might generate. I assure my hon. Friend that we are working very hard on that.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I nearly missed the Secretary of State's statement this morning because my train was cancelled, which is not an unusual

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occurrence—it happened yesterday, too. There are already strains on the rail network around Heathrow airport, the draft NPS commits to no net increases in journeys by road and TfL estimates that the cost of upgrading rail infrastructure to meet that commitment will be in the region of £19 billion. Heathrow has committed only £1 billion of those costs. The Secretary of State has told me that he does not accept TfL's estimates, so what are his own estimates? Will they be funded by the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady and I had the same experience yesterday. My train was not cancelled but, as she is aware, a power failure caused problems on the route—that does happen, unfortunately.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Renationalise them.

Chris Grayling: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman says that, because of course Network Rail is in the public sector and it was a Network Rail problem. On the subject of airport expansion and the importance of ensuring that in the constituency of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and in other affected areas we do the right thing for local people, I assure her constituents that we will work immensely hard to listen to their views in the coming weeks and to look at ways of minimising the impact of airport expansion. It is something that we need to do very carefully and with sensitivity to those communities, but I simply do not accept TfL's figures. Heathrow airport will have an obligation to meet the targets that it has set, but I am afraid that TfL's estimate of £19 billion or £20 billion is just plucked from thin air. I see no evidence whatever to support that estimate.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the broad thrust of the statement, given the vital role that Heathrow plays as the hub airport not just for London but for the whole south-west of England. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that there will be proper co-ordination between this airport strategy and delivering the type of infrastructure, such as a resilient railway and the dualling of the A303, that will be vital to making sure that this is a success?

Chris Grayling: I can absolutely give that assurance. My hon. Friend knows that we are now moving ahead with the development process on the A303. I have made funding available for the next stage of work to develop the right solution to the problems at Dawlish. Of course, the other thing that will benefit the south-west is improved aviation links. Newquay airport, which is a bit further west than his constituency, is one of the regional airports that will benefit from that increased connectivity.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Secretary of State wants 250,000 extra flights over one of the most densely populated parts of Britain—2 million people live in the area—but he has no concrete proposals for dealing with congestion, noise or air quality. How is he going to deal with diesel and other emissions? What about increased freight, which will go by road, not rail? Does he not know that the increases in public transport

are already needed to meet local demand? Is he not just passing the buck to somebody else to solve these problems, and not for the first time?

Chris Grayling: No, I am not passing the buck to anyone else. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the plans for improved public transport connectivity around Heathrow, as I described, he will see that Crossrail, HS2, an improved Piccadilly line, the south-west rail access and the western rail access will entail the kind of transformation to access that Heathrow has never seen before. My belief is that, with tight commitments on the airport developers to ensure that they meet their promises, we can deliver this with lower-noise aircraft, a smart compensation package and benefits for the United Kingdom.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The economic case for HS2 is partly built on the fact that we would reduce the number of internal flights within the UK, yet reports suggest a dramatic increase in their number when Heathrow expands. Can my right hon. Friend clarify the position? What commitment is he making to expand regional airports so that they have international flights and people do not have to come to Heathrow?

Chris Grayling: On that latter point, if my hon. Friend takes a look at what some regional airports have achieved, he will see extraordinary amounts of international connectivity. I went to Bristol airport recently to open its expanded terminal building, which is going to serve more than 100 international destinations. Our regional airports are already a great success story, and this is meeting an additional need, not replacing what they do. The great benefit from HS2 is not only the connectivity it generates, but the capacity it releases. We have such congestion on the rest of our rail network. In his part of the world, HS2 alone will deliver thousands of extra commuter seats into Euston in the morning rush hour, in an area that is already heavily congested, by taking those express trains off the existing route. So the business case for HS2 is much broader.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I welcome today's statement and the comments that have been made about long, tedious, meandering shopping malls. I know the Minister accepts Northern Ireland's uniqueness, but 60% of those who fly from Northern Ireland go to Gatwick, Stansted and Luton. I heard what he has said about Gatwick, but can we make sure that we expand and look after all those airports, so that this suits everyone in Northern Ireland and the other regional airports?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely, that is important. Those airports are all a central part of our future strategy for aviation and for transport generally. The expansion of Heathrow will have direct benefits for Northern Ireland—for example, Heathrow is recommending a route to Belfast City. It is important that we maintain the best possible links from Northern Ireland to our principal hub airport and through it to those international destinations which are important to businesses in Northern Ireland.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): One may wonder why a Member who represents the hills and valleys of mid-Wales should be speaking in this

debate. It is simply because my constituents will benefit from the expansion of Heathrow. Therefore, may I ask my right hon. Friend to proceed as quickly as possible to development?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point, as the impacts of this proposal will be felt up and down the country. It will be felt in small businesses producing equipment for the new airport. It will be felt in colleges that are training apprentices to work on the new airport. It will affect the regional economies of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. He is absolutely right in what he says and I am grateful to him for his support.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On jobs at Heathrow, would support for the right hon. Gentleman's proposals not be strengthened if employers such as British Airways treated their workforce decently? He knows that the mixed fleet cabin crew dispute is still going on because this underpaid, mainly female, workforce are being treated appallingly by BA. Will he intervene and ask BA, "Why don't you make an improved offer and settle this matter?"

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman makes his case well, but he would not expect me to become involved in a dispute of this kind. I simply say that I very much hope that BA and the union will be able to reach a resolution that is mutually acceptable.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I welcome today's decision, as I think it is the right one for the UK. However, the Secretary of State will be aware that on 23 January we had a black alert on air pollution in London, with 12 local authority areas signalling red alerts. That means there was toxic air, and this is at crisis point in London. If we are going to reassure the people of London so that they continue to support this decision, we need a much more comprehensive air pollution strategy, not the Government's current plans, which the courts said are "woefully inadequate".

Chris Grayling: We have, of course, taken careful note of the High Court decision and such a plan is in development at the moment, but we are doing things in the meantime. In the autumn statement, we released hundreds of millions of pounds of additional funding for low-emission vehicles, including low-emission buses, and more money for charging points. This is clearly something we have to deal with now. We have to find the right way to migrate the nature of the cars and other vehicles on our roads to a point where they are causing much less of a pollution problem than they do at the moment.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Very shortly, there will be a UK mainland airport from which passengers and their luggage will be able to fly directly into a UK international airport without any security checks on passengers or their luggage. The decision by Highlands and Islands Airports to remove security checks, particularly for Campbeltown into Glasgow, is an unnecessary relaxation of a system that has worked well. Were the Government aware of that, and are they happy to see passengers and their luggage flying into a major UK airport without undergoing the security checks that every other passenger and their luggage has to undergo?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for drawing that to my attention. I was not aware of it but will look into it.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State may be aware that today the Scottish Government will pass their budget—an austerity budget that cuts £327 million from public services at the same time as slashing air passenger duty. Incidentally, the budget is supposed to go through with the support of the Green party. Will the Secretary of State tell me what assessment his Department has made of the legal requirement for air quality around Heathrow and other UK airports as a result of the slashing of air passenger duty in Scotland?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman identifies clearly the inconsistencies we all too often see in policies coming from both the Scottish National party and the Green party, and he makes his point articulately. On the emissions around Heathrow, as I said earlier, it is much more an issue of land transport—cars, buses, trucks and vans—than of aircraft. That is why we have to focus our efforts on dealing with the challenge on our roads rather than focusing on aviation. The issue will be dealt with and the pressure taken off Heathrow by our sorting out the issue on the roads.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As I explained in the debate on triggering article 50 yesterday, many in the aviation sector think that Brexit may lead to the sector shrinking, thus negating the need for an additional runway. Given the fact that air service agreements lie outside conventional trade agreements and the ambit of the World Trade Organisation, will the Minister confirm whether any talks have taken place with the Trump Administration on a US-UK open skies agreement?

Chris Grayling: I can confirm that no talks have yet taken place, but I am expecting to meet my US counterpart in around a month's time. Discussions took place with the previous Administration and there is good will on both sides to make sure that there is no hiatus in transatlantic air traffic.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I welcome today's statement, particularly the talk about connectivity with HS2, which will of course be greater if we get an HS2 hub at Crewe. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, once there are three runways at Heathrow, the proportion of slots available to domestic traffic will remain at least the same as it is now?

Chris Grayling: I am looking carefully at how best to do this, because I do not want a situation in which we retain a proportion of slots, but they are always at 11 o'clock at night. It might not be simply about slots; it might be about getting the right mechanism to make sure that there is the necessary capacity to ensure that connectivity. I probably will not say simply that it will be x slots; we will want to make sure that the package is right to ensure the fair treatment of regional airports.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State will know that 9,000 people have died unnecessarily in London because of poor air quality. Will he guarantee that, post-Brexit, the Government

[Tom Brake]

will not dump EU air-quality regulations? He did not give that guarantee in response to an earlier question from the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). What will he do if the airport cannot be delivered within the legal air obligation limits—proceed anyway, change the air-quality objectives, or pull the plug on the runway?

Chris Grayling: It is very clear that the airport will not be able to secure its development consent order if it cannot demonstrate its ability to meet those targets. It is binding: it will have to achieve them. On the broader strategy, after we have left the European Union, the air quality standards in place in this country will be UK air quality standards, but it is not the Government's intention to reduce air quality standards; it is our intention to deliver a strategy that cleans up our air, which we will do shortly.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State's airspace policy consultation include new measures to protect the public from the danger of drones? Given the recent reports of airspace near misses, will he act now, before a tragedy occurs?

Chris Grayling: I can confirm to the hon. Lady that we are indeed consulting on the best regulatory framework for drones. I suspect that that will inevitably lead to some form of licensing for drones of a scale that could be a threat to the public and some limitations on where they can be used. We are listening to the views of the public, the drone development industry and others with a relevant interest to work out the best framework.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, welcome the launch of the consultation. Will the Secretary of State commit to a vote on the national policy statement by the end of this year? I also welcome the inclusion in the statement of the fact that Northern Ireland will enjoy the benefits of Heathrow expansion. In the statement, he refers to six more domestic routes across the UK. Will he ensure that Northern Ireland is one of those?

Chris Grayling: It is certainly my hope and aim that we can have that vote by the end of the year, because I want to get on with this as quickly as possible. Belfast City is one of the airports identified by Heathrow as being a likely extra route, and certainly it is right that Northern Ireland should have a proper slice of this cake when it is there.

Business of the House

11.35 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): With permission, I should like to make a statement about the business for next week.

MONDAY 6 FEBRUARY—Consideration in Committee of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill (day 1).

TUESDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Continuation of consideration in Committee of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill (day 2).

WEDNESDAY 8 FEBRUARY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill (day 3) followed by remaining stages of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill.

THURSDAY 9 FEBRUARY—Debate on a motion on Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories followed by debate on a motion on governance of the Football Association. The subjects for debate were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 10 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 20 February will include:

MONDAY 20 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [*Lords*] followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the High Speed Rail (London-West Midlands) Bill.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 9 and 20 February will be:

THURSDAY 9 FEBRUARY—Debate on the sixth report from the Science and Technology Committee on smart monitoring of electricity and gas followed by debate on the effect of the state pension changes on working-class women.

MONDAY 20 FEBRUARY—Debate on e-petitions relating to a state visit by President Donald Trump.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I thank the Leader of the House for the statement? I note that we still do not know when the House is rising for the summer recess, so I ask him again to announce that date.

May I add the Opposition's voice to your letter, Mr Speaker, and the letter from the Lord Speaker about a date for a debate on restoration and renewal? Members need to know what is going on and engineers and everybody else need to keep the House safe, so the sooner that we can have that debate the better.

Mr Speaker, you will not believe this, but on this day in 2004, Roger Federer began his 237th consecutive week run as world No. 1, and that record remains unbeaten. He has now won the Australian Open—possibly because you, Mr Speaker, interviewed him. Roger Federer has had longer to get to the final of the Australian Open than Parliament has had to debate triggering article 50.

This is not a democratic Government. The Government thought that they could trigger article 50 on their own, but the Supreme Court dragged them back to Parliament. The Prime Minister said that the Supreme Court did

not tell them what form the Bill should take, but drafting the legislation is the job of the Executive. It is the Court's job to interpret that legislation.

The Government produced a two-clause Bill, but they were clearly having a laugh, because in the first line, it says, "The Prime Minister may—". They used the word "may" instead of, possibly, "must". There is no discretion in this. In order to leave the EU, as the people of Britain have voted for, all the Prime Minister has to do is to give notice to trigger article 50; that is all article 50 is about.

This is a secretive Government who failed to tell Parliament about the misfiring of a missile. That is why Her Majesty's Opposition has been asking for a plan from the end of last year and for a White Paper since the Prime Minister made a speech to Lancaster House—not this House—which will be published only today.

We cannot trust this Government, because the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was among those who said that £350 million would go to the NHS if the UK leaves. That has now been proved to be incorrect, so how can we trust them now? That is why the Prime Minister has to report back to Parliament on the deals. Will the Leader of the House, in the interests of the British people and democracy, ensure that there is a vote on the final deal made by the Government so that we can protect workers' rights and EU citizens, retain tariff-free access to the single market and all EU tax avoidance and tax evasion measures, consult with the devolved Governments and ask the Government to publish any impact assessments?

As the Prime Minister's words yesterday showed, this is not the Government of the NHS. Could we have a statement on the Prime Minister's response to the letter from 2,000 senior clinicians who said that they have reached unacceptable levels of safety concerns for their patients, and could that statement also say whether hospitals are operating at safe staffing levels? Will the Government publish a response from the Prime Minister to the letter from the Chairs of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, the Public Accounts Committee and the Select Committee on Health?

Now we see the recklessness of the Government's policies. They changed NHS bursaries, which has resulted in fewer people wanting to become nurses. It is the same recklessness that was shown by the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who now says that he regrets cancelling Building Schools for the Future. Tell that to the Joseph Leckie Academy in my constituency, which had its allocation cancelled; children now have to be sent home when it rains heavily. With 46% of schools losing funding under the new funding formula, could we have a statement on why the £384 million that was in the education budget has been clawed back by the Treasury? Schools deserve the money now, not in a budget giveaway.

The Leader of the House has failed to respond to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) about her Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, having said two weeks ago that he was not in a position to make a statement. Will he now state the position on that Bill?

The Speaker of the House of Representatives of Burma, Win Myint, was here last week at your invitation, Mr Speaker. Sadly, a key constitutional expert and lawyer

for the National League for Democracy, Ko Ni, was assassinated in Burma this week. He just happened to be a Muslim. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to do all he can to support the Burmese Government in their quest for peace?

Finally, it is World Cancer day on 4 February. Every hon. Member will have been touched in some way or know of someone who has been affected by the disease, so will the Leader of the House join me in thanking all the researchers looking for a cure? On Saturday, let us remember all those who have lost their lives to the disease, wish all those well who are currently going through treatment, and celebrate with those who have beaten the disease.

Mr Lidington: May I first associate myself with the hon. Lady's words about World Cancer day? It is probably the case that there is no Member in any party of this House who has not been touched in some way by the case of a relative or a dear friend who has had to fight—sometimes successfully and sometimes sadly not—against this scourge. Like her, I would celebrate the advances of medical science, the skills of oncologists and others who diagnose and treat cancer, and the courage of cancer survivors and their relatives who give them such critical support. Let us keep in our thoughts and prayers those who have been bereaved as a consequence of cancer, and give thanks to those staff in the NHS, and in the voluntary and charitable sector, who work to provide specialist nursing care, including hospice treatment, to people who are having to face the end of their lives.

I turn to the other points raised by the hon. Lady. I want to be able to give the House some news, as soon as possible, on the summer recess and on the restoration and renewal programme, but I am not able to do so today. My understanding is that the Committee to consider the Bill of the hon. Member for North West Durham (Pat Glass) has now been appointed, but has not yet met.

The hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) mentioned the European Union. I really do think that the line of questioning she pursued this morning was something of a distraction therapy to try to divert attention from the blatant divisions within her party, with different members of the shadow Cabinet and the Front Bench dropping off the perch with every news bulletin. For a two-clause Bill, the second clause of which is simply the short title of the Bill, two full days on Second Reading, including going to midnight on Tuesday, and up to three days in a Committee of the whole House, seems to me a perfectly reasonable allocation of time.

Let me turn to the hon. Lady's points about school funding. The money to which she referred was allocated by the Treasury to the Department for Education explicitly for the purpose of supporting the full shift of all schools to academy status. The Government, having reconsidered that policy in light of public representations and representations in this place, altered their policy. Therefore, that money was not needed, since those schools were not going to transfer to academy status.

The hon. Lady's point about Burma is well made. I shall make sure that it is passed back to the Foreign Secretary, but I can give her an unqualified assurance that this Government will continue, through the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development,

[Mr Lidington]

to work to support the cause of building democracy, human rights and community reconciliation inside that country.

Finally, the hon. Lady rightly paid tribute to the stupendous achievement of Roger Federer. It is not only tennis aficionados such as you, Mr Speaker, who will have cheered at his success. Somebody in professional tennis who is in their mid-30s is at quite an advanced age, and there is perhaps a message of hope to all of us that age is just a number and that we can strive for greater achievement whatever age we reach.

Mr Speaker: What a splendid note on which to finish. The man is an inspiration.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Lidington or Federer?

Mr Speaker: I do not wish to be discourteous to the Leader of the House, but I actually had Federer in mind.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): May we have a debate on the power of clinical commissioning groups in the NHS and the fact that they are unaccountable to the public? Is the Leader of the House aware that a clinical commissioning group covering part of my constituency plans to withdraw services from Bridlington hospital and Driffield hospital? That is not on account of cost, but the clinical commissioning group seems hell-bent on doing it, despite overwhelming public opposition. Does he accept that these plans are totally unacceptable? If we cannot have a debate, will he draw my concerns to the attention of the Secretary of State for Health?

Mr Lidington: I will not only undertake to draw my right hon. Friend's concerns to the attention of the Secretary of State, but I can point him towards Health questions on Tuesday 7 February, when he may have the opportunity to question Ministers directly about this issue. Clearly, the details of the health service in his area are not something on which I would be able to comment, but the principle here is that clinical commissioning groups should engage in proper public consultation in their local area as they draw up sustainability and transformation plans for that locality. Ultimately, the local authority, through its health overview committee, has the right, if it believes that services are being wrongly and adversely restructured, to refer the matter to the Secretary of State.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

We like our anniversaries in this place, and I support everything the Leader of the House said about World Cancer day in a couple of days' time. However, today is groundhog day. I know that most days seem like groundhog day in this place, and I do not know about you, Mr Speaker, but I always seem to wake up to the news that another Labour Front Bencher has resigned—perhaps Punxsutawney Phil can get a place in the Labour shadow Cabinet.

Three cheers for the Leader of the House for finally getting the White Paper for the Brexit Bill; it has only taken half the time the Bill will take to go through this Chamber, but we have got it at last. Let us hope that it is quite close to the 650 pages we had in the independence White Paper, although I doubt that very much.

This is a Bill the Government did not want and that they are forcing through at breakneck speed, but they must be prepared to listen to the hundreds of amendments that will be tabled to it. I have noticed that in the programme motion there is no programming for a Report stage. That must mean that the Government will arrogantly reject every single amendment without proper consideration. Why are we not getting a Report stage on the Bill as it goes through the House?

May we have a statement on the Government's intention regarding a second Scottish independence referendum? There is a piece in *The Herald* today from the Defence Secretary, who seems to rule out entirely a second Scottish independence referendum. We have just heard him on Radio Scotland, where he seemed to backtrack furiously on what he had just said. The Scottish Tories' leader has said that it would be wrong to rule out a second referendum. Believe me, a Government with only one MP in Scotland telling the Scottish people that they will not have a say in their future could not be a bigger gift to the SNP.

I listened carefully to the response by the Leader of the House to several of my hon. Friends who asked about how EVEL would be applied to the great repeal Bill. He must totally rule it out now. We cannot have a Bill as important as this being considered by two classes of Member of Parliament in this House—one class of Member who has a say in everything, and then the Scottish Members, who can take part only in some of it. Believe me, that could not be a bigger gift to us either.

Mr Lidington: In response to the hon. Gentleman's points about the EU withdrawal Bill, I have to remind him that, first of all, this House voted overwhelmingly for the referendum to take place and for the decision to be referred to the British people; and, secondly, only a matter of weeks ago the House again voted overwhelmingly to endorse the Prime Minister's timetable for triggering article 50 before the end of March this year. The timetable on this two-clause Bill is designed to ensure that those objectives are upheld.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about Report and Committee stages, the purpose of Report is normally to enable the House as a whole to consider the Bill as it comes out of Committee, where it has been considered by a small number of Members upstairs. On this occasion, we have a full two days and time, if needed, on the third day for consideration of amendments by a Committee of the whole House. The hon. Gentleman is really asking for a further extension of the Committee of the whole House.

Finally, on the hon. Gentleman's points about Scotland, the Prime Minister could not have been more emphatic, on numerous occasions at the Dispatch Box, in making it plain that we are determined to consult the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive about how their interests, and those of the people whom they represent, are affected by the process of withdrawal from the European Union and the negotiations on which we shall shortly embark.

The EVEL arrangements in our Standing Orders can apply only if three conditions are met: first, that the matter in question is devolved to Scotland; secondly, that the same matter relates to England only, or to England and Wales only; and, thirdly, that you, Mr Speaker, have certified the amendment or the Bill as falling within the definitions prescribed under our Standing Orders. Although I cannot possibly comment on a Bill that has not yet been published, it seems to me—given that international agreements are, under the Scotland Act 1998, defined as reserved, not devolved, matters—that the principles embodied in our Standing Orders ought to give the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues considerable reassurance.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): This week, three of the six district councils in Dorset voted to keep their own sovereignty and independence. Despite that, last night the chief executive of Dorset County Council announced that other councils in Dorset would apply for a hostile takeover. May we have an early debate on how to prevent ineffective and wasteful councils from seeking to seize by compulsion the assets and powers of their financially sound neighbours?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is moving on from the sovereignty of Parliament to the sovereignty of Christchurch. A number of us in the House are very aware that there are often different and competing views—shall I put it that way?—among different local authorities in the localities we represent about the possible shape of future local government reform. As I can see from your reaction, Mr Speaker, you and I are both extremely familiar with this dilemma. As my hon. Friend knows, his view and the views of other colleagues representing Dorset constituencies will be attended to very closely by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and I urge him to continue to ensure that the views of his constituents are forthrightly represented in that quarter.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May we have a debate about our so-called national airline, British Airways? The manner in which it is treating its workforce, particularly the mixed fleet cabin crew, is a disgrace. They are mainly women and they are low-paid, yet the airline is refusing to settle on the basis of a reasonable offer to them. Would not a debate enable us to expose how our so-called national airline treats its workforce?

Mr Lidington: Although that is obviously a matter for the company, trade unions and employees concerned, the Government hope that all employers take seriously their responsibilities to ensure that their workforce is fairly rewarded. I cannot offer the hon. Gentleman a debate in Government time, but this might be a subject on which to seek an Adjournment debate.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Last week, I attended in the House of Lords a meeting, organised by the Cross Bencher and human rights campaigner Baroness Cox, at which three very brave women told us their harrowing tales of how they have been treated and the impact that sharia councils have had on their lives. It is a disgrace that we have this alternative form of justice in our country. May we have a debate on that to make sure

everybody in this country is treated equally under the same law and we do not have sharia councils treating women in such an appalling manner?

Mr Lidington: It is very important that all of us in this place uphold wholeheartedly the rights that both men and women have under the law of the United Kingdom, and emphasise that whatever private or community dispute resolution arrangements may or may not exist, the legal rights of women and men under law trump any such informal agreements.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): May we have a debate about the vexatious use of family courts by controlling and abusive ex-partners who seek to use custody as a way of harassing, intimidating and impoverishing people—often their wives—in order to continue the controlling, coercive and bullying behaviour that they exemplified throughout their relationship?

Mr Lidington: Like the hon. Lady, I have had cases in which constituents have come to me about that kind of harassment. There may be an opportunity for the hon. Lady to highlight the issue via an Adjournment debate. Ultimately, we have to accept that in individual cases we must rely on the good sense and professionalism of the judge who is presiding in the particular case to hear and make a judgment about the evidence put forward by the two parties and come to a fair resolution.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): Mr Speaker, if you visited my constituency, I would certainly take you to one of our three fabulous livestock auction markets. Alongside our livery yards and riding schools, they are key to the fabric of our rural community, yet their future is threatened by eye-watering rises in business rates. Will my right hon. Friend provide time in this House for us to debate why rural businesses are being so unfairly penalised?

Mr Lidington: In my hon. Friend's relatively short time in the House, he has already emerged as a formidable champion not only of the Richmond constituency, but of North Yorkshire and rural businesses more generally. The position nationally is that the business rate revaluation will, overall, benefit businesses in rural areas across England, and no small property will have an increase of more than 5% from 1 April because of the transitional relief scheme. If my hon. Friend would care to write to me about the particular cases of the auction marts in his constituency, I undertake to draw them to the attention of the Communities Secretary.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): This week we spent 17 hours discussing the European Union, but we did not spend a single minute on the crisis in Yemen, where half the population are still starving. Last Sunday, President Trump authorised the first attack on al-Qaeda in Yemen, causing the death of one American soldier and 14 casualties. When can we have an update on the urgent situation in Yemen? We hold the pen at the UN on this subject. We desperately need a ceasefire. When can we know what is happening?

Mr Lidington: There will be questions to the Foreign Secretary on 21 February, which will provide an opportunity to raise Yemen. The right hon. Gentleman may wish to

[Mr Lidington]

take other parliamentary opportunities available to him to focus on Yemen at greater length. The Government have never concealed the fact that trying to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict will be a difficult business. If there were an easy answer it would have been found by now. We continue to support the work of the UN special envoy on Yemen, who is striving ceaselessly to bring about the ceasefire that both the right hon. Gentleman and I wish to see. The Department for International Development continues to do what it can to bring humanitarian assistance to those who are in such need.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): This week, a petition raised by the parents of April Jones, who lived in Machynlleth in my constituency, reached 100,000. April was just five years old when she was abducted and murdered. The person responsible, Mark Bridger, is now in prison. The petition calls for tougher sentences for those looking at child pornography on the internet and greater control of internet search engines. Will the Leader of the House urge the Petitions Committee to bring forward an early debate on April's law as soon as possible?

Mr Lidington: I understand completely the way in which this appalling and tragic case has shocked the community of Montgomeryshire and the wish of so many people to see this debated in Parliament. As my hon. Friend will understand, it is not for the Government but the Petitions Committee to allocate time to debate e-petitions, but I am sure the Chair of the Petitions Committee will want to consider carefully the case he has made.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): As the Government hurtle headlong into Brexit Britain, may we please have a debate in Government time on our future plans for international trade policy? The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State are jet-setting around the world promising all sorts of deals to President Trump and President Erdogan, but the House has still not had the opportunity to discuss the principles that will underwrite future trade deals or the process we will follow to ratify them. Is this, as I suspect, just another example of Brexit-on-the-hoof without policy and without scrutiny by Parliament?

Mr Lidington: I would have hoped that, even while expressing her concerns, the hon. Lady might have paid some tribute to the energy and determination of my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Department for International Trade ministerial team, who are actively seeking to ensure we have the best trading opportunities around the world after our departure from the European Union. There are questions to the Department for International Trade on Thursday 9 February—next week—but of course the Government have already had a number of debates in Government time on different aspects of our departure from the European Union. I shall make sure we look seriously at her case for a further debate focusing on international trade.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How will we use the time next week if you, Mr Speaker, do not select any of these ridiculous and impertinent amendments?

Mr Lidington: I think the procedure with regard to Committee of the whole House to a certain extent spares you that duty, Mr Speaker, because it falls to the Chairman of Ways and Means. He will, as always, be guided by the rules on order, and ensure that they are properly upheld.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my phenomenally talented 16-year-old constituent, Ali, from Dewsbury, who has just rejected a multimillion pound deal for his latest business venture? Will the right hon. Gentleman facilitate a debate on how the Government can help other young aspiring entrepreneurs?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join the hon. Lady in congratulating her constituent Ali. The more we can do to encourage young people not just to understand enterprise but to see setting up an enterprise and giving employment to others as their vocation, the better. I will pass on her case to my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary, but I know that all parts of Government will want to ensure many more Alis in all our constituencies.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Excitement is mounting in Cleethorpes following the announcement yesterday of a visit next week from the northern powerhouse Minister. Earlier this week, the Humber local enterprise partnership held a showcase event here at Westminster, attended by four Ministers, at which the advantages of economic development in northern Lincolnshire and the wider Humber region were shown to the guests. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on the success of the Government's northern powerhouse policy?

Mr Lidington: I can see that even now crowds are sleeping out in the streets ahead of the ministerial visit and that Cleethorpes is scarcely able to contain its jubilation as the bunting is strung from lampposts. My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government's approach to economic and industrial strategy is, in particular, to ensure that those parts of the UK that have not benefited from economic growth in recent decades in the same way as the more prosperous cities and regions are able to do so, and that certainly includes Cleethorpes and the other towns and cities in north Lincolnshire. I hope, for example, that there will be some beneficial spin-offs for the wider north Lincolnshire and Humber region from Hull's designation as this year's city of culture. I know that Ministers are keen to champion my hon. Friend's work.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The Government control the vast majority of business and time in Parliament. Considering the crisis in the NHS and the fact that every Member wants to raise the crisis in relation to their own constituency, can I propose to the Government that before Easter an entire week be exclusively dedicated to the NHS and the crisis in it? I would predict that even in a week we would struggle to find time for every Member to outline their concerns.

Mr Lidington: All Members, whichever political party they represent, follow closely the challenges and successes of the NHS, particularly in their own constituencies, and are keen to raise these matters with Ministers. There are Health questions next week. I cannot promise

the hon. Gentleman a full week of debate, in the way he wishes, but I would point out that the Government are following through on their commitment to put into the NHS the money that NHS England itself said it needed for its transformation and reform plans. At the 2015 general election, his party refused to match that pledge.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the replacement of the pound coin in March? I am not convinced that the general public have been sufficiently informed that the coin as now constituted will not be legal tender in October or that the slots in vending machines will be able to cope with the new 12-sided coins.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a good point. On 1 January we launched a campaign to raise awareness and to encourage the public to return the current, round £1 coins. The message is clear: if someone has a £1 coin sitting at home or in their wallet, they need either to spend it or return it to their bank by 15 October, when it ceases to become legal tender. For some months we have been running a separate campaign to support retailers and other businesses in preparing for the new coin, so that slot machines, machines in car parks and so on will all have been altered.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Why does the Leader of the House not come clean and admit that his failure to plan for a Report stage in the Brexit Bill means that he intends to turn down every single amendment from the 128 pages of serious amendments? That railroading—for that is what it is—means that the amendments that lie undebated and not voted on will be longer than the White Paper, which, by the look of it, is not substantial enough to stop a door, never mind start an international negotiation.

Mr Lidington: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The reality is that he is opposed in principle to the Bill, and he seeks to argue that parliamentary procedure should be prolonged so that, in effect, we go beyond the March deadline for triggering article 50. The Prime Minister has set out the plans to be followed which this House has overwhelmingly endorsed. The question of how many amendments are selected for debate is a matter not for the Government, but for the Chairman of Ways and Means, who will decide which of the amendments are in order and which are not. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has studied the programme motion that we voted through last night, so he will have seen that it allocates time for the different categories into which the amendments that he described fall. We will have perfectly sound opportunities next week, during the three days that are available for debate, to go through all the amendments in sufficient detail.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): As chair of the all-party group for communities engagement, I refer to my letter to the Prime Minister and to the point I made to the Foreign Secretary earlier this week about the treatment of UK citizens at border controls around the world. Can we please have an urgent statement or a debate on that matter?

Mr Lidington: The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are both reflecting on that issue carefully following the recommendations of my hon. Friend and the all-party group. I assure him that the Foreign Office

and our network of posts around the world take up individual cases when they come to their attention. However, in the light of what he said, we will look at the case for a systemic procedure for recording such cases.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Yesterday, with the greatest reluctance, many Members genuflected to the authority of public opinion as expressed in a referendum. Will the House show the same respect to the unprecedented number of people who have signed two petitions since Saturday? Some 1,800,000 people have expressed their outrage at the prospect of President Trump enjoying a state visit here, whereas 200,000 have supported the invitation. Can we ensure that we show respect to people's sense of horror by having not only a debate in the House, but a vote among hon. Members?

Mr Lidington: The unique feature of the EU referendum was that Parliament passed an Act that expressly referred the decision to the British people. I certainly felt that we were honour-bound to accept the verdict. As for the state visit by the President of the United States, of course people are free to express their opinions, and it is right that the Petitions Committee has allocated time for the petition to be debated. The Government take the view that a state visit is perfectly appropriate. The relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States of America—including with its elected head of state—matters to the security of our citizens and the geopolitical role of the west, as well as to our commercial and industrial interests. For those reasons, it is right that we should welcome the elected head of the United States of America in the way we have his predecessors.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday I had the privilege of listening to Susan Pollack, the noted holocaust survivor, when she addressed Belmont synagogue and a large group of year 8 students from across Harrow. She asked, "What do you think of when I say, 'What does a Jew look like?'" There came no answer, yet we have heard about the publication today of the report from CST about the terrible, dramatic increase in the number of anti-Semitic incidents. May we have a debate in Government time on that report, and more importantly, on what action they will take to stamp down on anti-Semitism?

Mr Lidington: The best thing I can say is that all of us, within the Government and outside, were appalled by the reported increase in hate crime. There has been progress in tackling that, but even one case is too many. We have published a new cross-Government hate crime action plan to try to tackle all forms of hate crime, but all of us across the House need to make it clear that Jewish people in Britain, like people from all communities, must be able to live their lives free from fear of either verbal or physical attack. In order to tackle anti-Semitism we need to implement effectively our strong legislation against religious discrimination and racially and religiously motivated crime, but there is also a responsibility on us all as individuals and as members of political parties—and people who have leadership positions in our constituencies—to make it clear in public again and again, if necessary, that anti-Semitism has no place whatsoever in this country.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): May we have a debate on property acquired by companies such as G4S in relation to the

[Tom Blenkinsop]

dispersal of asylum seekers? In my constituency an independent councillor, Mary Lanigan, has used that as an opportunity to spread hatred and to divide the community along the lines of race and religion by repeatedly using inaccurate phrases such as “illegal asylum seeker”. Her contact details have even appeared on an abusive letter that has been circulated to residents to whip up certain emotions, for obvious reasons. Can we have a debate on G4S properties and on the councillors’ code of conduct in relation to the properties being dispersed among communities?

Mr Lidington: This country has a proud history of granting asylum to people who need our protection. We are committed to providing safe and secure accommodation while applications from individuals are being considered. We are clear that asylum seekers should be accommodated only in properties that are both decent and safe. Home Office Ministers work closely with their contractors to ensure that those standards are met. Where a contractor falls short, we work with them to try to sort those issues out as rapidly as possible. If the hon. Gentleman would like to let me have details, I will pass them to the Home Secretary.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Kevin Horkin, a Ribble Valley resident, has asked me to be a trustee of his charity, the British Pet Role Trust. High on its agenda is looking at legislation relating to the theft of pets. We know that is on the increase—BBC figures show an increase of 22% in the theft of dogs over the past two years—and some police forces do not properly collate that information. Part of the problem is that pets are seen as chattels and not as living creatures. May we have a debate on legislation relating to pets, so that we can get legislation on the statute book to protect them properly?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. In this place we should never underestimate the affection that millions of our constituents have for their pets, and the important therapeutic role that pets often play by giving people companionship who might otherwise be at risk of great loneliness. I will refer his request to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but in the meantime my hon. Friend might want to pursue opportunities to highlight his concerns through the Backbench Business Committee or an Adjournment debate.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am sure that the Leader of the House will wish to join me in congratulating Professor Peter Mathieson, who has just been appointed the new principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, and also pay tribute to Tim O’Shea, who has kept it in the top 20 of the world’s universities. Will the Leader of the House use the time for debate on the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill next week to look seriously at the Labour party’s new clause 6, which could give Professor Mathieson a real boost in his new principalship at Edinburgh University, by saying that EU nationals can not only stay and work here, but are very welcome?

Mr Lidington: I am very happy to congratulate Professor Mathieson on his appointment and Tim O’Shea on what he achieved during his tenure at Edinburgh University. I have visited the university myself and have seen what a formidable institute of learning it is. As for the hon. Gentleman’s point about the Bill, it is for the Chairman of Ways and Means, not the Government, to determine which amendments are selected for debate. However, the Government’s clear position is that we want to reach an agreement at the earliest possible opportunity in the negotiations that safeguards the rights of EU citizens here and, equally, the rights of United Kingdom citizens living in other EU countries. As is spelled out in the White Paper, on which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will be giving a statement shortly, we want to ensure that our future relationship embraces opportunities for us to continue to benefit from the brightest and the best people coming to study at universities throughout the United Kingdom.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Following the announcement that the excellent Mid Wales Holiday Lets company in my constituency is a well-deserved finalist in the Wales business of the year competition, may we have a debate about the importance of holiday lets to our tourism industry and the regulatory environment that surrounds them?

Mr Lidington: Having enjoyed many family holidays in holiday lets in Wales, may I endorse every word that my hon. Friend says and congratulate Mid Wales Holiday Lets on being a finalist in the Welsh business of the year competition? The holiday letting sector makes a hugely important contribution to the tourism business in Wales and the United Kingdom in general. It is a key provider of employment and income, particularly in the rural parts of our country.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I understand that a debate on the comprehensive economic and trade agreement between the EU and Canada has been scheduled for Monday next week. The Leader of the House is aware of the intense interest in the House about this controversial treaty, so can he explain why the House has been given so little notice of the debate and why it is not taking place on the Floor of the House, as the European Scrutiny Committee, under the excellent chairmanship of the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), strongly recommended?

Mr Lidington: I do not think that the notification given is unusual in terms of the period of notice given for European Committee debates. Having had to respond to many of those debates over the years, I can say to the hon. Lady that having to reply to up to 60 minutes of questions in a European Committee is a much tougher outing for a Minister than giving a 10-minute response to a 90-minute debate here in the Chamber. Two-and-a-half hours are allocated for the Committee and 90 minutes are allocated for a debate on the Floor of the House. Nevertheless, as I said earlier in response to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), who spoke from the SNP Benches, I will additionally undertake to explore whether in future there will be the possibility of a general debate about EU exit and international trade, in which case the hon.

Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) would have a further opportunity to express her views on the Canada deal.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I was listening to “Good Morning Scotland” on Radio Scotland earlier this week. Lord Lawson was being interviewed, and I was struck by the fact that the interview was from his house in France. Can we have a statement on which Members of the House of Lords actually live in this country at a time when we are engaging in Brexit, the destination of which could mean that our citizens have fewer rights to work abroad, while citizens from the European Union living here face an uncertain future and will perhaps be unable to work?

Mr Lidington: The other House has its rules about the domiciliary status of its Members and it is for the House of Lords to police those rules. It was interesting during the referendum campaign to note that some of those who campaigned strongly to leave also took great advantage of freedom of movement. I hope that in the new arrangements between the United Kingdom and the European Union we will end up with a state of affairs where tourists travelling for long or short stays in each other’s countries can still proceed with as little hassle as possible.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): HSBC Bank has announced that it is closing its last branch in my Ogmore constituency, in the town of Maesteg. This will cause considerable upset and distress to lots of constituents, not only in the town but in the surrounding villages and communities. Can we have a statement or debate on the impact of bank closures on towns and villages across the country, and the need for banking to remain as local as possible? Does the Leader of the House also agree that “the world’s local bank” is perhaps becoming a little bit less local?

Mr Lidington: As I have said before at this Dispatch Box, I think there is a responsibility on banks, particularly when a bank knows that it has the last branch in a community, to weigh very carefully whether it should move towards closure. There are clearly commercial pressures as more customers, both businesses and individuals, move towards online banking. There is also a read-across to what the Government are seeking to do by bringing high-speed broadband to rural communities more quickly, because the more people in rural areas are able to have good-quality broadband in their homes or business premises, the more likely they are to take advantage of the opportunities of online banking, which people in the cities already have.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Most of the rights that workers enjoy, such as paid holiday leave and maternity and paternity pay, are protections derived from our EU membership. Given that the Conservative party has now styled itself as the party of the workers, can we have a statement to the House that sets out the Government’s guarantees, which have still not been given, on the continuation of those rights post-Brexit?

Mr Lidington: I have to say to the hon. Lady that I have sat in this Chamber several times now and heard the Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Secretary

of State for Exiting the European Union say in terms that we will protect workers’ rights. After all, some of those workers’ rights—parental leave, for example—go further in this country than those that are mandated under European law. I really think she should be careful before giving credence to these scare stories.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was very disappointed to learn last week that an important funding bid for my constituency was rejected when the latest round of growth deals was announced. What was also disappointing was the lack of transparency about why the bid, which could have transformed Ellesmere Port town centre, was unsuccessful. May we have a debate to enable the Government to explain why investment in my community is not a priority for them?

Mr Lidington: With all those growth deal rounds, there have been more bids from local enterprise partnerships and local authorities than could possibly be met, given that funds are finite, however generous they may be. I suggest that if the hon. Gentleman seeks an Adjournment debate, he would have the opportunity to extract a detailed ministerial reply.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make Government time available for a debate on the impact that Brexit has already had on some of my local businesses and others? They include a business that is having to scale back on expansion because it has been hard hit by the drop in the pound, one that is losing EU employees and another that is worried about the increasing skills shortages among teachers, doctors and engineers. Such a debate would also enable the Government to set out what their analysis of the impact of coming out of the single market will be on British jobs.

Mr Lidington: There will be opportunities next week, and certainly when the repeal Bill is introduced after the Queen’s Speech later this year, for all those issues to be explored. The Government’s objective, following the decision that the people took in the referendum, is to make sure that British businesses have the greatest possible freedom of access to, and freedom to operate within, the single European market, and that European businesses have the same opportunities here.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): May I return the Leader of the House to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) following the earlier statement from the Secretary of State for Transport? We are still in the dark on the issue raised by my hon. Friend. May we have a debate on, or scrutiny of, the proposal to allow passenger aircraft to fly to Glasgow international airport with zero security checks? If security is to be taken seriously, it should be borne in mind that the knowledge that Barra, Tiree and Campbeltown airports will have zero security surely presents risks, and, more widely, makes a mockery of security provision at all airports.

Mr Lidington: I will ensure that those points are referred to the Transport Secretary, and will ask for a reply to be sent to the hon. Gentleman.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Schools in Cheshire West and Chester were already receiving £400 less per pupil than the national average before the Government recently slashed a further £4.2 million from our education budget, and that will rise to £6.4 million in the next couple of years. May we have a debate on schools funding, so that we can establish why the Government's new fair funding formula apparently provides neither fairness nor, indeed, funding?

Mr Lidington: Obviously the hon. Gentleman is championing his constituency, but I think he overlooks the point that for many years schools in different parts of the country have received hugely differing levels of expenditure per pupil. The purpose of the new national funding formula is to ensure equality between children, and children's opportunities, in those different local authorities. Furthermore, we will maintain the pupil premium, which is worth £2.5 billion this year alone and will provide extra support for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. We shall only be able to continue to fund education at current or increased levels if we continue to have a strong economy, creating the wealth and economic growth that make such spending possible.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May we have a debate about how we can keep Tory Front Benchers awake when important matters relating to Scotland's future are being discussed in the House? I have received a number of emails and other communications from concerned constituents who were watching television last night and observed that the Deputy Leader of the House appeared to be taking a nap while my SNP colleagues and I were speaking. Does the Leader of the House agree that when the Secretary of State for Scotland cannot be bothered to attend such a debate, it is important for his colleagues to remain awake, no matter how dismissive they may be of Scotland's interests?

Mr Lidington: I think my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House was concentrating hard on the words of the hon. and learned Lady and her colleagues, as he always does. I assure her, in all seriousness, that the Prime Minister has made it clear to every member of the Cabinet that she considers it vital for us all to have in mind, all the time, the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom as we approach the different aspects of the forthcoming policy negotiations.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Given what the Leader of the House has just said, is it not disgraceful that, according to this morning's edition of *The Herald*, the Secretary of State for Defence has said that the UK Government will veto any legitimate demand from the Scottish Government for an independence referendum? May we have a debate in Government time on the question of where sovereignty lies in Scotland? Is it not the case that when the Government talk about taking back control, what they mean is taking back control from the people of Scotland?

Mr Lidington: If I recall rightly, what my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary said to *The Herald* was that respect works both ways. It is right for the Government of the United Kingdom to respect fully both the devolution settlements and the competences of the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament,

and the interests of Scotland within the United Kingdom in reserved matters, including our European negotiations; but the Scottish Government, and members of the SNP, should also respect the verdict of the Scottish people in the 2014 referendum on the future of Scotland.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time about delays in universal credit payments? Claimants are waiting for at least six weeks, and those who are not paid monthly do not have a month's salary as a cushion. People in low-paid, part-time or temporary jobs do not have savings to see them through, and are having to use food banks.

Mr Lidington: The virtues of universal credit are that it is a simpler system, with more generous childcare provisions, than the system that it is replacing, and that, for the first time, people will be given extra help when they are in work to make progress and increase their earnings. It will ensure that working more always pays more, and that people are always better off in work than on benefits.

Our purpose in introducing universal credit on a gradual basis is to identify and eliminate teething problems such as those described by the hon. Lady at a very early stage, and to put them right. If there are cases in her constituency that she thinks are not being addressed with sufficient speed, I ask her to let me know the details, and I will draw them to the attention of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions immediately.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Last July the Security Industry Authority launched a new IT system whose implementation led to difficulties caused by system defects. As a consequence, some applications are taking longer to process than they ought to. Constituency cases with which I have been dealing recently indicate that the problem is ongoing, and that a resolution has yet to be found. May we have a statement from the Home Office to update the House on the progress of this matter?

Mr Lidington: I do not know the details of the problems that are affecting the Security Industry Authority, but it is clearly important for it to be able to process applications swiftly and efficiently. I advise the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate, but also to write directly to the Home Secretary with the details of what she has discovered. I am sure that there will be a full response.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Leader of the House will be aware of the issue of compensation for UK victims of the Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism. He will also be aware of the indication that a private Member's Bill would come to the House of Commons from the other place. May we have a debate in Government time on the progress of Her Majesty's Government's efforts to secure compensation for those victims, as was suggested by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), during a debate in Westminster Hall on 13 December?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman has been diligent in pursuing the issue that he has raised, and I fully understand why it is so important to people in Northern

Ireland, but he will recognise that, given the present situation in Libya, this is not a straightforward conversation to have with the Libyan authorities. However, the Under-Secretary of State—who is the Minister for the middle east and north Africa—continues to pursue the issue. Foreign Office questions will take place in the next few days, and the hon. Gentleman may wish to raise the matter with my hon. Friend then.

Exiting the EU: New Partnership

12.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the Government's plans for exiting the European Union.

Today we are publishing a Government White Paper on the UK's exit from, and new partnership with, the European Union. The Government have made clear that they will honour the choice made by the people of the United Kingdom. On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom will leave the European Union—no, that is wrong. On 23 June 2016, the people voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. It is just as well that I corrected that; I should have read this first, shouldn't I? [*Laughter.*] Don't worry, we have two more years to go—two years of this!

The House is currently considering a straightforward Bill that will give the Prime Minister the authority to trigger article 50 of the treaty on European Union and begin the negotiation over our exit. The Bill is not about whether or not we leave the EU, or even about how we do so; it is about implementing a decision already taken by the people of the UK in last year's referendum. However, we have always said that we will detail our strategic aims for the negotiation and seek to build a national consensus wherever possible. The White Paper sets out those aims and the thinking behind them. It confirms the Prime Minister's vision of an independent, truly global UK, and an ambitious future relationship with the EU.

That vision is based on the 12 principles that will guide the Government as they fulfil the democratic will of the people of the UK: providing certainty and clarity where we can as we approach the negotiations; taking control of our own laws and statute book; strengthening the Union by securing a deal that works for the whole of the UK; maintaining the common travel area and protecting our strong historic ties with Ireland; controlling immigration from the European Union; securing the rights for EU citizens already living in the UK and the rights of UK nationals living in the EU; protecting and enhancing existing workers' rights; ensuring free trade with European markets, while forging a new strategic partnership with the European Union, including a bold and ambitious free trade agreement and a mutually beneficial new customs agreement; forging free trade agreements with other countries across the world; ensuring that the United Kingdom remains the best place for science and innovation; co-operating in the fight against crime and terrorism; and, finally, delivering a smooth and orderly exit from the EU. Those 12 objectives amount to one goal: a new, positive and constructive partnership between Britain and the European Union that works in our mutual interest. All of them are key, but let me highlight some of the specific issues in the White Paper.

The White Paper reiterates our firm view that it is in the UK's interest for the EU to succeed politically and economically. That cannot be said too firmly: we want the EU to succeed politically and economically. We therefore approach the negotiation to come in the spirit of good will and working towards an outcome in our mutual benefit.

[Mr David Davis]

We recognise the EU's principle of the four freedoms, so the UK will leave the single market. Instead, we seek a new strategic partnership, including a bold and ambitious free trade agreement and a mutually beneficial new customs agreement that should ensure the most free and frictionless trade in goods and services that is possible. That will be to our mutual benefit. As the White Paper notes, we export £230 billion of goods and services to the EU, while importing £290 billion of goods and services from the EU every year.

The White Paper also sets out how, after we leave the EU, the UK will look to significantly increase its trade with the fastest growing export markets in the world. Although we cannot sign new trade deals while we are still members, we can prepare—we are preparing—the ground for them. This means updating the terms of our membership of the World Trade Organisation, of which the UK was a founding member—it was GATT, the general agreement on tariffs and trade, in the first instance. Modern free trade agreements require mechanisms to resolve disputes and to provide certainty for businesses on both sides, so the White Paper examines the precedents in this area and makes it clear that we will negotiate an arrangement that respects UK sovereignty.

We recognise the need to provide clarity and certainty wherever we can during a period in which some uncertainty is inevitable. We will therefore bring forward another White Paper on the great repeal Bill, which will lay out our approach in detail. This legislation will mean the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, while converting existing EU law into domestic law at the point of exit. That means that the position we start from—a common regulatory framework with the EU single market—is unprecedented. This negotiation will not be about bringing together two divergent systems, but about finding the best way for the benefits of the common systems and frameworks that currently enable UK and EU businesses to trade with and operate in each other's markets to continue when we leave the EU.

The White Paper also sets out that we will take control of our own laws, so that they are made in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, and ensure that we can control the number of people coming to the UK from the EU. The jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in the UK will come to an end. It will be for Parliament and the devolved legislatures to determine significant changes to reflect our new position.

I have said at this Dispatch Box that there will be any number of votes on substantive policy choices. To that end, the White Paper makes it clear that we expect to bring forward separate legislation in areas such as customs and immigration.

Delivering a smooth, mutually beneficial exit, while avoiding a disruptive cliff-edge, will be the key. A never-ending transitional status is emphatically not what we seek, but a phased process of implementation for new arrangements—whether immigration controls, customs systems, the way we operate and co-operate on criminal and civil justice matters, or future regulatory and legal frameworks for business—will be necessary for both sides.

As the White Paper says, the time needed to phase in new arrangements in different areas may vary. As one of the most important actors in global affairs, we will continue to work with the EU to preserve UK and

European security, fight crime and terrorism, and uphold justice. We must work more closely, not less, in those areas.

We will continue to seek to build a national consensus around our negotiating position, so we are talking all the time to business, civil society, the public sector and representatives of the regions. We have engaged the devolved Administrations in this process. While no part of the UK can have a veto, we are determined to deliver an outcome that works for the whole of our country. We continue to analyse the impact of our exit across the breadth of the UK economy, covering more than 50 sectors—I think it was 58 at the last count—to shape our negotiating position.

To conclude, the referendum result was not a vote to turn our back on Europe. It was a vote of confidence in the UK's ability to succeed in the world and an expression of optimism that our best days are still to come. Whatever the outcome of our negotiations, we seek a more open, outward-looking, confident and fairer UK that works for everyone. The White Paper is available on the Government website. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

12.45 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Normally I would thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement, but this statement says nothing. A week ago at Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister said that there would be a White Paper. Yesterday she said that there would be a White Paper tomorrow, and the Secretary of State now makes a statement saying that there is a White Paper, but as the White Paper was not delivered until a few minutes ago, how can meaningful questions be asked about it?

For months we have been calling for a plan; that was refused on the basis that there would not be a running commentary. Then the Government agreed to a plan but delivered a speech. They were forced to concede under pressure that there would be a White Paper, but now a White Paper has been produced too late in the day for us to ask meaningful questions of the Secretary of State in this session. That is completely unacceptable.

The first fight on Brexit is very clear: it is a fight about giving this House a meaningful role in holding the Government to account. The Government had to be forced by the Supreme Court to involve Parliament at all in the article 50 process. They have been forced to produce a White Paper, and they have been forced to concede a final vote. Before Christmas, the Secretary of State was standing at the Dispatch Box refusing to confirm that there would be a vote in this House at the end of the exercise.

The decision to leave was taken on 23 June last year. What matters now are the terms agreed under article 50, and the nature and extent of our new relationship with the EU. In her Lancaster House speech, the Prime Minister adopted a risky approach—a wish list with gaps, inconsistencies and an unacceptable fall-back position. Now we need time to debate this White Paper properly in this House and a vote on its contents.

On the question of votes, from flicking through the White Paper, I see that all that is said about the final vote, at paragraph 1.12, is that the final deal that is agreed will be put to

“a vote in both Houses of Parliament.”

We have tabled amendments for consideration next week that seek a meaningful vote—a vote in this House before a vote is taken in the European Parliament. Without such a vote, all hon. Members will have to watch on their screens the European Parliament debating our deal before we get to express any views about it. That is completely unacceptable and it demeans this House.

Finally, I note from a perusal of the White Paper that there is nothing that progresses the situation of EU nationals in this country. We have been calling time and again for unilateral action to be taken before article 50 is triggered, yet the White Paper disappoints on that front.

Mr Davis: Let me start with the purpose of the White Paper: to inform all the debates—not just today's—in the coming two years. The shadow Brexit spokesman is exactly right: what matters above all else is not the amour propre of the Labour party or whatever, but the terms that we get for this negotiation. That is about the future of Britain, and it is what this House should care about first and foremost.

The hon. and learned Gentleman talks about a meaningful vote, but I have not yet quite understood what he means by that. I have been here long enough to have voted thousands of times in this House and I have never yet voted on something that I considered not meaningful. Every vote in this House is meaningful.

There will be a meaningful vote at the end. The hon. and learned Gentleman makes much of the time that this has taken, but I have been saying for a long time to the Select Committee—its Chairman is not here—that it was inconceivable that we would not have a meaningful vote at the end of this process.

The hon. and learned Gentleman's last point was on EU nationals. I have a track record of defending the interests of people who are under pressure. Indeed, the last thing—pretty much—the leader of his party did was to go with me to Washington to get the last Brit out of Guantanamo Bay. I am not going to be throwing people out of Britain, and for the hon. and learned Gentleman even to suggest that is outrageous. Let me say this to him: I want the European Union nationals here to have all the rights they currently have, but I also want British citizens in Europe to have their rights. We owe a moral debt to EU nationals here, but we owe a moral and legal debt to the citizens of Britain abroad. We will protect both.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I deeply welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the White Paper, which is most emphatically in our national interest. Tomorrow, the Heads of Government of the 27 other member states will convene in Malta, where they propose to make a declaration about their vision for the future of Europe. President Tusk's letter of 31 January does not bode well. Will my right hon. Friend encourage the 27 to recognise that by promoting ever closer, more centralised and unreformed political union, they are creating the very circumstances that they claim to want to avoid and depriving themselves of the trust of the citizens they claim to represent? They are effectively going in the wrong direction.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend has led on this issue for about 30 years and has always had an honourable, straightforward and insightful view of the European Union. We have said that we are going to be a full

member until the moment we leave, and that means being a responsible member. We will exercise our influence over what we think is the best interest of the European Union until the moment we leave, because we want the European Union to be strong, stable and effective. In these times of difficult international relations, we need the EU as an anchor, and that is the policy that we will pursue.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He is not a man of few words, but he is perhaps a man of few meaningful words. This is just another panicked U-turn. When it comes to European matters, it is not much of an achievement to be the second most chaotic party in the Chamber. The Government have had seven months in which to pull this together, yet we got the White Paper only a minute before the Secretary of State got to his feet to make his statement. I concede that he is more experienced than I am, but it is striking that we are getting the White Paper after Second Reading of the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill and two sitting days before its Committee stage. How are we to question him about the White Paper when we are given it just before he gets to his feet? I believe that that shows an astonishing disrespect for Parliament. He would not have put up with this were he not on the Government Front Bench.

What are the Government afraid of? They do not want to give us any opportunity for scrutiny, so there must be something they are afraid of. They do not have the courage of their convictions. Scotland voted to remain as the blue in the red, white and blue Brexit, so are the civil servants having to pull together all these last-minute policy changes? The Secretary of State said in his statement that the devolved legislatures would face "significant changes". Does that mean that a legislative consent motion will now be required? This is a mess; it is a bourach. It is going to have an impact on each and every one of us, and people deserve better.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman says that this has taken seven months, but we have been in the European Union for 40 years. This is about reversing—well, not reversing but amending—and dealing with 40 years' accumulated policy and law. He mentioned Second Reading, but that Bill will trigger the process. It does no more than to put into effect the people's decision of 23 June last year, so I cannot see how he thinks the publication of the White Paper after Second Reading is problematic. There will be any number of occurrences in this House when the 50-odd Scottish National party Members will have a chance to hold the Government to account, to make their views known on policy, and to put forward the interests of Scotland, whether during the passage of the great repeal Bill or that of the other primary and secondary legislation that will follow on from it. I do not think he can complain about an absence of democracy in this respect.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is extensive interest in this statement, which I am keen to accommodate, but to do so will require brevity from Back Benchers and Front Benchers alike, especially in the light of the subsequent business, which is very well subscribed and to which I have to have regard. So it would help if we could have short questions and short answers.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the White Paper. The complaints about it not being detailed enough and arriving only at the last moment are of course nonsense. The Prime Minister set out most of its elements in her 12-point speech, and those who missed that should go back and read it again. They will see that its points are all reflected in this document. I want to ask my right hon. Friend about migration. The key concern in academia and in the high added value, low volume areas is that they should get a much earlier statement about how flexible any future permit system will be. Will he take that a little further and say that those areas will see next to no change, and that it is the low value, high volume areas that we need to control?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Needless to say, people who were not here at the start of the statement should not be standing. That goes without saying; it is an established feature of our proceedings.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) is another Member of this House who has given a great deal of time and dedication to this issue. On migration, it is my job to bring the decision back to the House, but it is not my job to make the decisions thereafter. However, it is clear to me that the policies for controlling migration after our exit will be designed to further our national interest. Britain is a science superpower. We are the leading scientific centre in Europe, and as a result we will want to encourage the competition for talent to come here. The same will apply in finance, engineering, medicine and all the other areas in which skills are at a premium. We will want to attract those people, so we do not expect our policies to have any deleterious effects on industry at all.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that we will have meaningful votes on a range of things. How can it be, then, that paragraph 8.43 of the White Paper commits us to leaving the customs union, which will have a devastating effect on manufacturing, without any analysis of the effects and with no impact assessment?

Mr Davis: There has been considerable analysis of this—

Helen Goodman: Well, it is not in the White Paper.

Mr Davis: Let me just finish my answer. The point is made in the policy paper that we want to have a customs agreement. That will follow directly as a result of the free trade agreement. If we are successful in getting low or zero tariffs in the free trade agreement, and no non-tariff barriers, we should succeed in getting a customs agreement that reflects that, and that makes it very straightforward to continue trading with Europe.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I think it would be wise to get to the end of the negotiations before we draw any conclusions on what conclusions we have come to. That would be the meaningful way to do it, although I think that those who use the word

“meaningful” four times in a speech are being rather meaningless. The key point is that what we are after is the same thing that European Union members are after—arrangements that are good for them, good for us and good for the world.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is the aim of our policy. He is also right to suggest that, at the end, the House will be able to hold the Government to account and make a meaningful decision about the policy, but that will not be the only opportunity. There will be many points along the way when we will debate every policy issue that arises from the process—from customs agreements to immigration. The House will be very much in control of that.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): In the 60 seconds that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) had to look through the White Paper, he was spot on to zone in on the obfuscation on page 11 about the lack of a meaningful vote for Parliament at the end of the process. There is no point in having a vote after the Secretary of State has already signed things off with the European Union, treating Parliament as some sort of afterthought. Will he rule out now the Government showing such contempt for Parliament?

Mr Davis: This is my sixth statement to the House in less than six months—[*Interruption.*] Let me finish. The House will have the opportunity to vote on any number of pieces of legislation before we get to the end and then will have a vote to decide whether what it gets is acceptable. I cannot see how it can be made more meaningful than that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On page 49 of the White Paper, the Government state:

“We have an open mind on how we implement new customs arrangements with the EU”.

It is important to be admirably clear so that everyone knows where we stand, so will the Secretary of State confirm for the avoidance of doubt that we are not only leaving the EU and the single market, but definitely leaving the customs union?

Mr Davis: If my hon. Friend reads the rest of that chapter, he will see that we will exclude ourselves from the common commercial policy and common external tariff, which amounts to exactly what he says.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I welcome the principles in the White Paper, particularly around protecting and enhancing existing workers’ rights. Will the Secretary of State confirm that there is nothing to negotiate with the other EU countries on workers’ rights because they already exist in our law and will be protected? The people who have been going around saying that such rights are threatened should be told that they are not.

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The Government’s approach is to maintain every single piece of employment protection that exists now, which incidentally is much better than that of most European countries, and to enhance it. There should be no concern about that at all.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I urge the Secretary of State to give priority to the matters in chapter 6 of the White Paper on securing the rights of EU nationals. I have in mind a constituent who is an EU national and who has sadly been receiving cancer treatment for many years. I am anxious to be able to give her certainty as soon as possible that she will continue to have access to the NHS.

Mr Davis: That is part of the point of doing this. We are talking about not only residents' rights, but the right of access to healthcare. That matters both for Europeans in Britain and for Britons abroad. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): "The end is not yet and the best is yet to be," is a benediction that any Presbyterian on the Ulster Bench will welcome—even the Wee Frees who have clambered on at the end. I welcome the White Paper that the Secretary of State has produced today, in particular the three chapters that refer to the Union, to strengthening the relationship with the Republic of Ireland and to fighting and combating terrorism. Is he familiar with the commentary of Dr Ray Bassett, the former Irish ambassador and diplomat? He made it clear that Ireland's position should now be about forging a new relationship with the United Kingdom, because the other 26 parts of the EU do not really listen to Ireland.

Mr Davis: I am not familiar with that commentary, but I welcome the hon. Gentleman's view about the chapter on the relationship with Ireland. One of the most important parts of the last seven month's preparation has been striking a relationship with Ireland that ensures that we underpin the peace process, maintain the stability of Northern Ireland, keep an open border, and so on. It is incumbent on the British Government to be as helpful as we can to the Irish Government because they are in the most difficult position, so that is what we are doing.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Paragraph 8.43 of the White Paper makes it clear that we want to leave the customs union so that we can negotiate free trade agreements "around the world." If we leave the customs union, we will be bound by an external tariff unless we negotiate otherwise. Is that the correct position?

Mr Davis: Generally speaking, a most favoured nation arrangement applies under WTO rules, but countries are generally allowed to make free trade agreements at whatever level they seek. We want to ensure that as many of the existing EU free trade agreements carry straight over, which will also be lower than MFN rates.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Given the old-age dependency ratio and its importance for the public finances and given the absence of the concrete information in paragraph 5.9 of the White Paper, what level of net migration to our country does the Secretary of State anticipate across future years?

Mr Davis: The Government's policy is that migration will be at a sustainable level. The point to understand here is that such decisions are made on a year-by-year basis. It is not Government policy to make the British economy suffer as a result of labour or talent shortages or anything else. It is perfectly proper for a Government

to want to control their own migration policy and not leave it open-ended. The solution to the problem the hon. Lady cites is not just not managing the problem.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): When the Government serve notice on the European Union under article 50, will they take that opportunity to frame the negotiation by making it clear that we expect to agree the framework of our future relationship, as specified in article 50? Otherwise, we will effectively be negotiating the divorce arrangements in the dark, and the European Union would not be observing the principle of sincere co-operation.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend refers to the need to negotiate ongoing arrangements in parallel with the departure arrangements. As he says, article 50 refers to having regard to ongoing arrangements, and a negotiation on departure arrangements cannot be concluded before the ongoing arrangements have been concluded. I have already made that point to Michel Barnier, my opposite number, and I think the Prime Minister has made that point to a number of her opposite numbers around the European Union. This will be the first issue that we need to resolve at the beginning of the negotiations, so my hon. Friend is quite right.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will Parliament get a vote on the Government's intended final deal before the deal is struck with the European Union?

Mr Davis: I suspect that the final vote here will be before the final ratification in the European Union. Its ratification process is much slower than ours will be.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I want to put it on the record that I am extremely pleased that the White Paper has been published, and I thank the Secretary of State and his team for listening to hon. Friends and our calls for a White Paper. Will he join me in sending a message to my constituents to feed in their views? In the spirit of listening to his hon. Friends, will he also clarify whether the Government will consider formal reporting back to the House?

Mr Davis: I am not quite sure what my hon. Friend means by formal reporting. I have visited the Exiting the European Union Committee once and will be appearing in front of it again, and this, as I said, is my sixth statement to the House. We come to the House at every possible opportunity to tell Members what is going on. There will be subsequent debates, including substantive debates on policy. There will undoubtedly be other Brexit debates—more are planned already—so there is no question that the House will not be fully informed. That we are somehow not paying attention to the Opposition is an illusion—a chimera—that they like to run out. We have given them a White Paper and answers about the customs union and the single market. I do not know how much more open I can be without being dissected.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Government seem to be in a constant state of delayed reaction, but we finally have the White Paper. It contains a statement on strengthening trade with the world that reads like a tweet, and a conspicuous amount of space that is totally blank. Does that reflect the Government's thinking on Brexit?

Mr Davis: The Government's thinking on Brexit is very clear. If someone disagrees with it, that does not mean that it does not exist. That is the problem that SNP Members have had all the way through this process. They just do not like it—[*Interruption.*] Sure, half a page is blank. Wonderful. I think that is the case in every book I own.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome the White Paper and hope that it heralds unity both in our party and in the country on our approach to leaving the European Union. May I therefore commend to all Members yesterday's speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt)? He was the epitome of grace and magnanimity.

Mr Davis: I agree with him entirely on both counts.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that the best way to continue the benefits of the common systems and frameworks that enable UK and EU businesses to trade would be to stay in the single market and rejoin the European Free Trade Association? Does he also accept that, for UK businesses to have continued access to the single market, there will need to be mechanisms to ensure that UK regulations do not diverge from EU regulations? Can he explain what happens to sovereignty then?

Mr Davis: The answer to the right hon. Gentleman's first question is no, because, again, membership of EFTA would put us within the reach of European regulations and the European Courts. Frankly, that would take away what influence we do have. We have laid out in the White Paper what is the best relationship, which is a customs agreement and a free trade agreement. Bear in mind that we are starting from a position of identity. He makes a good point about maintaining that identity, and we will publish proposals on that in due course, but this is what we are going to do. It is perfectly possible to go the route I am talking about without rejecting the decision of the British people on 23 June last year.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend inform the House of how the legislation, and the White Paper in particular, will hopefully help to protect and enhance Gibraltar's unique position and of the progress he is making towards a free trade deal between us and Gibraltar? I understand that such a deal can happen before we leave the EU.

Mr Davis: The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), gave evidence to the House of Lords on precisely that—indeed, on all the dependent territories—and it can be taken as read that we will rigorously protect their interests.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State observes that the UK was a founding member of the WTO, but he forgets that we

were the driving force behind the completion of the single market. Does he understand how angry British business is that he has abandoned the single market before negotiations even start?

Mr Davis: In these debates, membership of the single market and access to the single market are often conflated. What British business wants is unfettered access, and what German, French and Italian business wants is unfettered access to our market. That is what we seek to produce.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that we will be coming out of the Prüm framework and building a new relationship on data sharing to fight crime and terrorism that ensures that my constituents' most personal data are no longer subject to the ECJ?

Mr Davis: As we are coming out of the European Union, that will happen almost by definition, but that is not to say that we will not be making new arrangements. The Prüm framework covers data exchange, DNA and so on, and it is very clear in our minds that we will be making new arrangements to keep terrorism, crime and so on under control. We will no doubt protect my hon. Friend's constituents from the ECJ.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Local Government Association has been asking for meetings with Ministers about the impact of these processes on councils and on how more powers can be devolved, yet in the Secretary of State's statement I did not hear a single reference to local councils. I cannot see a single reference in the White Paper, having read through it very quickly. Will he now commit the Government to having meaningful discussions with the LGA, and will he commit to the principle of subsidiarity, too?

Mr Davis: There is only so much I can do in a limited statement. The Minister of State has already met the LGA, and he has sent out invitations to local councils so that he can talk to them. In the last statement, or maybe in the one before, I said that I am willing to meet the mayors of the various regions of the country after they are elected in the next round. It must be taken as read that we are not putting the regions to one side. The very first public meeting I had after becoming Secretary of State was with people in Blackburn, Lancashire.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): There are three British ambassadors in Brussels. Does my right hon. Friend think that the staff of our ambassador to the European Union will be enhanced, or indeed might his post be scrapped, after we leave the European Union?

Mr Davis: I assume that my hon. Friend is talking about our permanent representative to the European Union, who has 120 brilliant staff, and they all work for me. I do not know what our representational arrangements will be, but he is referring to an ambassador to Belgium, an ambassador to NATO—I assume—and an ambassador to UKRep. We will undoubtedly have close relationships with the European Union thereafter, so it will be a pretty sizeable embassy I should think, but it will not be what it is now.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Our current membership of the single market is governed by the European economic area agreement. The Government

contend that we are a member of the EEA by virtue of our membership of the EU—that may or may not prove to be the case—but can the Secretary of State be clear about the implications of our domestic legislation in that regard, specifically the European Economic Area Act 1993? Will the Government repeal that Act? If so, when? Will we get a vote?

Mr Davis: As it stands—as far as I can see, having gone through this quite carefully—once we are outside the EU, the question of whether we automatically cease to be a member of the EEA becomes a legal empty vessel. We will look at that. If we do propose to withdraw from the EEA, we will come back and tell the House.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When European subjects have come to my surgery to talk about their rights, they have left in agreement that those rights must go hand in hand with the rights of UK subjects living in their own country. I hope the Secretary of State has got the message.

Mr Davis: I have got the message and, incidentally, so have the leaders of most of the countries with the most people here. They also understand that we have to protect the rights of British people at the very same time as we protect the rights of their citizens. There is no question that it is not going to happen. The question is when it will happen, and we are trying to do it as quickly as possible.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): We welcome the White Paper, particularly chapter 4 on our links with Ireland, including on trade, security and the wish for unfettered access, but at the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs this week a customs specialist said that, for trading in goods, there will have to be border points either between Northern Ireland and Ireland or, much worse, between Scotland and England and the island of Ireland. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that we are not going to have hard borders of that type?

Mr Davis: We are not going to have hard borders. I will take the question on two different levels. First, the common travel area has existed since 1923 and, in that respect nothing will change. On goods, there will be the softest, most invisible and most frictionless border we can find. There is a lot of technology these days, ranging from automatic number plate recognition through to the tagging of containers, with trusted trader arrangements across the border, and such things operate between Norway and Sweden, the US and Canada, and so on—countries with very amicable relations and very open borders—and we will do the same with Ireland.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The White Paper is an impressive document, for which I thank the Secretary of State—the Venn diagram on page 48 is particularly insightful. He will know that the European Union has concluded a pathetically small number of free trade agreements with other countries, but there are some. Will he confirm that there will either be a continuity arrangement with those countries on Brexit or that the agreements will be the basis for an accelerated relationship with those very few countries?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade has already been in touch with the most important countries to us—South Korea and others like it—and they all seem very keen both to maintain grandfather rights and to improve on the deals and make them much more tailored and specific to both our interests.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The White Paper says that the great repeal Bill

“will preserve EU law where it stands at the moment before we leave the EU.”

The White Paper goes on to say that it foresees two pieces of primary legislation, but that:

“There will also be a programme of secondary legislation under the Great Repeal Bill to address deficiencies in the preserved law”.

What deficiencies does the Secretary of State have in mind?

Mr Davis: As the great repeal Bill will pass through European law—the *acquis communautaire*—in its original wording, it might refer to European institutions when it should refer to British institutions. For example, it might say that local government has to publish its procurement contracts in the *Official Journal of the European Union*, which would no longer be appropriate—it would be more appropriate to publish them on the Government website. Secondary legislation will be principally aimed at such technical concerns. Major areas of policy change will primarily be addressed in primary legislation, which is why we cited those two examples.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s constructive approach. In that light, I draw his attention to a report by the European Parliament’s Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs, which highlighted European businesses’ financial reliance on the City, expressed concern if that access were to be disrupted and urged negotiators to approach the issue in a constructive and open fashion.

Mr Davis: And we fully intend to do so, as we think it is in the interests of both ourselves and the European Union, because we do not want anything that causes instability in the eurozone, any more than we want anything that damages the City.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Remarkably, the White Paper does not contain a single reference to Eurojust or any real indication of our future co-operation with the EU on criminal justice matters. That raises the question: if something so significant has been omitted, what else is missing? Never mind a White Paper, this is a lightweight paper.

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady worked hard to get her soundbite out. The White Paper contains a whole section on justice and home affairs, and we have made it very plain, over and over again—I even said this in my statement at the beginning—that we intend to maintain closer co-operation with Europe, not have less co-operation, on security, crime and intelligence matters. We must understand that Europe has a great deal to gain from this, because we are the intelligence superpower in

[Mr David Davis]

Europe—we have the most powerful intelligence agencies—and therefore on things such as tackling crime and terrorism we are very important to them, as we think they are to us, too.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Significant discussion has already taken place between the Prime Minister and the Welsh Government following last June's referendum, and there has been discussion in the Welsh Parliament, and I very much welcome that. In the interests of UK unity, Wales's interests must be taken into account, including through discussion of this White Paper. Will the Secretary of State guarantee Wales's involvement and that it will continue to feature in all our discussions? We accept, of course, that there can be no veto.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right in what he says, and this has been our approach. We have had a number of meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee, two of them chaired by the Prime Minister and three of them chaired by me. We have been to Wales to see the Welsh Government to talk about some of these issues. My right hon. Friend the Minister of State is appearing before the Welsh Parliament—

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones)The Committee.

Mr Davis: The Welsh Committee—sorry. He is appearing before the Committee on 14 February, I believe. We are taking the interests of Wales extremely seriously. We will operate this negotiation so that no part of the UK loses—that is the aim.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): If we are leaving the single market and the customs union, will the Secretary of State give a guarantee to my workers at Ford and at Tata Steel, who make the steel for Nissan cars? Two thirds of both Ford and Nissan cars are exported to the EU, so will he guarantee that they will have tariff-free access to the EU markets? Or is this only a promise to negotiate and seek?

Mr Davis: This is a negotiation, but if the hon. Lady reads the White Paper, she will see that it sets out that European exports of goods and services to us total £290 billion, whereas ours to them are worth £230 billion. So they clearly have a strong interest—as strong an interest as we do—in tariff-free goods access, because for them goods are a much bigger part of it as well. The disparity is more than £60 billion, so there is every reason to expect that we will succeed in what we are intending to do, which is protect the jobs of her constituents.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that at last week's Brexit questions I asked about the seafood sector, and I can tell him that it will be particularly pleased with the comment in paragraph 8.16 giving it full support. However, he will also be aware of the long-standing grievance of the fishing communities up and down the country following their being sold out in the original negotiations. Will he reiterate yet again that that will not occur on this occasion?

Mr Davis: Yes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State makes much of the process and joked that we might be at this for another two years, yet in that time the unelected and unaccountable House of Lords will have more influence on the implementation of the White Paper, and the negotiations and relationships that we must forge for trade agreements, than the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. How does that strengthen the Union?

Mr Davis: That is simply not the case. As I just said, we have regular monthly meetings with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive—when they are in play—and we are taking what they say very seriously. We will not agree with everything they say, as the hon. Gentleman well knows. The Scottish Government's paper was presented at the last meeting and there were areas of agreement on employment protection and on environmental protection, but disagreement on the concept of a “carve out” on the single market and a discussion about how the devolution would work. That hardly constitutes not paying attention to the Scottish Government.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I welcome this White Paper and I am glad the Government have listened to Members. EU nationals play a vital part in our universities, workplaces and families. Although I support the need for some control on freedom of movement, will he ensure in negotiations that workers, students and family members find that our borders remain open if they are from the EU? After all, control does not mean arbitrary restrictions.

Mr Davis: Absolutely, control does not mean slamming the door. As I said, it is in the UK's interest to keep attracting talent, and if we attract talent, we attract the families—that goes without saying. Earlier, I was asked whether I could promise something that is to be negotiated, but this is something we will decide in this House, for the first time, in a couple of years' time.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): One crucial and reasonable question for the Secretary of State to answer is: how does he see frictionless, unfettered trade with the EU continuing after we have signed free trade deals with other countries? Surely the greater the divergence between ourselves and the single market in external tariffs and standards, the greater their need at some point to impose customs checks on us.

Mr Davis: Obviously, we need to seek to maintain some sort of standard parity, be it by a measure of equivalence or by something else, depending on the product. The area where the deals outside and the deals with the European Union conflict is on rules of origin. We will have to have a good rules of origin scheme, just as any other free trade area has. For example, the Canadian treaty has specific rules of origin and we will need to do the same. But that is a very small burden by comparison with the sorts of things people are worrying about, if we get the customs agreement we seek.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): When, if ever, does my right hon. Friend think the EU will issue an equivalent White Paper, setting out with equal clarity the agreed negotiating objectives of the 27 other members?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend's question sort of answers itself, but I hope that it will be once the EU has received the article 50 letter from us—so in April or May. It will receive that letter in March and will respond in April or May.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I know that today is groundhog day, but why are we exiting the customs union in order to recreate the customs union?

Mr Davis: It is to create a customs agreement; it is in order to enable us to develop free trade agreements with that huge portion of the world where there is very fast growth and we have a strong market presence. Some 40% of our trade, or as much as we have with the EU, is with areas where we do not have free trade agreements. So this is a very large area and it is growing, sometimes twice as fast as the EU is. We are taking this approach for the future opportunities. People often talk about the implications of the referendum for young people, but the biggest implication is the prospect of jobs in the future, many of which will come from global markets, not just European ones.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): A lot of the politicians in EU states say that they are against torture, but do they not recognise that the fact that they are not willing to come to a deal with my right hon. Friend about EU citizens being allowed to stay, live and work here and British citizens being allowed to stay, live and work in the EU countries is a form of mental torture and trauma that they are perpetrating upon them? Will he redouble his efforts to get this deal done as quickly as possible and to make the announcement as quickly as possible? If only one or two countries are holding out, for whatever reason, will he be prepared to name and shame them, so that their citizens here can bring pressure upon them to get that deal done?

Mr Davis: I will certainly do the first half; I will certainly redouble my efforts, although they are pretty intense in any case, to ensure that this happens quickly. My hon. Friend is right that we are talking about just a few countries. I suspect their reasoning is the communautaire reasoning of not starting anything before the negotiations start, and I hope this will be rapidly resolved thereafter.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does not the fact that so many Members from both sides of the House who wanted us to remain in the European Union nevertheless last night voted to trigger article 50 set a fine example that Members of the unelected upper House would do very well to follow?

Mr Davis: I was sitting there calculating whether my right hon. Friend's question today was longer than his speech yesterday, and I think it was.

Yes, I hope Members in the upper House do pay attention. The Bill is a manifestation of the will of the people—nearly 17.5 million people—and I would expect the upper House, which quite properly has its place and its rights, to respect that will.

NHS in England

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. In a moment, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee of the House, Mr Bernard Jenkin, will speak on this subject for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Mr Jenkin to respond to these in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions, and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning.

1.31 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to present to the House the seventh report of PACAC this Session, “Will the NHS Never Learn?”, a follow-up to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report on the NHS in England, “Learning from Mistakes”.

Over the past decade, written complaints regarding NHS services have doubled, from just over 95,000 in 2005-06 to more than 198,000 in 2015-16. Investigations into such complaints have frequently failed to identify the root causes of any mistakes that occurred. Even more frustrating is that they have failed to prevent the same mistakes from being repeated over and over again, despite multiple reports highlighting that as a critical issue from both the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which I chair.

In its report “Learning from Mistakes”, which was published last year, the PHSO highlighted the fear of blame that is pervasive throughout the NHS. That fear drives defensive responses and inhibits open investigations, which in turn prevents NHS organisations from understanding what went wrong and why. That also undermines public trust and confidence, because the public can see that NHS organisations are failing to learn from mistakes—if they did, that would drive improvement. A combination of a reluctance on the part of citizens to express their concerns or to make complaints, and a defensiveness on the part of services to hear and address concerns, has been described by the PHSO herself, Dame Julie Mellor, as a “toxic cocktail” that is poisoning efforts to deliver excellent public services.

To further understand the issues and what more needs to be done to tackle them, PACAC recently undertook its inquiry, which followed up on the PHSO's “Learning from Mistakes” report. In PACAC's report, which was published earlier this week, we conclude that if the Department of Health is to achieve its policy of turning the NHS into a learning organisation, it must integrate its various initiatives to tackle the issue and come up with a long-term and co-ordinated strategy. That strategy must include a clear plan for building up local investigative capability, as the vast majority of investigations take place locally. We will hold the Secretary of State for Health accountable for delivering the plan.

[Mr Bernard Jenkin]

PACAC's report also considered the potential impact of the new healthcare safety investigation branch, which is in the process of being set up. The creation of HSIB, as it is known, originates from our recommendations as the Public Administration Committee in 2015. The Government accepted our recommendation, and HSIB is due to be launched in April. It will conduct investigations into the most serious clinical incidents, and is intended to offer a safe space to allow those involved in such incidents to speak openly and frankly about what happened. In so doing, it is hoped that HSIB will play a crucial role in transforming the expectation and culture in the NHS from one that is focused on blame to one that emphasises learning. It should be a key part, albeit only a part, of the wider strategy that we want the Government to adopt.

Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go if the Department of Health's aim of turning the NHS into a learning organisation is to be achieved. Most importantly, HSIB is being asked to begin operations without the legislation necessary to secure its independence and ensure that the safe space for its investigations is indeed safe. That undermines the whole purpose of HSIB. It is essential that the Government introduce the necessary legislation as soon as possible.

To ensure that the learning produced from HSIB's investigations leads to an improvement in standards, PACAC also reiterates its previous recommendations, made in our 2016 report, "PHSO review: Quality of NHS complaints investigations", that the Government should stipulate in the HSIB legislation: first, that HSIB has the responsibility to set the national standards by which all clinical investigations are conducted; secondly, that local NHS providers are responsible for implementing those standards according to the serious incident framework; and, thirdly, that the Care Quality Commission should continue to be responsible, as the regulator, for assessing the quality of clinical investigations at local level according to those standards.

The purpose of complaints is not just the redress of grievances—which I must say is extremely unsatisfactory in the NHS anyway—although that is clearly important; complaints are a tool by which public services can learn and improve. When medical professionals are forced primarily to be concerned with avoiding liability and responsibility and are trapped in a culture of blame, there can be no learning. There is an acute need for the Government to follow through on their commitment to promote a culture in which staff feel able to speak out and in which the emphasis is placed on learning, not blame. I very much hope that they will implement PACAC's recommendations as a step towards achieving that as soon as possible.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend for his work, and that of his Committee, on producing the report. He is absolutely right about HSIB and the need to underpin it properly. The Government have said that they would cap litigation costs at £100,000. I think my hon. Friend would accept that there will always be litigation, even if we get a more satisfactory means of redressing grievance, in the way he has suggested. Does he think that that cap would be appropriate, particularly since motor costs, for example,

are capped at that level? Would that mean that people with grievances would be properly compensated while, sadly, their lawyers would not be?

Mr Jenkin: I confess I am not sighted on the proposal to cap litigation costs, but people resort to litigation only because they feel that their complaints are not being heard and that the problems they have identified in the service are not being addressed. People resort to litigation because they do not feel they are being told the truth. We know from our surgeries that most people who complain come in and say, "I only want to make sure this doesn't happen to somebody else. I don't want compensation." Nevertheless, because that public-spirited attitude to complaining is so often rebuffed in the health service, people resort to litigation because they feel there is a cover-up.

In other fields, such as aviation and marine investigations, where this kind of investigative process is already established and is designed to find the causes of accidents without blame, there is far less resort to litigation at the outset. That does not preclude litigation in the final analysis, but discovering the truth without blame is the first step towards reconciliation.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I, too, greatly welcome this report, as do my constituents. That may seem surprising to some of my colleagues, as, of course, my constituency is in Wales, but all my constituents use hospitals in England for elective care and specialist care, so this is as important to the people of Wales as it is to the people of England. I have also been involved in many of the complaints. Does the Chair of the Committee acknowledge that, in the debates that he has had and in any follow-up debate that he might have, the position of Welsh constituents is key, because, although they are in another Administration as far as health is concerned, they depend on hospitals in England for treatment?

Mr Jenkin: I am most grateful to my Welsh hon. Friend for his question. It gives me an opportunity to highlight not only my agreement with the point that he makes, but that this is just about healthcare safety investigations in England. By pursuing this policy to set up HSIB, the Government have embarked on a very, very major and significant reform, which the health services in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are certainly watching. I can assure my hon. Friend that they are being watched all over the world. Different countries in different jurisdictions have tried using various bodies to deal with this question. I do not think that any country before England has embarked on a reform of this scale and nature that has the capacity to transform safety investigation in a health system. I very much hope that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland will either set up their own equivalent of HSIB, or employ HSIB as the pinnacle of their investigation system as well. This matter is not something that necessarily needs to be devolved any more than the Air Accidents Investigation Branch of the Department for Transport.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Does the Chairman agree that each of us receives from our constituents many more golden letters about their treatment in the health service than letters of complaint? When there are complaints or questions, openness and responsiveness matter most, and most of our constituents

are satisfied with that. HSIB will be for the pinnacle of the hardest cases, but most cases should be resolved locally by the GPs or the hospitals.

Mr Jenkin: I certainly agree that the vast majority of our constituents who experience the care of hospitals or GP practices are extremely grateful for the quality of care that they receive. However, we cannot underestimate how corrosive the blame culture has been throughout our health system. Crises such as those at Mid Staffordshire and at the Morecambe Bay maternity unit arise from the defensive culture that exists in the NHS. If we are to change that into a much more open and collaborative system of learning from mistakes, we need HSIB to set the tone throughout the entire organisation. It is not just about dealing with a few complaints, but about setting a whole new standard for a whole new profession in the NHS about how complaints and clinical incidents are investigated. I am most grateful to have the opportunity to present this report.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Labour welcomes this constructive report and thank all of those involved in producing it. It highlights some worrying statistics, including the fact that the most recent NHS staff survey found that 43% of staff thought that their organisations treat staff involved in near misses, errors and incidents fairly. Clearly, from the Chairman's candid contribution today, there is a long way to go before we eradicate the culture of defensiveness that he has described. To give HSIB the strongest start, it was the clear view of the Committee, HSIB, the Expert Advisory Group, HSIB's chief investigator and even the Minister himself that legislation is needed, but, as of today, no legislation has been forthcoming. Given that, does the Chair of the Committee agree that it might be better to delay implementation to allow time for legislation?

Mr Jenkin: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his support. I am also extremely grateful to my Committee for its work on this report.

I hesitate to lose the progress that we have made. We have approved the appointment of the chief investigator of HSIB, who spent 25 years as chief investigator of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch of the Department for Transport. He brings with him that wealth of experience and perspective about how this organisation should work. The answer is, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, for the Government to bring forward the legislation as quickly as possible. I know that efforts are being made in that direction, but perhaps the Minister will have something to tell us.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I wish to add my thanks to my hon. Friend and members of the Committee for their considered report. He has succinctly described to the House what more needs to be done systematically to transform the way in which the NHS learns from errors to improve patient safety. We support the main thrust of the Committee's recommendations and will offer a detailed response to the report in due course. Like the Committee, we put this matter right at the top of our agenda to change the culture within the NHS, of which he has spoken so eloquently today.

We are committed to making our hospitals and GP surgeries the safest in the world, supported by the NHS as the world's largest learning organisation. The only way in which we will achieve that is through a learning rather than a blame culture characterised by openness, honesty and candour; listening to patients, families and staff; finding and facing the truth; and learning from errors and failures in care.

As my hon. Friend has indicated, the Government have accepted the recommendation of PACAC's predecessor Committee to establish an independent healthcare safety investigation service. The Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch will be up and running from April. I join him in welcoming the appointment of Keith Conradi, the former chief inspector of the Air Accidents Investigation Branch, who has a strong track record of delivering high-quality investigations in aviation.

The hon. Gentleman's Committee has again called for HSIB to be statutorily independent, and we agree that it should be as independent as possible if it is to discharge its functions fully and effectively, and we would not rule out the option of legislation. His Committee has also raised, in this week's report, various suggestions for HSIB and its potential role in setting standards. We will be responding to that formally in due course.

We are committed to ensuring that the NHS becomes an organisation that learns from its mistakes. In response to the Care Quality Commission's report, "Learning, Accountability and Candour", from April this year all NHS trusts will be required to publish how many deaths they could have avoided had care been better, along with the lessons that they have learned.

Before I pose my question, I should like to thank the Committee for its response to the Government's recent consultation, "Providing a Safe Space in Healthcare Safety Investigations", and we will be responding to it shortly.

Improvements in safety, incident handling and learning in the NHS will not happen overnight, but does my hon. Friend agree that the shared programme of work demonstrates a commitment, across the care system, to improve the way in which all serious patient safety incidents are viewed and treated, and is that not a crucial foundation for lasting change?

Mr Jenkin: I am most grateful to the Minister for his question and for the fact that he has personally appeared at the Dispatch Box today with his opposite number from Her Majesty's Official Opposition. I know that his presence here underlines the commitment of the Secretary of State to this programme of change.

I very much welcome the shared programme of work to which my hon. Friend refers, but, in taking evidence for this particular report, we found that there was some dislocation between the various bodies involved in it. We conclude that it is only Ministers, and probably only the Secretary of State, who can draw this together to ensure that there is a coherent strategy and a plan, which is what we emphasise in this report.

Finally, my hon. Friend refers to legislation in passing, but I hope that valiant efforts are being made in that regard. Perhaps something can be included in Her Majesty's Loyal Address later this year. I must point out that it is not just about statutorily underpinning the independence of HSIB, but the safe space to which he

[Mr Jenkin]

refers and on which he thanks the Committee for its contribution. The safe space has to be legislated for. Without legislation, there is no safe space. The AAIB, the Marine Accident Investigation Branch of the Department for Transport and equivalent bodies could not possibly function unless they can provide people with protection, so that those people can come and talk openly and off the record about what has happened. That has transformed the safety culture in other areas, and it is the transformation that we need in the health service. I leave with the Minister the word “legislation” echoing in his ears, and I very much look forward to making further progress with him on these matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The House is grateful to the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee for bringing his report before the House this afternoon and for taking questions.

Backbench Business

Armed Forces Covenant

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 17 January 2017 on the 2016 Armed Forces Covenant Annual Report, HC 492.]

1.49 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant Report 2016.

It is a great privilege to lead this debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the opportunity to discuss this most important of national issues in the Chamber.

As the world in which we find ourselves is unsettled and tumultuous, more than ever we must be mindful that some 150,000 men and women stand ready to defend our nation and to take on military challenges with our allies around the world to help to maintain peace, safe seas and safe skies. Standing firmly behind them are their families: silent spouses, children, parents and siblings who give them the strength to take on whatever challenges we ask of them. Our armed forces personnel, their families and our veterans are all citizens who deserve a voice. RAF Boulmer and the Otterburn ranges, the site of the largest Army training area, are in my constituency. I am deeply mindful of the role of MPs in sending troops to war when required. When I was a new MP, it struck me that we needed to do more in the House to talk about the armed forces covenant so that we could better understand what it means in practical terms and how we can help to increase the nation's commitment to it. I am therefore pleased that we are now able to discuss the 2016 report and the covenant's impact on those it affects.

In putting myself forward as an advocate for the covenant and finding ways to spread the word, I had not expected that military families who were feeling disfranchised and unable to raise issues of concern by virtue of their service would give me the honour of contacting me to talk about their problems. Those problems include schools admissions, housing maintenance, difficulties with car leasing contracts after deployment at short notice, spousal employment, lack of mental health support and the physical challenges left by past service. Such big and small problems cause great pressure to service personnel and veterans. They create disadvantages that would not arise if those people were civilians and make them question whether to stay or leave.

What shocked me—I had not identified this before—was the sense of disempowerment that many of our military families too often feel. Most importantly, they feel unable to talk to their MP about welfare issues in the way our civilian constituents do all the time. The first issue I would like to raise with the Minister—perhaps this could be the first item in next year's report as a successful change to help our military families—is a change to the defence infrastructure notice, which sets out the rules and regulations on when serving personnel can or cannot talk to their MP.

In a Public Accounts Committee hearing last summer, Lieutenant General Nugee gave a clear verbal indication that it was fine for personnel and their families to talk

to their MP about any non-military matters of concern. We have taken that great news to be an active commitment to the covenant vision of helping to reduce disadvantage for military families. However, the reality is not quite so clear because the notice still does not reflect this sentiment. I ask the Minister to look again at the DIN, which affects all Ministry of Defence employees—military and civilian.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I do not intend to respond to all questions at the time they are raised throughout the debate, but this is a matter of significant importance. I want to make it absolutely clear that any member of the service family who wishes to approach their Member of Parliament can do so in the way any civilian would. I am not sure that the DIN does need to be changed—I am not sure that it is as ambiguous as my hon. Friend suggests, although I am happy to check—but if it does, I am happy to commit to doing that.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the Minister very much for that intervention. I hope that we can look at that in detail.

The hierarchical and command-based rules that are needed for military discipline in war should never create a barrier whereby military personnel and their families are not free to raise concerns about day-to-day issues that affect them. Those issues, to name but a few, might be: family housing matters, which are subject to the MOD's oversight; school matters, which come under the purview of the Department for Education; or health matters, which are the responsibility of the Department of Health.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point, although it is one that rather puzzles me. I have spent 20 years in one of the most military constituencies in Britain. I see service people in my surgeries day in, day out, and I deal with all kinds of issues on their behalf. I have never once heard of any kind of restriction on them speaking to me.

Mrs Trevelyan: That is very encouraging, but my postbag over the past 18 months—I have received correspondence from not only local people, but service personnel throughout the country—suggests that people often have a real sense of anxiety about coming forward. Sometimes when wives have done so, there have been repercussions for their husbands, who have been challenged about stepping outside the chain of command into the civilian arena of their MP's office. I hope that we can encourage other soldiers and their families to do what the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) have done.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She is making a powerful contribution. This is about not only those who are currently serving but those who have served. A constituent called Linda McHugh came to me in difficult circumstances after she was denied a war widow's pension because she had remarried. People who remarried after 2015 have now been protected, but does the hon. Lady agree that it is only right and proper that the Minister look into restoring the pension rights

of those who were married to servicemen in the past? For example, Linda was married to a serviceman who lost his life in 1973.

Mrs Trevelyan: We will leave that very interesting point with the Minister. We must continually be mindful about war pensions, especially if people are experiencing real hardship and strain. The covenant exists to support not only young men and women coming back from recent wars, but those who have supported and served over many decades. The hon. Gentleman's question can go on the Minister's list.

Mark Lancaster *rose*—

Mrs Trevelyan: Oh, the Minister is going to answer the question.

Mark Lancaster: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for making his point, which has been raised on a number of occasions. I am very pleased that, in principle, the Government recognised the issue when the correction was made back in 2015. Although, as I think hon. Members will accept, there are questions over retrospection that we must consider carefully because of the precedent that may be set, I reassure the House, as I have reassured individual Members before, that we are looking carefully into the matter.

Mrs Trevelyan: I commend the Minister and his devoted team of civil servants in the MOD, who are working tirelessly to build on the original direction of the covenant that was set out in the Armed Forces Act 2011. That Act calls on the Secretary of State for Defence to publish an annual report setting out what has been done in the past year—not only by the MOD itself, but by other Government Departments, and wider business and community networks across our nation—to help to reduce disadvantage for our service families and veterans.

This year's report highlights some of the great work done during 2016 in a number of areas, including: to build up the corporate covenant, and to encourage more private sector businesses to get involved in the practicalities of becoming corporate covenant signatories; to improve regional consistency in the levels of support received by the armed forces, especially through the community covenant; to improve on communicating what the covenant is, what it does and who it supports; and, most critically, to continue to prioritise issues that are known to be creating disadvantage for service families and veterans. I will take a few minutes to discuss each of those areas in the report, beginning with the corporate covenant.

The MOD team that is focused on building up the number of businesses and organisations that sign up to the corporate covenant has been working as hard as ever. More than 1,300 businesses have signed up to make their organisations more military-friendly and understanding, and able to benefit from the great skill sets that service leavers and reservists can bring to business. Last year, our all-party group on the armed forces covenant wrote to the then 850 organisations that had signed up to ask them what they were doing as part of their commitment. From the big boys such as BT,

[*Mrs Trevelyan*]

Google and Hewlett Packard, to small companies such as DJ Rees Services in Merthyr Tydfil, those that have signed up are changing the way they do business and seeking staff so that they support the covenant concept.

I mention DJ Rees because its reply was my favourite. This decorating, building and refurbishment business—an SME—decided that, having signed up to the corporate covenant, it would ask its whole supply chain to do so as well. It drafted a covenant on behalf of each supplier, encouraging them to sign up to the bronze employer recognition scheme—the first rung of the scheme's ladder—and formally asking them to commit to provide one week's work placement as part of the armed forces employability pathway scheme. In this way, DJ Rees was able to create, with its suppliers, many more work placements in its part of Wales. Just imagine the impact we could have if every large business that has signed up to the corporate covenant drove such a commitment through its supply chain.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Lady agree that small and medium-sized businesses in other parts of the United Kingdom, such as European Circuits in my constituency, which has signed up to the corporate covenant, can also play a major part?

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am keen that MPs from both sides of the House become more involved in spreading the message about the benefits of businesses in their constituencies signing the corporate covenant.

As MPs, we are perhaps more connected than anyone to our local business community, so we have a great opportunity to evangelise about the importance of businesses committing to the covenant and the life-changing impact that that can have for military families. We have more than 5 million SMEs—businesses employing fewer than 250 people—which make up 99% of all businesses across the UK. We have a long way to go to make every business covenant-friendly. We have 1,300 signed up so far, and they are committed in their small or larger way to supporting our military families. We therefore look forward to working with the MOD and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to increase participation in the corporate covenant scheme exponentially in the year ahead.

A key way in which businesses can benefit themselves and help service families is employing military spouses, who have faced a long-standing challenge to find employment that matches their skills and qualifications because, too often, employers see a military address and decide that even though the potential employee might be the best candidate for the role, they will not be around for more than two years. However, a committed military spouse, who will certainly have a posting for two years, and often longer nowadays, should be as valued as any civilian candidate.

From my conversations with military wives, it seems that the key block to getting the right job is often that an employer sees that the applicant's address is a military base. Will the Minister therefore consider working with me and his BEIS colleagues to remove the address requirement from job application forms, perhaps in

favour of something such as a distance-from-work criterion, to ensure that there is no unconscious bias against military spouses?

Ongoing work at Stanford University shows clearly that gender-neutral applications alter employer choices by removing a marked bias towards male applicants. In the same way, it would be fantastic if, as part of our continuing real commitment to the covenant, BEIS led a trial on removing addresses from job applications to see whether that helps to increase successful employment opportunities for military spouses.

It is great news that every council in England and Scotland has now signed up to the community covenant and that colleagues in Northern Ireland continue to make progress on finding ways to build a framework through Stormont and local councils to improve the commitment to the covenant. The community covenant could have one of the greatest positive impacts for military families—serving and after service—because our local councils deal with housing allocation policy, brief GPs and health professionals about the needs of the armed forces community, set up webpages to help to join up local services, support local charities in the military space, and deal with school admissions policy.

Colleagues will no doubt share with the House more details of the excellent work in their areas, so I will raise just one key area with the Minister: school admissions policy. My ten-minute rule Bill, which is going through the House at the moment, calls on the Department for Education to change admissions policy so that military families moving at short notice can get the right school place at any time. I very much hope that the MOD will support the Bill.

This year's report refers to the work done to identify educational disadvantage. My postbag led me to bring in my Bill because too many families moving at short notice could not access a school place without ending up in the appeals system, which creates even more stress for parents and children alike. Excellent work from the University of Winchester, which the MOD is supporting, shows a marked impact when it comes to higher education outputs for military children. We must at least reduce the stress of moving schools to help these kids to reach their potential.

Lastly—this is a key part of this year's report—we must look at the prioritisation of key issues that create stress for serving families if we are to reduce the very real retention risk we are now experiencing. Having brought the numbers in our armed forces down for many years to create a leaner, peacetime force, this is an urgent challenge. We must always remember that, without the human capital, all the ships, submarines, jets, planes, helicopters and tanks in the world are no use to us.

Our people are the most important component of the triumvirate of equipment, estates and personnel that makes up our world-class military resource. We train them to the highest standards in the world, and we must ensure that we do all we can for them because, notwithstanding the moral component—I say this as an accountant—we want to make sure we get the best value for money for our investment. If we lose a pilot for lack of a decent house, or a nuclear engineer for lack of a school place, we have failed to assess the value-for-money implications to the taxpayer and the capability needs of our services, and we are failing to enact the spirit of the covenant in practice.

This year's report highlights the excellent work done by the Department of Health, and internally by the MOD with Defence Medical Services, to build a more robust infrastructure framework. Substantial work has taken place to tackle hearing loss issues, and that will be an interesting area to follow in the year ahead, because the NHS hearing loss treatment guidelines have recently changed. For those whose hearing has been damaged as a result of service, it is to be hoped that they will get full treatment to restore their hearing.

The launch of the e-learning for healthcare programme to help GPs to gain greater understanding and awareness will be useful but, of course, ensuring that the transfer of all medical records works across the country will be key to helping GPs to know their patient's history and to work with them when crises arise in the years after service.

The new veterans' gateway is a great step forward in helping families and local service providers, as well as MPs. We have high hopes for it, although there are concerns that gaps in mental healthcare provision, in particular, will remain a stubborn block to providing real and needed support for military families who are, for instance, supporting post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers who are unable to access the long-term medical interventions that they need to help them recover and lead full lives once again. Perhaps the Minister could give us a little more detail about how suppliers at the other end of the gateway will be supported by relevant Government Departments so that there is capacity to meet this well-identified need.

The report also talks about developing an alternative approach to the provision of accommodation for service personnel and their families. I would be failing in my duty to all our military families if I did not mention the crisis in military housing, which is a real and present danger to the retention of large numbers of our highly trained personnel. I have tackled the problems with CarillionAmey's maintenance contracts in a number of forums already, and the Minister has been enormously helpful in getting a trial MPs' hotline set up to help us to sort out practical problems for families in service accommodation. However, the problems are extensive and cause enormous frustration to too many.

I have challenged the Minister on the combined accommodation assessment system rental changes, and not a single family I have spoken to minds that their rent is going up, but if the system is to reflect normal social housing rates under the decent homes plus standard, their homes really do need to be DH plus. Too many are not, and the challenge system has been weighted against families getting a fair and honest appraisal of their home's categorisation. There is more to do to rebuild the loss of trust we really are facing.

However, the most challenging part of the housing debate is the future accommodation model, which the MOD is working on. According to the report, it is aimed at supporting families

"to live in the private rental market or enabling them to purchase their own home."

I am grateful to the Minister for publishing the data sets from the survey this week, and we are looking at them closely. I ask him also to publish the additional notes that personnel wrote. He said he would do that, but they do not seem to be in the initial statistical data sets that are online.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I hear what the hon. Lady says about military accommodation and I think that we all genuinely share her concern. Does she agree that it is particularly worrying that the report indicates that satisfaction has actually decreased? Those satisfaction levels are very low indeed.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. We should be extremely mindful of the continuing low morale in all services, although the Royal Marines are the noble exception, perhaps because they are very busy on a great number of operations. We should be mindful of the critical point that he raises.

The key concerns in the FAM debate are that, given that the drive towards the universal housing allowance has been clearly set out in documents since 2009, the FAM survey of personnel is just a smokescreen to bring the policy in anyway. No one disputes the aim of providing a way to access good-quality and affordable housing as part of the offer, but we must get that right. Whatever the changes involved in locating the Army and the Air Force in fewer locations, such as by moving submarine activity to Faslane and so on, the reality is that, when deployed, in small numbers or large—we can never predict the future—our military families need to be looked after in decent, well-maintained housing, and to have a framework of real support around them and their children. If we fail in that, we will lose more and more of our personnel at a much earlier stage in their careers to the civilian world. That is not value for money, and it is not good for our capability, or for the morale and corporate memory needed to maintain the unique quality of our armed forces.

Mark Lancaster: I do slightly take offence at my hon. Friend's suggestion that the survey is just a smokescreen to bring in this policy. The purpose of the survey is to inform opinion. Some 27,000 of our service personnel responded to the survey, and it will form the evidence base for how we move this policy forward. If my hon. Friend is suggesting that we should not have surveyed our armed forces personnel, I entirely disagree with her. However, let me be clear that no firm decisions have yet been made about how this policy will proceed, and to suggest that we should not have surveyed service personnel is fundamentally wrong.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the Minister for his comments. My suggestion about a smokescreen is based on the feeling among military families and personnel that four questions were asked, but that the existing SFA opportunity was not among them. There was an opportunity in a separate, non-mandatory question for military families who thought that SFA was a good thing to indicate why they thought so. The survey contained four questions about the four different choices that military families might want to make, which included living in privately rented accommodation and owning their own home. I simply reflect the voices that have shouted very loudly at me that there is a deep sense of anxiety, as all the families' federations surveys have indicated.

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Much as I respect my hon. Friend the Minister, when we read the questions in the screenshot we can see how they are designed to produce a particular answer. To take just one example, the most common reason why people are

[*Sir Julian Brazier*]

in favour of change—two thirds are nominally in favour—is that they want to live in a better house. Nowhere are they told that once they go into the private sector, they will be totally responsible for persuading landlords to do something about the maintenance of their homes—unlike in the very expensive Australian model, in which the Department of Defence has kept that responsibility.

Mrs Trevelyan: My hon. Friend reflects the deep concerns about the way in which the survey was put together and the framing of the questions, which left a lot of personnel unable to give the answers that they wanted to give. I think the Minister is mindful of that, and I am glad to hear that no formal decisions have yet been made.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I do not want to get involved in a dispute between two of my hon. Friends, but does my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) agree that, of all the surveys published in recent times, the one that matters most is the monthly service personnel statistics of 19 January this year? They show, sadly, both reservists and regulars voting with their feet.

Mrs Trevelyan: Sadly, that is the reality. I talk continually about retention risk. That risk is very real, and we are suffering from it.

I want to take the Minister and the House a little further into the FAM survey. The survey talked about choices, but no one felt that SFA was a choice that the MOD wanted to keep on the table. The Minister and I will continue to discuss the matter, but that is what the personnel who completed the survey felt. Giving service personnel the choice to live where they want is fine, if the option to live with their family when not deployed during the week is real. However, housing costs in too many parts of the country where forces are based are too high, so the likely reality is that families will be spread across the country and unsupported. We cannot plan for a peaceful world when all our troops are at home.

We are undermanned, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) says, our recruitment numbers are a challenge. The offer needs to hold up if recruits are to remain in service once they have families, and a key component is getting the housing offer right. Choice is a great thing, but it simply will not work to drive a policy change that breaks up patch life or creates effective salary drops because of housing market stresses.

The annual report shows the continuous work of the Department's team to help to reduce disadvantage. That is commendable, but there is so much more to do. Not a single person here would ever want to hear the words that I have heard far too often: "This is just too hard; we are going to leave the service." The most recent continuous attitude survey shows that there is a stark gap between the 76% of respondents who are proud of their service and the 45% who would suggest that one should join up. That is a gap that we cannot fix.

I hope that in the year ahead we can focus on actively encouraging service families to talk to their MPs when they have problems, so that a strong new constructive

dialogue can begin. The covenant is one of the most powerful tools we have to drive through good decisions, to reduce the looming capability risk gap and to increase our servicemen and women's belief in their value to us. I fervently hope that we can harness such a dialogue across the House in 2017.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I apologise to the House for my inaudibility. I shall attempt by hand signals to explain what I am trying to say.

2.14 pm

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) in this debate. I welcome the publication of the annual report on the military covenant, but Members will not be surprised if I raise, as I have done on previous occasions, concerns about the implementation of the covenant in Northern Ireland. May I commend the Minister at this stage? I know that he is totally committed to his work as Minister with responsibility for veterans, dealing with the military covenant. We appreciate the interest he has shown in Northern Ireland and look forward to further visits from him in the near future.

May I draw the attention of the House to a letter I received recently pursuant to a case that I had been dealing with on behalf of a constituent, who is a veteran of our armed forces? I had written to the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill, who is now the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland, having replaced the former Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness. In her response, she said:

"As you are aware the Armed Forces Covenant is not in place here and ex Military personnel therefore do not have the 13YJ code (the code which identifies someone with a history of military service) added to their clinical records for GP referrals.

The Armed Forces Covenant has been adopted by England, Scotland and Wales"—

note, not Northern Ireland—

"to provide equal access to healthcare where it can be linked to military service, serving personnel, their families and those who leave the Military Forces. The Covenant has not been adopted here as health care arrangements are delivered on an equitable basis to all members of the community."

That highlights the extent of the problem we are dealing with in Northern Ireland. I do not include the Minister in this, but I have to say that some associated with the Ministry of Defence are in denial about that problem. The reality is that after more than 30 years of Operation Banner, we have literally tens of thousands of veterans living in Northern Ireland. Indeed, I would argue that in our region we probably have a higher proportion of veterans than most other regions of the United Kingdom.

It is worth bearing it in mind that many of those veterans served with the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment Home Service in the communities in which they lived. That brought with it added pressure for them and their families, to the extent that recent reports have indicated that there is a very high incidence of post-conflict trauma among veterans in Northern Ireland.

The University of Ulster is undertaking a study to try to evaluate the level of mental illness among veterans in Northern Ireland, but it is known to be quite high. We are faced with a problem whereby veterans seeking help for their mental illness are being told by the Department

of Health, “We are sorry, but if you are a veteran in Northern Ireland, the armed forces covenant does not apply here, so we cannot deal with you on the terms on which you might be dealt with by the health service in England, Scotland or Wales.”

The armed forces covenant does not give preferential treatment to veterans. It merely seeks to ensure that those veterans are not disadvantaged by virtue of their military service. And yet the Minister hides behind the notion that applying the military covenant in Northern Ireland would somehow undermine the basis of equality that is at the heart of the Belfast agreement and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. We in this House, and the Department, need to do more to challenge this muddled thinking and this wrong approach.

The Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has investigated the matter. In evidence to the Committee, Ministers said that there is not a problem, and that section 75 applies but does not interfere with the implementation of the covenant. But here we have, in black and white, from the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland a clear demonstration of the prevailing attitude that the armed forces covenant does not apply in Northern Ireland, and that it has not been adopted there. Yet my understanding is very clear: the armed forces covenant applies across the United Kingdom and ought to be fully implemented across the UK. It is wrong that veterans in Northern Ireland are suffering from a lack of recognition of the covenant, and we need to do something to put that right.

In evidence to the Defence Committee, the Minister stated in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) that it was the view of the Department that the military covenant in Northern Ireland was being implemented to the extent that some 83% or 84% of its provisions applied there. I cannot evaluate that assessment, but, given that access to healthcare is such an enormously important element of the covenant, the only thing I would say to the Minister and the Department is that if the Department of Health in Northern Ireland says, “Sorry, the covenant does not apply”, I am not convinced that the 84% figure for the proportion of the covenant being implemented in Northern Ireland is an accurate reflection of where we really are.

Mark Lancaster: Let me be absolutely clear. I will not try to evaluate the 83% or 84% figures, but I have been clear both in my evidence to the Select Committee and in the House that, while progress is being made in Northern Ireland—yes, absolutely, the covenant does apply in Northern Ireland—I fully accept that more work needs to be done to ensure an equitable status for veterans who reside in Northern Ireland and those who reside in the rest of the United Kingdom. I have made trying to achieve that one of my priorities during this year.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I very much appreciate the Minister’s intervention, and we will work with him towards that end. In the end, we are not interested in party politicking about this; we are interested, as he is, in ensuring the best outcome for veterans across the United Kingdom.

I am pleased that I am joined on these Benches by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan). He and I work very closely together on matters relating to the covenant and the welfare of veterans, which is an indication that this issue transcends party politics in

Northern Ireland. I suppose he and I must redouble our efforts to ensure that other political parties recognise that this is about a humanitarian approach to the welfare of those who have served our country, and that we should not allow politics to get in the way of ensuring that men and women get the help they need.

On the positive side, I am pleased to report that we now have an appointment to the covenant reference group, which advises the Government on the covenant and looks at how to co-ordinate actions relating to the covenant across the United Kingdom. I am delighted that my colleague Mrs Brenda Hale—she was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, representing the same constituency as me, until it was dissolved—has been appointed to represent Northern Ireland on the covenant reference group. I want to thank the hon. Member for South Antrim and his colleagues for their support on that issue. Brenda’s husband, Captain Mark Hale, was tragically killed on active service in Afghanistan while serving with 2 Rifles, and Brenda knows personally the challenges that are faced by veterans in Northern Ireland. I believe that she will be a very able representative of those veterans on the covenant reference group.

I am also pleased to report that a number of the new councils in Northern Ireland have adopted the community covenant, to which the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed referred in her opening remarks. In my constituency, both the councils covering the Lagan Valley area—Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council—have now signed up to the community covenant. I am pleased that they are taking forward initiatives linked to the community covenant, which is positive progress.

One area on which further progress could be made is that of better co-ordinating the very valuable work of all the agencies and veterans’ charities that operate in Northern Ireland. I would like to see the establishment of some type of hub for veterans in Northern Ireland, a one-stop shop that a veteran could contact to receive information about where they can get help, whether with welfare issues, accessing healthcare, pensions or other issues that have an impact on them. We want such a hub to be established in Northern Ireland to draw together and co-ordinate the work of the various organisations and charities.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thought that we were going to set up a national hub or one-stop shop, and I presumed that regions would have a sub-one-stop shop as well, which would make sense.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The hon. Gentleman is a good friend of the veterans in Northern Ireland. I share his expectation and, indeed, his hope that that is exactly what will happen. I just want to ensure that Northern Ireland does not lose out, and that Ministers will co-operate with the Northern Ireland Executive and local organisations representing veterans to ensure that this does happen.

I want to raise a concern about a recent decision by Combat Stress to withdraw its regional welfare officers service from Northern Ireland. I have been contacted by a number of veterans from across Northern Ireland, many of them suffering from mental health problems, who have benefited from that very valuable service, which has offered them support at a time of great need. When I met the chief executive of Combat Stress, Sue Freeth, I

[*Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson*]

was very impressed—and I am very impressed—by what it is doing in Northern Ireland. Sue indicated to me that it would cost in the region of £60,000 per annum to retain this welfare support service. I have written to the Secretary of State about this issue, and I really hope that that funding can be found. It is not a big amount, but it has a big impact.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important issue. It is an issue not just for Northern Ireland, but for the mainland of the UK. The Minister will perhaps address this when he responds, but I cannot for the life of me see why the extraordinarily important welfare contribution made by charities such as Combat Stress—I am a very strong supporter of it—should not be continued. It is very important to have such a link, and I hope the right hon. Gentleman agrees that this is not simply a matter of medical care.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I cannot add to what the hon. Gentleman has said. He is absolutely right, and I urge the Minister to look at this.

In drawing my remarks to a close, I just want to make two points. First, the aftercare service provided by the Royal Irish Regiment is absolutely crucial. In Northern Ireland, we have many thousands of former soldiers who served with the Royal Irish Regiment Home Service and the Ulster Defence Regiment, and the aftercare service is undertaking very valuable work in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues will ensure that the aftercare service, which is much needed, will be retained.

My final point is an important one. In Westminster on Saturday, together with the hon. Members for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) and for South Antrim, I attended a rally of veterans from across the United Kingdom of Operation Banner, the longest-running military operation in the history of the British Army. They are concerned about the recent arrests and prosecutions of former soldiers who served in Northern Ireland, some of whom are in their 60s and 70s, and we share their concerns.

We share the concern that after years of service to our country, men and women who ought to be enjoying their retirement are now waiting for the knock on the door. We also share the concern about the circumstances, because it seems that the focus is on what the armed forces and the police did in Northern Ireland, and much less on what the terrorists did. It is worth bearing in mind that the vast majority of the 3,000 unsolved killings in Northern Ireland were carried out by terrorist organisations, yet the vast majority of the resources currently going into investigations are for those relating to alleged killings by the armed forces and the police, which is unacceptable.

I encourage the Minister and his colleagues, both in his Department and in other relevant Departments, to give serious consideration to the introduction of a statute of limitations that would protect the men and women who served our country and who deserve that protection. I recognise that no one is above the law, but when cases have been investigated—in some cases not just once, but twice—and the men and women who served our country have been exonerated only to find, years later, that those cases are being reopened, then I

think there is something wrong. It is having a big impact on recruitment to our armed forces. Young men and women are looking at what is happening and asking themselves, “Why would I join the armed forces if I face the prospect of being prosecuted?” I repeat that no one is above the law, but I really do think the Government need to act. They need to protect the men and women who protected us in our darkest hour.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope we can manage this afternoon without a formal time limit, because this is a pleasant debate in which there will be a lot of agreement. For everyone to have a chance to speak it would be courteous if Members were to speak for under nine minutes. That would give everybody else a chance to contribute.

2.30 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) with whom, alongside the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), I shared not exactly a platform but the plinth on the George V statue on the other side of the road from here last Saturday when 1,000 troops were there.

I endorse everything the right hon. Gentleman said. It is absolutely immoral that the men who fought in that filthy war, wearing the Queen’s uniform and doing their best for their country, facing an enemy who wore civilian clothes and lurked in the shadows among the civilian population, are now being dragged from their beds at 6 o’clock in the morning in dawn raids and dragged off to Northern Ireland. It is unacceptable. I am afraid I have to say to my hon. Friend the Minister on the Government Front Bench that this is not a matter simply for the Police Service of Northern Ireland or for the prosecuting authorities. It is, as I told the Prime Minister, a matter for Ministers. This is a matter of public policy and it must be addressed. I strongly endorse the case made by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley for a statute of limitations. I know many of my hon. Friends would have been on that plinth with me had that been possible.

Mr Gray: On a similar and related point, does my hon. Friend agree that firmly within the Government’s remit is the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which is, outrageously, criticising 4,500 of our soldiers? It looks like 60, or maybe a little fewer than that, will be prosecuted. Does my hon. Friend not agree that this is an absolute disgrace?

Sir Gerald Howarth: I entirely agree. I felt at the time that that man Phil Shiner was a disgrace. He was a dreadful man engaged in the cowardly and unacceptable activity of trying to find people to stand up and accuse their fellow countrymen who had gone to relieve the people of Iraq from their suffering. He tried to do down those people and I am very pleased to hear today that he has been struck off. Frankly, I do not think that that is enough; but then I always was a supporter of capital punishment.

Dr Murrison: I of course agree with my hon. Friend. Does he agree—I am trying to think of something nice to say about IHAT; I appreciate that that is very difficult—that IHAT has at least the benefit of being relatively

contemporaneous, unlike Operation Banner? Under Operation Banner, people are being dragged out of their beds many decades after the event and trying to work out what they were doing three or four or five decades ago. That is very difficult indeed. At least IHAT is investigating within a relatively short space of time from the alleged incidents.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend who succeeded me as Minister with responsibility for international security strategy at the Ministry of Defence. I would like to say more on this subject, but you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have asked us to be brief.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on introducing the debate and on her incredible work in highlighting this issue. The military covenant is not specific to any particular party. All of us, across the Floor, can embrace this issue. It is a covenant not between the Government and the armed forces, but between the armed forces and the people. We, as Members and Ministers, are acting on behalf of the people. I represent the home of the British Army, Aldershot, which has about 5,000 troops and their families, and we feel that acutely.

Project Allenby Connaught is the largest private finance initiative in the country. Nobody knows anything about it because it is hugely successful—a £19 billion PFI which, I have to say, was started under the Labour Government. I would like to put on record the fantastic job Aspire is doing in running the garrison under the PFI. Admittedly, it has released land to build 3,850 units of accommodation to sell. Nevertheless, the result has been a complete transformation of the military facilities in Aldershot. We have some of the finest single living accommodation and new headquarters—the recently opened Montgomery House—for the home command. The whole garrison in Aldershot has been transformed thanks to this PFI, so a small note of thanks to Geoff Hoon. He opened the fantastic sports facility, which is the home of the army sports board. There are world-class tennis courts. It really is a great garrison and I pay tribute to all those who have contributed to it. I rarely receive complaints about accommodation. The Minister, whom I actually met in my constituency when he was a sapper with the Royal School of Military Engineering—

Sir Julian Brazier: The picture my hon. Friend paints is an excellent one, but I think he would confirm that the cost of housing, both to buy and rent, in his constituency is extremely high. Is it not so much better to have the arrangement he describes than to put people out on allowances in the private sector?

Sir Gerald Howarth: Absolutely right. I can tell my hon. Friend that the average cost of housing in Aldershot is £259,000. That illustrates the challenge for people in the military trying to find their own homes.

Rushmoor Borough Council, which signed up to the military covenant in 2012, is doing a really good job. There is a tremendous relationship between the garrison and the council. Recently, the council met Hampshire County Council and the garrison commander—another great man, Lieutenant Colonel Mac MacGregor, who is doing a great job. They will carry out a workshop together to discuss how better they can implement the covenant in Aldershot. That is good news.

CarillionAmey is doing excellent work on the married quarters. It has created a forum for quarterly meetings with the wives and I very much hope that that will prove to be very successful.

Mike Jackson House is doing a stunningly good job of providing supported housing to single veterans who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. If any Members know people in my area who could benefit from it, I ask them please to get in touch with me.

As an illustration of how the garrison and the town are working together, a lot of companies have signed up to the community matters partnership project. I am very pleased to say that the new chairman is none other than the garrison commander. There is more that can be done, but a lot of good work has come out of the covenant. It is important to recognise what it has delivered.

I am also bound to say that the Aldershot military wives choir is of course the finest military wives choir in the country. Since my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) is nowhere to be seen, I can confidently say that without fear of challenge. When they come here to sing, I hope right hon. and hon. Members will accept my invitation to listen to them.

The covenant has done a tremendous job to engage with the public on the need to support our armed forces. Much more needs to be done, however, and most importantly on accommodation. I have people who have no connection with the Aldershot area, save that they have served there, come to see me having left the Army—sometimes their marriages have broken up because of PTSD or other such difficulties—and although the council does not put them at a disadvantage, it does not put them at the top of the list either. These men and women deserve to go to the top of the social housing list, as against some of the young ladies who come and see me and say they need social housing because they fell pregnant. It is not quite the same as having suffered PTSD. That is the big challenge. The other big challenge that the Minister should take away is that we will not rest until those who served in Operation Banner no longer face the risk of prosecution while the terrorists get away scot free. That is not acceptable.

2.40 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), although I did not agree with his last comment about women—but we will leave that to one side, as we are here to discuss the military.

I am never sure about these things, but I think I should start by declaring a non-pecuniary interest: my son-in-law is serving with the Army in Cyprus as an active reservist and my daughter has received some leaflets and so on from those supporting families with partners serving abroad. I say that just in case it matters somewhere along the line.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on bringing this debate to the House and the other Members who supported her, the hon. Members for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat). It is incumbent on us to debate these matters. We all agree that the armed forces—those who have served and those currently serving, as well as their families—deserve great credit and huge respect. When I taught in the 1980s—other

[*Vernon Coaker*]

Members might remember this—we did not, in some respects, celebrate or commemorate poppy day, and sometimes it was regarded as inappropriate for military personnel to come into schools. It represents a great step forward for our country that over the last few years the military have been welcome in our schools and we have celebrated poppy day properly. It teaches our children and young people the importance of service, how they live in a country that has been protected by people for generations and that the freedoms they deserve were hard won and need to be maintained.

It is important that we discuss these matters, and it is wonderful now to see so many young people at remembrance and other such events through the year. I am sure that everyone has noticed that. It is a huge step forward for us all, and it is happening across the country, including in Northern Ireland—I have been there and seen it for myself. Incidentally, I agreed with many of the remarks of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). I know how hard he has worked, along with his colleague the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan), on these matters.

I wish to challenge the Government on a couple of points, but I want to put that in context, because today's report is generally a very positive one about the progress being made. From a consensual point of view, I think we all believe that progress is being made, but we have heard about accommodation and other such matters, and we all want to try to accelerate that progress and say to the Minister, "These are the challenges that still remain". I make my comments, therefore, having recognised that much progress has been made. To be fair to the Minister, he recognised that himself in his evidence on 17 January to the Defence Committee.

In every aspect of the covenant, we have made huge progress, but there remain problems. Although every local authority has signed up—as I understand it—their record on implementation and action is variable. We have to find a way of holding local authorities to account. Where they have signed up to things, how do we hold them to account more effectively and help them deliver the outcomes they have committed themselves to? For example, a Local Government Association report has found that, regardless of our efforts, 40% of those who have served in the armed forces still feel that their service has left them at a disadvantage. That is not good enough.

We also need to understand that the covenant for communities is non-binding. The point has been made that we need to raise awareness of the responsibilities of people who have signed up to the covenant. I was disappointed to hear the Minister say in his evidence that the inter-ministerial group with overall responsibility for co-ordination is to meet only twice a year, and it was unclear who was to chair it—perhaps he will clarify that in his remarks. I know his answer will be, "Well, there are lots of other bodies below that responsible for delivery of the covenant", but the inter-ministerial group is really important. I ask him gently whether meeting twice a year is sufficient. I question whether it is sufficient.

The issue of housing has been raised. There can be no doubt that, frankly, some of the accommodation is appalling—every Member here could give examples—and that it has been so for a number of years. This is a real

challenge for all of us, and we need to sort it out. It simply is not good enough that some of our service personnel are having to live in such appalling accommodation. A massive defence estate reorganisation is now taking place affecting some 27,000 families. There is an opportunity there, as well as a challenge, for the Government.

I agree very much with the comments of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed about schools admission policy. It raises an issue that the Minister might want to address in his remarks. What is the Government's view of not disadvantaging service personnel as opposed to giving them preferential treatment? My own view is that the public accept, in certain circumstances, that we should advantage service personnel because of their service to the country, and I think that schools admissions is one such area in which they should be advantaged.

Sir Gerald Howarth: In Aldershot, I find that Hampshire County Council has been incredibly enlightened: it makes allowances for all the schools in its budgets for what it calls "turbulence". I am not hearing many complaints at all, so I suggest that the hon. Gentleman has a word with his local education authority.

Vernon Coaker: I am making the more general point that the situation varies across the country. I am sure that it is really good in some local education authorities, but it is not so good elsewhere. Perhaps the situation in Aldershot, which is in Hampshire, is particularly good because there are a lot of service personnel, so they have experience. The Government need to consider what happens when service personnel disperse to areas across the country that do not have so many service personnel and how to give them the same quality of provision.

Finally, the issue of mental health will not go away. Significant numbers of veterans are still struggling to access the services that they need. We can debate why that is, but the reality is that things need to be improved and more needs to be done.

This is a hugely significant debate—it has almost been a discussion—and we all want the best for our veterans. We talk about their service to the country, and we need to make sure that the country does its best for them.

2.49 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who has maintained his interest in the armed forces and the military despite the fact that he is no longer formally responsible for them. I disagree with his last point about positive discrimination in favour of the armed services, but I will come back to that in a moment. Apart from that, I endorse all that he had to say.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who drilled down into the report with tremendous care. She does an enormous amount of work on behalf of our armed services through her all-party group on the armed forces covenant. She has entered into the armed forces parliamentary scheme with an incredible level of enthusiasm and dedication. She also comes to every all-party group dinner and event—her commitment and enthusiasm for the armed services is not just because she fancies Royal Marines.

On the subject of the armed forces covenant, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). I am glad to see him in the Chamber and I hope we might hear from him later. Some years ago, he wrote the seminal work on the armed forces covenant, “Tommy This an’ Tommy That”. I have the Library’s copy, and I recommend it to colleagues across the House. At least partly as a result of his work, the armed forces covenant was written into law in the Armed Forces Act 2011, so we owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. Incidentally, the same applies to his work on mental healthcare for veterans, on which he wrote a seminal report. Most of his recommendations have been carried out by subsequent Governments, and we should recognise his huge service to veterans.

All of us in the Chamber agree on the need for the armed forces covenant. There is no question about that. Some of us had doubts about whether it should be written into law, but none the less, it was. I welcome the fact that an annual report is now published; it is important to hold the Government’s feet to the fire. However, it would be useful if we had an annual debate on the matter alongside other defence debates. The Government could bring the report to the House and invite a debate, rather than relying on the good offices of the Backbench Business Committee. Surely the Government should say, “This is our report. Please ask us questions about it.” I hope that the Minister might consider doing so in future.

We all support the principles behind the armed forces covenant. There is no question about that. It is a contract between the people and the armed forces. In my constituency, the 200-odd occasions when the good people of Royal Wootton Bassett have turned out to welcome home and pay their respects to the 450 coffins returning from Afghanistan perhaps epitomises all the good things that the people of Britain think about the armed forces covenant. We realise that the armed forces do things we would not do, so we must look after, respect and honour them for that, and I am very glad that we do.

The things that we do for the armed forces are important. We must make sure that their physical and mental health are looked after, both when they are serving and afterwards—incidentally, the covenant is not just about veterans and families, but about serving soldiers, sailors and airmen. We must look after their health for the rest of their lives—if they are injured, for example—and we must look after their housing and their children’s education. That is absolutely right, and we must do that.

However, I disagree slightly with the hon. Member for Gedling. In a constituency such as mine, which is largely military—some of the schools, for example, are virtually entirely military—if we allowed the military disproportionately to have access to schools and put them to the top of the housing list, for example, that would, by definition, disadvantage civilians. I am not certain that I could go to my constituents and say, “I’m awfully sorry, your children can’t get into that school because we have given those spaces to military children” or, “You can’t have a council house, because we have given it to the military.” I am not sure that is right. The point behind the covenant should be that the military are not disadvantaged because of their service. However, they should not necessarily be given excessive advantage over the rest of the community either, otherwise support for the military covenant would quickly disappear.

Wiltshire has been outstanding in its support for the covenant over many years. We set up the civil military partnership in 2006. We have 15,000 serving personnel, 15,000 dependants and 54,000 veterans—and growing. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) claimed that he represented the home of the British Army, but I rather suspect that Wiltshire is, in fact, now the home of the British Army. We have enormous numbers of serving and veteran personnel in the area. As a result, the council has done a huge amount, encouraging local organisations and working with the housing association and the schools, to implement the military covenant in Wiltshire. I pay particular tribute to my noble Friend Baroness Scott of Bybrook, who has taken the lead in this matter over so many years as leader of Wiltshire Council.

None the less, in addition to the community covenant and the local government covenant, we must not forget all the other people who make such great contributions to the welfare of our soldiers and veterans. I am glad that the Minister and I are both wearing the SSAFA tie this afternoon. It is terribly important that we should not forget the charitable side of things, and there are a huge number of charities doing useful things. I was very proud recently to be made the patron of Operation Christmas Box, which sends 25,000 Christmas boxes to all our armed services on deployment around the world every Christmas and is hugely appreciated by the soldiers, sailors and airmen. These things are important. They are not a formal part of the military covenant, but they achieve many of the things that the covenant does, so let us not forget the charitable sector, the local government sector and the business sector, alongside all that the Government do for our armed services.

So far this has been a largely consensual and agreeable sort of debate. I do not mean to detract from that in any shape or form, but I have two or three questions to ask about the way in which the covenant is operating, which the Minister might like to reply to or perhaps take into consideration in the year ahead, as he applies the covenant.

First, I am concerned about a decline in interest. Ten or 15 years ago, when we had high kinetic warfare around the world, the people were very concerned about our armed forces. Today, that interest is rapidly declining, as evidenced by the level of donations to charities. Donations to Help for Heroes, for example, were up to £40 million at one time, but are now sharply down, and it is the same for the Royal British Legion and others. If, as we all hope, we do not see a return to kinetic warfare for many years to come, my concern would be that the military covenant could become a dusty document, that people would forget about it and that the whole thing would become ancient history, as the military disappeared from headlines and public awareness. I would be interested to know what the Minister thinks he could do to avoid that occurring. Annual debates might be one way of doing it.

Secondly, those of us who represent military constituencies are concerned—we are very aware of these things—that the footprint of the military across Britain is now increasingly small. The permanent basing structure that we now have, with the five super-bases for the Army, means that large parts of Britain have absolutely no military involvement at all. I cannot help feeling that the military covenant ought to be a way of spreading the word throughout the entire population of Great Britain that these are things

[Mr James Gray]

that we must care about. Again, I wonder whether the Minister has any thoughts about ways in which that could be done.

Thirdly, we have written the military covenant into law, and that is good thing. It provides a good structure for all the things we are discussing today, but there are two problems with it. As the military covenant is written into law, we might be able to tell ourselves that we have done something about this, thereby assuaging our conscience and not doing the much greater things that we would do were it not in law. In other words, the law must not become the lowest common denominator or simply the level below which we must not fall. Rather, there are many more things we should be doing, even if they are not enshrined in the covenant.

I would also be interested to know from the Minister how many legal cases there have been in the last year or two in which the military covenant has been used as evidence against a military defence. In other words, are the armed forces and spouses using the military covenant as evidence to sue the Ministry of Defence for a variety of purposes? It would be interesting to know whether the covenant has become part of the law in that sense.

The final thing that makes me rather concerned is this fixation we have—it is an important fixation—with veterans, families, housing and all those things. Of course they are hugely important—my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed is quite right that if we do not get them right, then recruitment and retention will go down—but we should not forget that the covenant is actually between the people and the serving soldiers, sailors and airmen. We have to get right the way in which we employ these people, very often in appalling circumstances that we ourselves would not even contemplate entering into. It is not just about the disabled, the sick and ill, the wives or the children, although they are all hugely important; it is about the soldier.

That is where the book by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire comes in. The great “Tommy” poem—which, if I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to quote a couple of lines from—absolutely goes to the heart of the military covenant:

“O it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Tommy, go away’;
But it’s ‘Thank you, Mister Atkins,’ when the band begins to play...
Then it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Tommy, ‘ow’s yer soul?’
But it’s ‘Thin red line of ‘eroes’ when the drums begin to roll...
While it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Tommy, fall be’ind,’
But it’s ‘Please to walk in front, sir,’ when there’s trouble in the wind...
You talk o’ better food for us, an’ schools, an’ fires, an’ all:
We’ll wait for extry rations if you treat us rational.
Don’t mess about the cook-room slops, but prove it to our face
The Widow’s Uniform is not the soldier-man’s disgrace.
For it’s Tommy this, an’ Tommy that, an’ ‘Chuck him out, the brute!’
But it’s ‘Saviour of ‘is country’ when the guns begin to shoot”.

2.59 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), not just on securing the debate, but on what I thought was an outstanding introduction that revealed the depth of her knowledge and her work on

this matter. I was not aware of the all-party parliamentary group before, but I certainly am now, and I pay tribute to her for its work. I hope to deal with some of the issues that she raised.

I welcome the report. With all respect to the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray), who talked about the importance of the serviceman, I want to say something about support for veterans and their families, and, in particular, about service accommodation.

The covenant is, and must surely continue to be, a lifetime guarantee for all those who have served our country, and now is as good a time as any for me to express my gratitude to them for their service. A couple of months ago, it was my great pleasure to open the annual conference of the new Westminster Centre for Research and Innovation in Veterans Wellbeing at the University of Chester. I have to say that, unfortunately, the centre is not named after this place; it is named after the late Duke of Westminster, who was a great supporter of the armed forces. It is led by Colonel Alan Finnegan, formerly of the Royal Army Medical Corps, and it has links with the veterans community and the regional Army brigade headquarters.

When I was at the centre, I recounted the story of something that had happened in Chester early in my term as the city’s Member of Parliament. One of the apparently homeless people who were begging in the streets—one of the regulars in the city centre whom we recognise—had a sign saying that he was an ex-serviceman, ex-Army. That great 21st-century phenomenon, the social media storm, then blew up: people were extremely angry about what they considered to be a crime of impersonation, and even asked for the police to be involved. They were not suggesting that it was a crime of impersonation on the grounds that this gentleman was not really homeless; their anger was prompted by their belief that he was claiming to be an ex-serviceman when in fact he was not. I do not know whether he was or not, but the incident takes us back to what the hon. Member for North Wiltshire said about his constituent in Wootton Bassett, and, indeed, to what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker).

There is a real sense of pride in the members of our armed services, which is a welcome change from the atmosphere of past years that my hon. Friend described. I believe that, not only in Chester but more widely in the country, members of the armed forces should be able to wear their service as a badge of honour.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Christian Matheson: I will always give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Bob Stewart: May I remind the House that in the 1970s and 1980s, armed forces personnel were specifically ordered not to wear uniform in public because of the Provisional IRA and other terrorist threats? That is one reason why we did not see people wandering around in uniform.

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. There is, of course, a terrorist threat today, but I believe that the atmosphere has changed, and changed for the better.

For me, perhaps the most important aspect of that conference was the reminder that, for all our important work on mental and physical health, which was mentioned

by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling, and about which I shall say more later, most of our service veterans are not needy and suffering, but have benefited greatly from the training, experience and comradeship that service gives them, and are continuing to contribute to our society. Discipline, teamwork, initiative, ingenuity and personal responsibility from a young age are all huge benefits to the community as well as the individual. The report refers to some of the successes of the covenant in business, but I fear that we do not always emphasise sufficiently the contribution of ex-service personnel to society. We must certainly not allow them ever again to be seen as burdens on society.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, there are also health needs to be met. We know that military veterans present with a number of emergent health issues, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and obesity. We also know that the number of veterans who enter the judicial system as a result of violence-related crime associated with significant alcohol abuse is larger than the average. It is clear that a considerable amount of money is allocated to schemes involving the armed forces covenant, but the measurable outcomes of such initiatives are less clear. Covenant grants should, when possible, include measurable outcomes in the applications, and, when appropriate—it could perhaps be said that this is a shameless plug for the university in my constituency—the Government might consider using academic partners to shape the way in which valid and reliable information is collected and subsequently reported. I understand that the MOD covenant is looking at this and has invited expressions of interest, and I welcome that.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed devoted a long section of her speech to service families, which are referred to in chapter 8 of the report, which I welcome. The role of the family can sometimes be overlooked—although clearly not today, thanks to her—when seeking to support our forces and veterans. Any stress on a serviceman or woman also has an impact on their family. As she said, one way of addressing this is to ensure that there is as much stability in family life as possible, with welcoming surroundings—and that stability might also be reflected in retention rates.

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire talked about the consensual nature of the debate, but I will now, if I may, depart slightly from that. The Government have decided to sell off the Dale barracks in Chester, which is home to the Mercian Regiment, a successor of the Cheshire Regiment.

Bob Stewart: A fine regiment.

Christian Matheson: Yes, indeed. The decision is myopic and damaging. It will do nothing to maintain morale among the servicemen and families, and the popularity of the barracks is reflected in the number of service families who stay in the Chester area after leaving the Army.

The local schools are used to dealing with service children. This does not just mean, for example, making an extra effort to welcome and integrate new arrivals, to give as much stability as possible; primary schools in the Upton area of my constituency, where the barracks are based, are skilled at dealing with the pressures on children when their mums or dads are deployed away. I was not aware of the ten-minute rule Bill of the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, but this issue is of

great importance to three or four schools in that area, and I will now be looking at what support I can give her on that Bill.

Closing the Dale is unpopular and wrong, and I believe that it is being done solely because land values in Chester are high, which means that it can be sold off more easily.

Bob Stewart: Speaking as someone who has lived in the Dale barracks—my regiment was based there—I remind the House that the whole barracks was modernised only about 20 years ago, as the hon. Gentleman will know, and was considered then to be a future base for infantry.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful to the hon. and gallant Gentleman, whom I consider a friend. His service in the Cheshire Regiment we should never fail to recognise, and the experience he brings to the House should never be underestimated. The House may wish to know that he is still held in extremely high regard in my constituency.

I do not think the closure of the barracks will assist the Army in its effectiveness and I ask the Government to think again.

I wish to touch briefly on two other issues. The first was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and concerns Northern Ireland. The criminal investigations into every death there involving the British Army during the troubles are wrong. If evidence of a crime can be presented, it should be investigated, but a blanket inquiry cannot be justified. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) talked about a statute of limitations; I do not know about that.

As I have mentioned, many former members of the Cheshire Regiment, which served with distinction in Northern Ireland, are either originally from, or have since settled in, my constituency. Their service should be their honour, and I will defend them. Some of them may be implicated now in the new inquiry. In the specific terms of today's debate on the armed forces covenant, if the Government have not already done so—if they have, I apologise—will they consider guaranteeing full legal support to any ex-serviceman or woman who is dragged into this unfair mess?

My final point is also about veterans and ex-servicemen. I wish to mention my constituent Ray Tindall, along with John Armstrong, Nick Dunn, Nicholas Simpson, Paul Towers and Billy Irving. They remain incarcerated in a prison in Chennai in India wrongly convicted of a crime they did not commit.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this incredibly important point. Does he agree that, as service veterans, they are owed even more of a duty of care by this UK Government, who should be doing everything possible to get them home, where they belong?

Christian Matheson: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady and shall draw my comments to a close on that very theme.

Those people are all ex-servicemen. Ray was in the Indian ocean with the other men to raise a little bit of money, in his case to grow his business in Chester. I will raise the case of the Chennai Six at every opportunity,

[*Christian Matheson*]

because, with the greatest respect to MOD Ministers, I do not believe that our Foreign Office is being vigorous enough in its calls on the Indian Government to release the men. Ray has seen active service in recent conflicts, and if the covenant means anything—to them and to me—it means that we must continue all our efforts to bring him and those other lads home.

3.10 pm

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on securing this debate. It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), whose praise for my hon. Friend and for the late Duke of Westminster I very much endorse.

It is an unavoidable fact that the body of men and women whom we ask to do the most difficult and dangerous tasks for us have, for obvious reasons, no public voice. We in this House therefore have a particular duty to take an interest in their concerns. I am glad to see the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster)—a man who has done three operational tours—in his place today. The growth and flowering of the covenant is in no small part thanks to him, and it grieves me greatly that I shall spend almost all my speech talking about a subject on which we profoundly disagree.

Last year, the Ministry of Defence won a settlement that committed us to defence expenditure of 2% of GDP, which was a welcome move, and to a modest but positive growth path. However, that is still the lowest proportion of GDP since before the second world war. At the same time, we committed ourselves to an equipment programme that has resulted in the amount of money left to pay for our personnel being badly squeezed. This debate on the armed forces covenant gives us an opportunity to discuss that position. The armed forces have felt the same pressures as the rest of the public sector—and rightly so. They had to undergo the same pay squeeze and the same large-scale reductions in pension rights, but on top of that they had already suffered in a number of ways. They have had large rises in rents, restrictions in the availability of various allowances, and even a noticeable decline in the quality of food for single personnel.

The effects of those changes can be seen in the numbers. In my view, the Army now has the best senior leadership for a generation or two, with a new breed of generals who came through middle-ranking command positions in combat now introducing all sorts of reforms, yet the Regular Army today is 3,600 short and still shrinking. The Royal Air Force is nearly 2,000 short, and we have the smallest number of pilots since the service was founded. Naval numbers have stabilised at a level quite close to their target. That is a remarkable achievement by the senior service, given that it has the greatest budgetary pressures of all and a colossal level of operational tasking, but for reasons that will become evident, the Royal Navy is not the main concern of my speech. I shall speak mainly about the other two services.

Regular surveys of those leaving the armed forces show each year that the largest single factor involved is the strain on family life. It is in that context that I want to focus exclusively on chapter 3 of the covenant and

the new accommodation model. Many colleagues will be aware of the recent report from the National Audit Office that refers to the condition of the housing stock and the long backlog of repairs, but I am much more concerned about what it goes on to say about how short-term thinking over the past generation is setting us on a downward spiral. It states:

“To manage the estate within its budget, the Department has made decisions that subsequently offer poor value for money in the longer term, including the 1996 decision to sell and lease back the majority of Service Family Accommodation, which is now limiting the Department’s ability to manage this element of the estate cost-effectively.”

An additional problem in that regard will arise in four years’ time. It is a matter of record that I opposed that sell-off.

Against this unpromising background, I have much sympathy for my hon. Friend the Minister as he tries to find a new way forward for housing. He will no doubt tell us that the survey that the MOD has just published suggests that 55% of the 20,000-odd people who responded were broadly in favour of the proposals—almost twice as many as were against them. Nevertheless, I hope to persuade the House over the next few minutes that there are four reasons why that is a profound mistake.

The first reason why the new accommodation model is profoundly wrong is geography. Unlike the Royal Navy in Portsmouth and Plymouth, the majority of our garrisons and RAF stations are not near a supply of affordable housing to buy or to rent. Catterick and Tidworth, which are our two largest bases, are in the middle of nowhere—my sister lives near Catterick. Our RAF bases in Oxfordshire are among some of the most expensive housing areas in the country. All three of our fast jet fighter bases are in remote locations. Even where housing is plentiful, as in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), it is unaffordable.

The second reason is the effect on officers. The statement in the covenant is clear, but let me digress for a second. America has a policy of having allowances rather than family accommodation in some cases where housing in the area is affordable, but it is strictly based on rank. In contrast, the Government state that

“the accommodation allowance of tomorrow will be provided based on... need, regardless of...rank”.

I want to focus the House’s attention on the group who will lose out most. The critical group from which we are losing people is that of captains who are about to be majors in the Army. Company commanders and squadron commanders are the backbone of the regimental system. Those people and their counterparts in the RAF, which includes those coming up to the first breakpoint for fast-jet pilots after all those millions we have invested in them, will be told that unless they happen to have a large family, they will be given a small allowance instead of a substantial house in order to fund a much more generous arrangement for junior ranks with large families. Any civilian business that tried to follow such a principle would go bust within a year or two. Special arrangements for the regimental sergeant-major, the backbone of the regiment, are also being brushed aside.

The third reason is the continuing need for mobility. As long as I have been a Member of Parliament, every Government have committed themselves to greater stability, but there is some evidence that mobility has slightly

increased. The Minister might well introduce a bit more stability, but all the staff training and all the best staff jobs for all three services are in southern England. However, the majority of Army units and almost all RAF units are not. Officers from those two services will continue to have to be posted up and down the country. It is the same for the submarine service, which is in a different position from the rest of the Navy.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a complete nonsense that senior military personnel should have to go by second-class public transport? I had a general in Aldershot who had a national command. With a helicopter, he could brief his staff at 7.30 am in Aldershot and be up north by 10 o'clock. My hon. Friend is making an important point and the Minister had better listen to him.

Sir Julian Brazier: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his endorsement. He makes an important additional point.

This is not only about officers being posted around staff jobs. The centres of excellence where we train the next generation for the Army should get the cream of the senior NCOs from all over the Army. Brecon is shortly to have no Army units near it, but of course we have to post people in and out of there. The same goes for all the other phase 2 training schools. It is crucial that the best of the instructors go to RAF Valley, for example, but the nearby housing market is very thin.

The fourth reason is the question of cost, and that takes me on to the survey, about which I am sure the Minister will enlighten us. Let me provide some examples of how the wording of the questions and the issue of cost weigh against each other. The first is about housing quality.

The Australians operate a successful system whereby they lease properties in the local housing market. Their bases, unlike ours, are nearly all in major centres of population. They work on the basis that all the risk and all the maintenance is taken on by Defence Housing Australia. Such an arrangement is very expensive, and DHA funds it.

The reason that the majority of people gave for preferring the new system, as it was put to them, was that they thought they would get better houses. They were reminded in the survey—I have a copy if anyone wants to see it—that there is a lot of dissatisfaction with existing housing. The survey did not tell them that, in future, they will be responsible for all the risk and maintenance if they go away on exercises—as MPs, we all know how bad some private sector landlords are—unless they take on a huge extra cost.

Again, the survey says that we are going to reach out to unmarried families. I am in favour of that, and there is a serious case to be made for it, but how far do we go? If a soldier enters what might be a short-term relationship with a partner with three or four children from a previous relationship, are we really going to give them a gigantic allowance, perhaps twice as much as an RSM or a major with no children? There has to be a limit somewhere, but this is all dangled in the same survey.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some fantastic points, and forgive me for interrupting him because he is being crystal

clear. I merely encourage him to observe one further thing, which is that the nature of military service means that people are frequently dragged away from their home base. That means that a spouse, perhaps from abroad or from a very different part of the country, is then responsible for dealing with a landlord or landlady who might not have their best interest at heart, to put it politely. The spouse will not then have the protection of the command structure above or of the Department, and they will not have civil servants to assist them; they will, quite literally, be on their own.

Sir Julian Brazier: My hon. and gallant Friend puts it in a nutshell, much better than I have.

I will finish in a moment, but I have one last point on the survey—you have been very tolerant, Madam Deputy Speaker. The survey refers to home ownership 11 times. People in the armed forces desperately want to own a home, and they worry about what will happen to them when they leave the service. Nowhere does the survey say that we are moving out of the many garrisons where home ownership is practical: Canterbury has closed; Chester is about to close; and Ripon is closing. We are focusing on areas where it is not practical to become a local owner-occupier.

What do I suggest? We need to come to terms with two basic points. First, within the defence budget to which we have committed ourselves, there has to be a degree of rebalancing. I—and, I suspect, most of the other people in this Chamber on a Thursday—believe that we should spend more money on defence, but if we cannot persuade our colleagues to spend more on defence, with all the threats out there in the world, the budget needs a degree of rebalancing. We either have to accept slightly smaller Regular forces or we have to buy less equipment. Rather than tearing up a model that works, we need to fund it properly.

Secondly, we have to find a vehicle for enabling a route to home ownership. The key to that for many people is buying to let, which means a special arrangement on last year's Budget change that hugely disadvantaged service landlords, who are treated as if they are ordinary landlords, even though their property is the only one they have. They pay a higher rate of tax on the rent coming in than the relief they receive on their mortgage interest payments. There has been a bit of progress, but we also need to revisit the way in which the Forces Help to Buy scheme operates so that people do not have to apply to let the property, but can just let it when they get moved, with a guarantee that there will be no problems.

We need to find ways of reinforcing that model. We need to put a little more money into it, and we need to address the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) that people in the armed forces at the bottom end of the financial scale should be prioritised on waiting lists. But—and this is a crucial but—it must be done in a way that is fair. This cannot just be where they are serving—my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) made a strong point about this—it must be in their place of origin, otherwise a few communities will carry the whole weight.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you and the House have been very tolerant with me this afternoon. I firmly believe that this Government are strongly committed to our armed forces and I have huge confidence in

[*Sir Julian Brazier*]

our Ministers, and I know that everybody who has stayed behind for this debate on a Thursday cares about our armed forces, but I believe that the new accommodation model is a serious threat to two of our armed forces.

3.25 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): First, I thank the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) for securing this debate. I congratulate her on that, on her passionate support for serving personnel and veterans, and on her knowledge of the issues. I can safely say that we all welcome the publication of the fifth annual report on the armed forces covenant, but we should be very aware of the big challenges that remain, while welcoming the progress that has been made. The announcement last year of the £10 million per annum covenant fund was clearly a step forward, and the 300 projects that have resulted from it are a positive foundation that can be built on.

In recent years, society has become more aware and has more understanding of the effects of military service on the mental and physical health of those who chose to serve, and on their relationships with their families and their communities. However, quite apart from the rigours of their jobs, the challenges that face current and former military personnel in their own lives are many and varied, from post-traumatic stress or physical rehabilitation, to simply finding a house and job upon leaving the military.

Veterans are an asset to society and deserve our thanks, respect and support. There are some 13 million veterans in the UK today, amounting to one of the highest densities of veterans in a major country. In Scotland alone, approximately 1,800 men and women complete their military service and settle in our communities every year, many with their families. The transition from the armed forces to civilian is a hugely unsettling process. It involves leaving behind a job, a home, a community and a unique way of life—possibly the only life many servicemen and women have known in their adult lives. The importance of caring for veterans was underlined even further this week with the publication of a report entitled “Multiple deprivation in help-seeking UK veterans” by the charity Combat Stress. Among its key findings was the clear link between residence in areas with higher risks of deprivation and mental health difficulties. In addition, there was the startling finding that individual veterans take an average of 11 years before seeking help after leaving the military.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the stress that can be caused to servicemen and women, and their families and dependants, when they leave the service. Will she therefore join me in congratulating the Scottish Government’s commitment to supporting our ex-service personnel through the Scottish veterans fund, which contributes some £600,000 over three years to a range of one-off but vital projects in our communities?

Marion Fellows: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I was coming on to that, and indeed will do so shortly.

For all the progress that has been made in recent times, there is clearly still much to be done to encourage veterans to seek the help they need and deserve. The fifth annual report does cover what has happened in Scotland but does not provide much detail, so I hope to provide that. In January 2014, Cabinet Secretary Keith Brown announced the creation of a Scottish Veterans Commissioner to act as an ambassador for ex-service personnel. On 28 June 2014, Eric Fraser CBE, a former Royal Navy officer, was appointed to that post. On 13 December last year, the Scottish Government announced that Mr Fraser was to be reappointed until August 2018. The commissioner has published three briefings on Scotland’s veterans: “Transition in Scotland”, in March 2015; “Report on Provision of Information on Housing for Service Leavers and Veterans in Scotland”, in August 2015; and, most recently, “The Veterans Community—Employability, Skills and Learning”, in November 2016. I recommend reading them—they read much better than their titles, which I have tried to enunciate.

As alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), the Scottish veterans fund was established by the Scottish Government in 2008 to assist groups and organisations that offer assistance to Scotland’s ex-service personnel and their families and dependants. It is administered by Veterans Scotland and has been designed to provide discrete amounts of funding to one-off projects. However, after last year’s announcement of £600,000 of funding over the next three years, the fund will now accept applications for two and three-year projects. It is worth noting that one of our big employers in Edinburgh, Standard Life, has contributed £240,000 to the fund.

In February last year, the Scottish Government set out their ambitious agenda for the future in the report “Renewing Our Commitments”, with the goal of making Scotland the destination of choice for service leavers. On healthcare alone, since last year’s report on the covenant, the Scottish Government have put in considerable work to improve services for current and former service personnel. For example, in partnership with NHS Scotland, the Scottish Government have provided £1.2 million for 2016-17 to fund specialist mental health services for veterans. They also continue to fund and roll out a network of Veterans First Point centres across Scotland, so that any veteran can get help with any difficulties they have—and that is not confined to any one area.

The Scottish Government give veterans priority access to low-cost housing through the low-cost initiative for first-time buyers, and provide schemes to help with deposits for private renters. In addition, they have awarded £1.3 million of grant funding to the Scottish Veterans’ Garden City Association—another mouthful—to build new homes, 25 of which are now complete across six local authority areas, to support impaired ex-service personnel. I am delighted to tell the Chamber that I pass 10 of those new homes every time I visit my constituency office in Motherwell and Wishaw.

The Scottish Government support applications to the education support fund and encourage veterans and personnel to grasp the opportunities that the fund could give them. As an ex-further education lecturer, I have had practical experience of teaching service personnel—mainly those who were still serving but were committed

to leaving the forces and preparing for civilian life—and I have to say that I found them all to be both committed and diligent.

In Scotland, the most obvious and far-reaching differences found by personnel leaving the services concern the provision of public services, most of which have been devolved to the Scottish Government and are now delivered by local authorities and NHS Scotland. It is almost inevitable that everyone leaving the military in Scotland will need to engage with those organisations as part of their personal transition process, whether about their health, housing, education or employment.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. I recently visited one of my constituents, who is doing a lot for veterans. Indeed, quite soon he will be rowing solo from Portugal to French Guiana in aid of veterans. When he left the Royal Navy, he experienced quite severe mental challenges, and has recently been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Does my hon. Friend agree that the armed forces covenant and the work she has mentioned will mean—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am sorry, but I have just done some calculations and, given the number of Members who wish to speak, I am going to have to impose a six-minute limit on speeches after the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) takes her seat. That was a very long intervention, which would normally be fine on a Thursday, but we are going to be very pressed for time today. In the light of that, if the hon. Lady brought her speech to a conclusion, we would be very grateful.

Marion Fellows: May I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, lengthy though it was, and say that I appreciate the work that his constituent is doing?

I should also add at this point that an unfortunate few ex-service personnel do come in contact with the Scottish criminal justice system, which is also different. What may not be immediately apparent to the service leavers is the different approach to government in Scotland—I am talking about identifying which agencies have responsibility for the delivery of public services and what to expect in the way of support. Beyond the devolved public services, it must be remembered that Scotland also has several other characteristics that provide a different context for service leavers. Of those, perhaps the most important is the distinct nature of the third sector that provides vital support to the ex-service community.

We are also lucky in Scotland to have, across all sectors, a growing network of veterans' champions who are dedicated to reinforcing the values of the armed forces covenant, and a private sector that is just starting to see the benefits of recruiting service personnel and their partners.

I was especially struck by the reference in the Scottish Veterans Commissioner's third report, "The Veterans Community: Employability, Skills and Training", published in November last year, in which he described how he met two students at Glasgow Caledonian University who had previously served in the military. They were early service leavers, who can face additional stresses on returning to civilian life. Both were inspiring characters, but one in particular left a lasting impression as he

described the challenges that he faced during a short and troubled spell in the Army and a difficult transition into civilian life. He subsequently received vital support from the statutory sector, charities and the academic community—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I said that I hoped the hon. Lady was reaching a conclusion. Every minute that she takes is coming off subsequent Members. The speech limit is six minutes now, but it is rapidly coming down unless she really does conclude.

Marion Fellows: I apologise Madam Deputy Speaker. I got carried away in my enthusiasm.

In Scotland, we try very hard, through our devolved services, to support personnel and veterans. Scottish Veterans' Employment and Training Service deserves a mention. It covers a wide variety of public, private and charitable institutions, and helps people who have left the military to gain employment. I have also experienced at first hand Motherwell and Wishaw citizens advice bureau, which provides, through the Armed Services Advice Project, programmed help for people in my area.

We all must play a part in improving the lives of serving personnel and veterans across the UK to recognise the valuable role that they play in the defence of our citizens. Scotland is well versed in partnership working, and this is a well-used route to help veterans in Scotland. I commend it to the Chamber.

3.38 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on securing this debate and on the manner in which she presented it? Her work does her very great credit, particularly that in relation to the Public Accounts Committee.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) for giving us a wonderful plug and for promoting my book, which is available from all good booksellers. In a similar spirit, may I thank him for all his hard work on the armed forces parliamentary scheme—he has done a great job rejuvenating it and giving it a new lease of life—and for his work as chair of the all-party group for armed forces?

It seems like the covenant has been around for a long time, because, semantically, it has biblical or mid-17th century connotations, but the truth is that it was really only invented in 2000 in a staff paper. In 2007, the then Leader of the Opposition decided that it would be a good idea to create a Military Covenant Commission and appointed Frederick Forsyth as its chairman. People such as Simon Weston served with great distinction on that commission. It informed the thinking of the then Opposition and subsequent Government, and resulted in the inclusion of the military covenant in the Armed Forces Act 2011. That pretty much brings us to where we are today.

This report contains some great news. I give credit to the Government for their hard work and commitment, and I particularly thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Minister, who approaches this work with dedication and enthusiasm. There are a lot of positive things in the report. I was particularly taken by the fact that 73,000

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

pupils benefit from the pupil premium, which I feel strongly about as many of my young constituents benefit from it. Some 9,000 personnel are accessing the forces Help to Buy scheme, so that is having a real impact on people. The innovation is entirely compatible with the modern way of living for young people and has much to commend it, notwithstanding the points raised, quite rightly, by my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) about the future accommodation model. I share many of those concerns. I could see that the Minister was listening attentively, and I am sure that he will go away and reflect on my hon. Friend's insightful remarks.

Having been ever so nice about the Government, I would just like to reduce my diminishing prospects of preferment by pointing out that we have recently had some fairly bad news about the recruitment and retention figures for regulars and reserves. I am particularly worried about the Army. The figures are really very bad. Of all the surveys we do, this one matters most. People are not daft. They pick up on what is going on around them and vote with their feet. We are at a time of reasonably good, robust employment and people have other options, so we have to work twice as hard as ever to attract people and, much more importantly, to retain them.

Mr Gray: Does my hon. Friend agree that one thing we have to get right is the means by which people are recruited into both the reserves and the regulars? It is currently taking far too long.

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People simply walk. They do not give a reason; they just get fed up and go. That will not be reflected in any statistics. Those people are a wasted asset. I think that a lot of men and women who consider joining the reserve forces simply go and do something else.

The figures would have been even worse had we not changed the way in which we count people. We have now included phase 2 trainees in our trained strength. The logic behind that is perfectly sound in that phase 2 trainees can be used in the UK to do all sorts of exciting things do to with resilience and all the rest of it. Nevertheless, one is left—being a cynical politician—with the sense that this is, in fact, improving the figures. We have to compare like with like, but if we do that, we end up in an even more unhappy place—[*Interruption.*] I have been reminded that, of course, we are talking about phase 1 trainees: people who have completed phase 1, but not yet embarked on or completed phase 2.

The new employment model, the new recommendations for the service families accommodation and the future accommodation model have been discussed at length. I cannot expand on that in the time available, but I entirely agree with some of the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury. What has been proposed is exciting and forward-looking. It kind of taps into the way society is today. We always have to do that when trying to work out how the covenant will work into the future. However, it seems that this will disadvantage people and remove something valuable in service life. We must be very careful about that.

I am concerned about mental health in the armed forces. I wrote a report a little while ago called "Fighting Fit: a mental health plan for servicemen and veterans",

which the Government, to their great credit, implemented pretty much in full, but what I missed was the level of alcohol abuse in the armed forces. Some would say that that is up to the individual and has nothing to do with combat. I would say that the culture in our armed forces—I have seen this over many years—is one of encouraging the abuse of alcohol. We have a duty under the covenant to ensure that we deal with this, but I fear that we are not doing so at the moment. Some 65% of our military are at higher risk for their excess drinking.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): This has been an excellent debate with much consensus. I speak as someone who is proud to be the wife of an armed forces veteran from the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. Alcohol difficulties in the Army also reflect mental health issues. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that alcohol is often a suppressant for underlying mental health issues?

Dr Murrison: Yes, the hon. Lady is absolutely right. If we accept that we have a culture in the armed forces that encourages the use of alcohol—possibly with some benefits, actually—we have a duty of care to people to ensure that we try to tackle it. We were told that we were going to have an alcohol working group and that it would report shortly. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister where we are with that group and when we can have its report and the action points arising from it.

I suspect that the advent of lawfare will be discussed at length by one of my hon. Friends in a moment. However, I would like to weigh in, because the issue has already been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), and I agree with his remarks. I am deeply concerned about this issue. I wrote to the Prime Minister in October and received a very satisfactory response, in which she made it clear that she takes this matter extremely seriously. I am pleased to note that we have an intention to derogate from the European convention on human rights in respect of future conflicts. Of course, had we done so several years ago, we would not be running into some of the difficulties that have been alluded to this afternoon.

The Iraq Historic Allegations Team must conclude its work by the end of 2019. I am pleased that the Government have committed to making sure that that happens, in so far as they are able to do so. I am also pleased that they will be giving support to those veterans who find themselves having their collar felt; it is entirely appropriate that we should do that. Will that also apply to Northern Ireland veterans—Operation Banner veterans—who have been issued with letters from the Ministry of Defence inviting them to unburden themselves? Many of these gentlemen are in their 60s or 70s, and it is a troubling experience for them. My advice to them, quite frankly, would be, "If you receive one of these, you should seek the advice of a solicitor." It would be nice to know that the MOD agrees with that advice and that it will undertake to fund it.

Finally, I would like to give my observations on accommodation in relation to CarillionAmey. My sense is that, in recent months, things have improved. As somebody who represents a garrison town, I of course

get correspondence on this issue regularly from my military constituents, and it has tailed off recently. However, there is no denying the conclusion in the extremely good report from the Public Accounts Committee, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed contributed, that the

“performance of CarillionAmey has been totally unacceptable and it is right that the Department is considering terminating the contract.”

Those are strong words from a highly respected Committee of this House, and I would be interested to hear what the Minister is doing to rein in the worst excesses of a company that, frankly, has let the men and women of our armed forces and their families down.

3.47 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on bringing this debate to the Floor of the House. She is to be commended for that and for her commitment to the armed forces.

I am a great believer in the idea that the armed forces must be rooted in, and reflect, the society they serve and defend. I commend the hon.—and gallant—Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) for raising the issue of making sure that our armed forces reflect the society they serve by living in it and not just in bespoke military hubs.

In their domestic lives, service personnel have similar problems to the rest of society, but we must recognise that they also face unique challenges. The Minister will be aware that I have raised issues on the Floor of the House in relation to children, veterans and carers, as well as pre-deployment and the length of deployment.

However, that does not mean that challenges do not remain. In terms of the report and the general debate, I am astonished to see the difficulties that veterans still face in accessing medical care. While there have been obvious improvements, work remains to be done across the whole United Kingdom—for example, in ensuring a better transition into civilian life for veterans by ensuring that service GPs can share their expertise across the NHS, which we have discussed on the Floor of the House on many occasions. Critically, in Scotland and across the UK there are differing NHS structures. Local provision in Scotland is made through community planning partnerships, where a whole range of partners get around the table. The discussion of the impact of service life in community planning partnerships does not seem to be having any influence.

In housing, there are problems with CarillionAmey providing service accommodation that lives up to the understandably high standards of the Ministry of Defence. That fact has drawn the eye of the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, which indicates that much work remains to be done in delivering an improvement in the living experiences of service families and providing value for public money, as most of that money goes to a private company.

I wonder whether the future accommodation model should learn from elements of the Scottish housing standard, on which the Ministry of Defence could at least reflect, in introducing a basic standard. The Ministry of Defence in Scotland is exempt from the national housing standard, which every social landlord had to meet by 2015.

That brings me to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), who mentioned social housing. Rather than blaming pregnant women, perhaps the best way to give people access to social housing is not only to build more of it, but to stop selling it.

This week's Combat Stress report highlights some of the fundamental problems faced by veterans and underlines the fact that much work remains to be done. The opportunities grasped by many who enlist in our armed forces are unfortunately not shared by nearly enough people. Those of us who take an interest in armed forces and veterans affairs will not be satisfied until that attainment gap is closed. I agree with the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed about the corporate covenant. I am seeing that in small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency. Last week, I attended a Burns celebration in which the chamber of commerce—it covers not only West Dunbartonshire, but the whole of the old county of Dunbartonshire—led the charge to get businesses involved in that corporate approach.

It is one of my great hopes that the idea of the covenant can become embedded in the culture of the armed forces. The service rendered by those who join must be returned many times by not only this Government, but Governments of the devolved Administrations—and by the society that those people have served. I welcomed the Scottish Government's commitment, which some of my hon. Friends have mentioned. Last year, the Scottish Government set out their ambitious agenda for veterans with “Renewing our Commitments”, in order to make Scotland the go-to destination for those who leave the services.

In conclusion, I reiterate my welcome for the report and my satisfaction in the ongoing work of the armed forces covenant to ensure that those who have served are given the support and opportunities that they deserve. Like most people in this House and in the country, I know from my own family experience—members of my family have been on the front line—the unique challenges faced by those who serve in the armed forces, and by their families. I am happy to say that they deserve our respect, our thanks and our ongoing support. In doing so, I do not forget the work that we in this House and those in the Ministry of Defence must still do to ensure that veterans receive more support than we are giving them at the moment.

3.52 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on securing this fantastic debate. I remember spending many great days and cold nights in her constituency on gunnery training exercises. Those are fond memories, mostly. I would also like to declare that my youngest son serves in the British Army, also as a gunner.

The armed forces covenant has had a positive impact in redefining the relationship between our civilian population, veterans and our armed forces. By enshrining it in law, we have provided our armed forces, both past and present, with a tangible agreement—almost a contract—between the people who serve, the politicians who make the decision, as we do often, to put them in harm's way, and the rest of the population who benefit and are kept free by the service and sacrifice of our armed forces.

[Jack Lopresti]

I was very proud during the last Parliament to serve on the Armed Forces Bill Committee, not only as a Member of Parliament who represents a constituency with a huge defence, MOD and military manufacturing capacity, but as a veteran and vice-president of the Stoke Gifford Royal British Legion branch. I put lots of pressure on local councils in Bristol and south Gloucestershire to sign the community covenant during the last Parliament, and I constantly keep up the pressure regarding its ongoing implementation.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): As one Royal British Legion vice-president to another, may I tell the hon. Gentleman that I very much take the point he is making? He will be aware, although the House may not, that every branch of the Royal British Legion and most branches of the Royal Naval Association have a welfare officer, who is very often the conduit or link between recently discharged servicemen and women, and the local authority, social housing providers and general providers of social aid and assistance. Does he agree that the Government could do more in the pre-discharge period to let servicemen and women know about the advantages of the Royal British Legion, which can do so much for them? In many cases, sadly, that offer is not taken up.

Jack Lopresti: The hon. Gentleman is of course absolutely right. There is a responsibility on our part as Members of Parliament to link up with service charities such as the Royal British Legion to make sure that they are aware of what we can do to help veterans in our own communities.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman support the Royal British Legion's "Count them in" campaign, which calls on the next census to capture data on the armed forces community? That would help to improve the allocation of resources and services to this community, and I think the Government should support it.

Jack Lopresti: Of course I will support that. As I said, it is imperative on all of us to link up with local service charities and do whatever we can on all levels to help our veterans and their loved ones, families and dependants. I have done some work with a military charity called Alabaré, which does a lot on housing, and I helped to secure it considerable funding from the LIBOR fund to invest in veterans' accommodation.

Overall, the covenant has definitely helped to improve the way in which our country treats those who have protected our way of life, or are still doing so, by serving in the armed forces. We must never forget the huge debt of gratitude we owe both those who are currently serving and veterans, as well as their families. Freedom is not free: we do not live in a free country by accident, as most people in this country fully appreciate and understand.

When members of the armed forces swear an oath of allegiance to the Crown, they enter into a covenant relationship with society—they swear to protect and serve us all—but, regrettably, this covenant has recently been shown to be one-sided. In the foreword to the armed forces covenant annual report, the Secretary of State for Defence says:

"We have a duty across society to recognise this dedication and sacrifice, by ensuring that the policies we make, and the services

that we provide, treat our Service personnel, Veterans, and their families fairly, and ensure they suffer no disadvantage by comparison to the rest of society as a result of their service."

As other hon. Members have mentioned in some detail, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) in particular, there is at least one aspect in which former service personnel are being disadvantaged by their service. I am talking about the ongoing, politically motivated witch hunt that is now taking place against former soldiers and service people who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles. Only last weekend, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wrote in an article in *The Daily Telegraph* that there is an "imbalance" that has led to a "disproportionate" focus on criminal inquiries involving former soldiers. That is a clear admission of failure in relation to the armed forces covenant and of people being disadvantaged by their service.

I was interested to read the announcement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence in December that, in line with the Government's commitment to the armed forces covenant, they plan, in order to stop service personnel and their families having to pursue lengthy and stressful claims in the courts,

"to provide better compensation...for injuries or death in combat equal to that which a court would be likely to award if it found negligence. As part of this reform, we intend to clarify in primary legislation the long-standing common law principle that the Government are not liable for damages as a result of injuries or deaths sustained in combat."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 2016; Vol. 617, c. 53WS.]

The Secretary of State also said that that would address the so-called judicialisation of war. The Government are able to act, with primary legislation, to protect their own interests, but what is happening to our Northern Ireland veterans is also, in my opinion, a judicialisation of war.

Let me bring to the House's attention one of the many ongoing cases in which the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland—incidentally, he is a former lawyer for Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams—is seeking to prosecute two surviving veterans who were part of an Army patrol that shot the known IRA terrorist John McCann. Sadly, one of the patrol has died in the intervening years. The soldiers were investigated fully at the time, and the fact that the length of time that has passed means there is a lack of forensic evidence and credible eye-witness testimony would in my view make the trial, in modern terms, untenable.

We need to bring in legislation quickly to provide a statute of limitations on all sides. That would help to draw a line under the terrible events of the troubles and bring the communities together. There would also be no further retrospective prosecutions of our service people. I want to make a point that I have previously made in the House: there is no moral equivalence whatsoever between terrorists and brave service people who were keeping the peace to protect all communities. Nine hundred and sixty one people were killed serving in the police, the police reserve, the Army, the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment—nearly a third of all people who lost their lives in the troubles. It is clear to me that on this issue the Government have broken the military covenant. Clearly, we are not protecting or supporting our veterans who volunteered to put themselves in harm's way on our behalf. The Government are letting them down badly.

Nobody is suggesting that military justice and due process should not apply on operations. Our people operate under the highest possible standards and with very strict rules of engagement. They are a great force for good in the world, but where service personnel have been judged to have carried out their duties, often in extremely difficult circumstances and at great risk to themselves, their actions should not be second-guessed years later for the sake of political expediency, a form of appeasement and the weakness of some of our politicians.

This is not just about dealing with the past. This is about upholding the covenant and our country's honour, so that the people serving today and those thinking of enlisting have the reassurance that, whatever awful situation we send them into, it will not result, 30 or 40 years down the line, in their lives being ruined by retrospective, politically motivated prosecutions.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am afraid the time limit is dropping down to five minutes. I call Danny Kinahan.

4.1 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti). I very much agree with his sentiments, and the soft way with which he put it, that we really must start looking after our armed forces, particularly those who served in Operation Banner.

The military covenant is a fantastic document and a great idea. I congratulate all involved in trying to put it into place. I apologise today for speaking mainly on Northern Irish issues. Before I do, I would like to congratulate the Minister, who often gives me the opportunity to talk through these issues with him. He was going to visit Northern Ireland, but has had to delay because of our election.

I want to congratulate in particular the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on the huge amount of work she does on this issue. She visited Northern Ireland, where she met victims suffering from appalling combat stress; she listened carefully to how things are in Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that the covenant says that we will look at the regions and learn from each other. There is a great deal to learn from how Scotland and everyone does this. It is, however, right for me to concentrate on Northern Ireland, because so much there does not work.

I want to start with a story that was told to me many years ago, which always makes me think. Winston Churchill visited a Spitfire factory and the young, keen engineer told him, "We look at every aircraft when it comes back. We see where most of the holes are, and then we arm them and make them stronger." Winston Churchill, quick as a flash, replied, "You are looking at the wrong aircraft. You are looking at the ones that come back." What I am trying to get across is that we must all remember to think outside the box. We have the information in front of us about the 83% or 84%, but we have to make sure we consider the information we are currently not seeing. I believe there is a great deal we can learn from it.

We struggle in Northern Ireland because the structures are not properly in place. We heard from the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson)

about the difficulties in Northern Ireland. Working together, we now have someone on the reference group, but we need a non-political commissioner or champion who can work with all sides of the political spectrum in Northern Ireland and bring everyone together. As we know, one side in Northern Ireland sees all military and security forces as representing British imperialism. We have to show them the great work of our armed forces in the Mediterranean, picking up refugees fleeing Africa, and in dealing with Ebola. We need to show the mass of great work our armed services are doing.

In Northern Ireland, about 60,000 people served in the UDR and the security forces. I want to tell one more story. I was once valuing a painting near Dungannon. As I walked in, there was a photograph of the person I was meeting with all his colleagues in military uniforms. I said, "Gosh, you're brave to have that photograph on display next to the door." He took me out into the car park and pointed to about 20 houses nearby saying that in every single one of them the males had been shot by the IRA. That is the world they were living in. That is why people have mental difficulties. They never got a break. They did their duty, went back to work and lived with that threat.

That is why I have pushed so hard to make sure that we look after everyone. We need funding to help the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association to look after everyone, and we need to sort out who exactly is in charge of this in Northern Ireland. It is not the regular forces. The RFCA does most of it, but it needs resources. Councils do not have the support either. We have champions in every council, but they do not do housing or education; that is done up at Stormont, but it is not being delivered there because, as we have heard, the covenant is not seen as being in place in Northern Ireland. We had 197 shot in the UDR alone. We have to find a way of helping everyone. It needs someone to grit their teeth and look at how we make it work. If we look outside the box, I think we can get there.

I agree with everyone that we cannot have this witch hunt. I see myself as about as balanced as can be, but it is so biased.

Jack Lopresti: The hon. Gentleman and I both serve on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. In the last Parliament, we inquired into the implementation of the military covenant in Northern Ireland. Is it time we thought about another inquiry as an update on that?

Danny Kinahan: I very much agree. We should have an update. We also have to find a way of drawing a line, perhaps with a statute of limitations. We have to find some way of moving on in Northern Ireland, and part of that will mean looking after our armed services—not just the Army, Navy and Air Force, but the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the RUC, the prison officers and a whole mass of other people. As someone who lives in Northern Ireland, I want to end by thanking all those who have served there and secured peace. Let us make sure we keep it.

4.6 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The main point of the armed forces covenant is to ensure good morale in our armed forces. Maintenance of morale is the second most important principle of war and has been described as "a positive state of mind derived from inspired political and military leadership, a shared sense of purpose and values, well-being, perceptions of worth and group cohesion."

[Bob Stewart]

It is thus at the heart of the armed forces covenant. Napoleon called morale the “sacred flame”. He went further, saying, “Morale is to the physical as three is to one”. When I was an instructor at Sandhurst, between 1979 and 1980, when some in the Chamber were not even born, I did not really understand that. [Interruption.] Hon. Members are waving at me. I taught it, but I did not understand it. It means that if an army has high morale, the enemy thinks it has more forces. I did not understand that until I went to Bosnia.

Stephen Pound: As someone who was around in 1979, I must say that, while I hate to disagree with the hon. and gallant Gentleman, I do not think that the prime purpose of the covenant is to raise the morale of the troops. It is to repay a debt of honour we owe to servicemen and women. It is a debt of honour being repaid by the civilian society. It is not just about morale, surely.

Bob Stewart: I absolutely—and graciously—accept that point.

When I went to Bosnia, I learned this lesson. The three main opponents always came to me and said, “How many men and women do you have under your command?”, and I would say, “Lots. How many do you think?” They would say, “Between 3,000 and 4,000.” I had 800. Those men and women were acting like that because of their morale. We have the best armed forces in the world thanks to high morale and training. We give them everything we can, but we have the best armed forces in the world, and the armed forces covenant is going to make them even better.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree that what underpins the strong morale in the fighting elements of our armed forces is the confidence that when they come back into civilian life, they will be protected, nurtured and their sacrifice honoured?

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for that very good intervention. The armed forces covenant will require constant care and attention. It is a responsive document that must interact with what is happening at the time, and hopefully, it will become even more effective.

Finally, to speak sharply, I want to complain to the Minister, who is sitting there complacently. There is not one regular unit of the Air Force, the Navy or the Army in my constituency of Beckenham, and that is disgraceful—sort it out!

4.10 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am not quite sure how to follow the last point made by the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), but I will try.

It is a great privilege to speak in this debate on the covenant, not least because in October 2011, Blackpool was the first town in the north-west to show its commitment to the armed forces by signing the community covenant, which I have a copy of here. I pay tribute to the late Jim Houldsworth—a Conservative councillor, as it happens—who was instrumental in bringing the community covenant together in the town.

Blackpool has a strong relationship with the armed forces. Every year, to tie in with national Armed Forces Day—indeed, we had one of the first in the country—the town also holds an armed forces week, which this year will run from 19 to 25 June, with a range of events taking place. As far as I am aware, we are the only town that has a whole forces week. We have an active armed forces champion in Councillor Chris Ryan, who is responsible for spearheading plans to improve access to services. That action plan complements the armed forces community covenant for Blackpool.

We also have our own arboretum—the Fylde memorial arboretum and community woodland at Bispham—for which Councillor Ryan is setting up a friends group. I have been privileged over the last few years to have a couple of armed forces roundtable events with members of the local armed forces community. They have included people such as Sergeant Rick Clement—he is something of a legend in Blackpool, as a double amputee who served in Afghanistan and has raised tens of thousands of pounds for military charities—Lieutenant-Colonel Johnny Lighten from the north-west veterans committee and Stephen Greenwood from Blackpool Submariners.

I pay tribute to the fantastic speech that the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) made in bringing this matter to the House’s attention. However, I agree with other hon. Members that this debate should be an annual fixture in Government time.

My time is limited, so I will focus on just a couple of issues, the first of which is the return to civilian life. At my armed forces roundtable this year, that issue was the subject of a strong discussion, because many personnel are now leaving the armed forces at a younger age, in many cases having experienced very traumatic circumstances. However, they do not always find that the skills or qualifications that they have gained in the Army are readily recognised in civvy street. The in-service education metrics section of the 2016 report states that “there continues to be low satisfaction with the training and education available in relation to gaining civilian accreditation and personal development” and cites various statistics.

I urge the Minister to look carefully at that issue and to liaise with his colleagues in the Department for Education. I speak not only as a local MP, but as the shadow Minister for schools and further education, and I am well aware of this lack of transferability. We are not doing justice to our troops and armed services if they leave with qualifications that cannot be easily understood in civvy street.

I will give an example from a roundtable this year. Lesley-Jane Holt from LifeWorks for the Royal British Legion spoke about how a lot of employers use automated software to scan through CVs, but pointed out that it does not always recognise the skills relating to the forces. I urge the Minister to address that. With the Government making changes in further education and skills, with apprenticeships coming through and with the new Institute for Apprenticeships and everything that goes with it, now is an apposite time to do so.

I conclude with a plea from another person who attended that session, Councillor Edward Nash from Fylde, which is next door to Blackpool. He sent me a note for today that says:

“Some thoughts on the Covenant: It is seen as increasingly ... London-based...All bids now go to London”.

We used to have a regional panel and we should resuscitate it. He continues:

“What does the Corporate Covenant with business actually achieve? Recruitment? Reservists?”

Who gets what out of it? I know that a great deal has been achieved, but as we have heard, a great deal more needs to continue to be achieved. It would be very useful if the Minister looked at these issues.

4.16 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) not just for securing the debate but for the tireless work that she does for the armed forces in this House and beyond.

From the long winter of the Crimean war to the bloody waters of Gallipoli, the history of my constituency's Green Howards Regiment is a shining reminder that the story of British liberty is inseparable from that of our military. It is an enormous privilege to represent the almost 1,500 veterans, service personnel and their families based around Catterick Garrison and RAF Leeming, yet for many years, despite their heroism, my constituents have too often found themselves at the back of the queue for public services. There will always be more that we can do, but in housing, education and employment, I am proud to say that the armed forces covenant and the work of this Government have moved us closer than ever to ensuring that the world's finest armed forces are never penalised for their service.

Let me begin briefly with housing. Before the covenant's introduction, retiring service personnel in my constituency often found that they did not meet the residency requirement to be considered for council housing. As a direct consequence of this Government's action, I am pleased to report that that is now largely a thing of the past. I pay enormous tribute to Richmondshire District Council for its tireless work in this regard. However, although military families are used to having their lives uprooted when orders of a new posting come in, they are too often also used to finding inadequate housing when they get there.

In the most recent armed forces attitude survey, only 29% of military families said that they were satisfied with the quality of maintenance in service family accommodation. CarillionAmey's failures to live up to the standards set out by the MOD have been mentioned before, and they are a betrayal of both the taxpayer and our armed forces. I very much welcome the action that the Government have already taken in condemning that failure. With the future accommodation model on the horizon, I am mindful that it will be a great comfort for my military constituents to know that the lessons of CarillionAmey's shortcomings have been learned so that they will not be repeated. I also echo the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) about the FAM.

Let me turn next to education, a crucial area. With frequent school changes and parents left to manage alone during tours of duty, the sacrifices made by members of our armed forces are often felt hardest by their children. The Government have taken real action by introducing the service pupil premium—as we speak, that funding is helping schools across my constituency to meet the unique needs of military children. I also

commend the Government for creating the education support trust, which funds North Yorkshire County Council's excellent service pupils champions scheme. Thanks to the hard work of council leader Carl Les and Neil Irving, that has been an enormous success. I urge the Government to maintain the funding for that programme. My constituents welcome plans to expand Catterick to a super-garrison, but I urge the Minister to ensure that discussions with the local council begin as soon as possible so that we can ensure that adequate school places are made available when the additional soldiers and their families arrive.

My final point is about spousal employment. Fifty per cent of military personnel already cite the impact on their partner's career as making them more likely to leave the services. The reason is that the husbands and wives of Britain's servicemen and women represent a deep reservoir of talent that all too often goes untapped. That is a problem not only for families but for our economy, which is missing out on some of our nation's most able and resourceful citizens. The work done by charities such as Recruit for Spouses, and the Government's ongoing spouse employment support trial, is crucial to rectifying the situation. I hope very much that such work continues, and that it will remain at the heart of our thinking about the armed forces covenant.

The soldiers, sailors and airmen of north Yorkshire do not expect the path that they have chosen to be an easy one. All they want to know is that when they take on that burden, their Government will do what they can to make it just a little lighter. The annual covenant report makes it clear that we still have work to do, but with six years of success behind us, it is equally clear to me that it is this Government who can make that a reality.

4.20 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome the report, and I particularly welcome the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who has done so much for the armed forces in just a year and a half. It is extraordinary to think how much she has already achieved in such a brief period.

We have heard much about the burden of service, and I think it might be helpful for us to remind ourselves of the joy of it. The reason I joined the armed forces—it is the reason many of us joined—was that it is the most extraordinary opportunity to serve one's country in the most dynamic and demanding environments.

I cannot express to the House the joy that I experienced when conducting fighting patrols in Afghanistan and Iraq. It might sound absurd, but actually to spend days with men—in my case it was only men—who were like-minded, focused, determined in pursuit of a goal that they knew to be right in the service of a country that they knew to be honourable, and serving alongside men we knew to have integrity: what a rare experience that was. What an experience it was not to be clouded by mortgage fears or annoyed by the words of Whips, but simply to be free to do exactly what was right.

However, the experience was also hugely demanding. We were operating in very difficult circumstances, in heat and dust, sleeping little, often in danger—at risk of either improvised explosive devices or direct action—and also working alongside people from other nations. I speak

[Tom Tugendhat]

not only of the Americans with whom, obviously, we worked very closely, the Australians with whom I had the great joy of serving, or the Estonians, Danes and Czechs, all of whom were impressive and quirky in their own ways, but of Afghans and Iraqis—men of huge courage and great integrity who literally put their lives on the line for us and many of whom, sadly, did not live to tell the tale.

That experience was almost like a drug it was so powerful. It is so electric to be challenged in everything you do—physically, mentally, morally—for such a period. It is so demanding. It is exhausting and exhilarating all at the same time. That is why the covenant matters. The challenge of coming back is much greater than the challenge of simply going from an institution to a free civilian life. It is almost like kicking a habit. Living in such an environment that is so all-consuming and so demanding, but also so rewarding, gives you a purpose that very few things can match—even some of the things that we are doing now, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Jack Lopresti: In the light of my hon. Friend's military service and the operational tours that he has done, may I ask whether he is comfortable with the way in which we have treated our interpreters and other locally employed civilians?

Tom Tugendhat: I have only a few minutes to speak, so if my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not talk much about locally employed civilians, except to say that I am hugely pleased that this country has given refuge to a wonderful man who served as my interpreter for a brief period when I was working for the governor of Helmand. That man went through several explosions with me—literally alongside me. We managed to escape with our lives from several relatively closer calls than I think my parents would have liked to know about.

I mention my parents for a specific reason. While I was experiencing the exhilaration of combat and the joy of camaraderie, my family and my then girlfriend—my wife should not hear about that too much!—were left behind. Of course, for many of the folk I was serving with, their families were waiting anxiously, hoping that they would not get a knock on the door. That, again, is where the covenant comes in, because when my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) is talking about accommodation models, he is talking about not only the place where people live, but a community that supports them. We must not destroy the communities that support our armed forces who serve in battle—those around Aldershot, for example—where the families live together and understand the pressures everyone is under. Accommodation is not simply about a need for a house—a set of bricks—but about a need for a family of a different sort that reinforces those families who also serve as they sit and wait.

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for giving way. On the question of support networks, does he agree that the Government and broader society need to be particularly aware of the pressures on people like him who were members of the reserve forces and do not have that automatic wraparound structure as a result of the diverse and dispersed nature of their particular circumstances?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. and gallant Friend speaks absolutely correctly. Of course, he will know this very well, having served himself and also being a reservist.

I want to skip quickly on to a second aspect of the covenant, which I am sorry to say was not mentioned in the report: the law. We have heard mention of the Northern Ireland cases and we have touched on the Iraq historical allegations cases. My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) has done an enormous amount of very impressive work on this. Sadly, for family reasons, he cannot be here today, but I am afraid that his work has demonstrated that our Government are not doing enough. We need to do more to protect those who have done the most for us, because what the covenant should be about is ensuring that those who have served—who have risked all and given all—can come back safe in the knowledge that they are safe, and that they are not going to be pursued by charlatans and liars like Phil Shiner, who has been struck off today by the Solicitors Regulatory Authority for his deceit, dishonesty and absolute treason to this country in pursuing fine, fine people. I am delighted that that has come to pass. If any man would wish to claim the faith that he does, he would do well to read his commandments: the eighth is:

“Thou shalt not bear false witness.”

I urge the Government to look very hard at the changes they are making with regard not only to future derogations from the European convention on human rights for operations, but also a statute of limitations, because it is not enough simply to support those who are vulnerable at home or to make sure their kids have schools to go to—important though these things are—if for the years after their service they are constantly looking over their shoulder, fearful of a knock on the door, because somebody who had tried and failed to kill them in combat is now using our own courts against them. That would not only leave them weaker, but leave them exposed. It would also leave the country exposed, and that is unacceptable.

4.28 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I shall begin with a number of expressions of gratitude: gratitude to the Chair for allowing me to contribute at all when, because of another Defence Committee commitment, I could not attend as much of the debate as I should have; gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) for her splendid work on the armed forces covenant—she is relatively new to the House of Commons, but has taken to this place like a duck takes to water; gratitude to the Minister, who carries out his responsibilities with a great deal of conscientiousness, informed not least by his own frontline military service, for which the country has reason to be grateful; and gratitude to all hon. Members who have seen active service and have spoken so movingly today.

In particular, I single out my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), who has just spoken. He held the House in a vice-like grip and added an important piece of information that will affect my own remarks. I had not known that Mr Shiner, who I believe glories in the title of professor, had been struck off today. I was not going to say anything about him because I knew that he was facing ongoing proceedings, but I now feel it incumbent on me

to say that if people like that had been around in the aftermath of the second world war, and if our troops in that war had known that they would have to face the duplicity, the manoeuvrings and the outrages perpetrated on subsequent generations of soldiers by such people, they could not possibly have fought with the valour that they showed in defeating Nazism and fascism.

This country will be failed by its Government if we do not find a method of preventing what is a much more lethal version of the practice that used to be known in industrial relations terms as the “work to rule” from being applied every time a soldier has to pull a trigger in a deadly conflict. That would make the carrying out of the profession of arms absolutely impractical and impossible. The words that we have heard today, time and again, are “statute of limitations”. The idea that anyone could come up with new and relevant evidence 40 or more years after crimes—if they were crimes—have been committed is frankly preposterous in the context of a military conflict. It is not going to happen. All that such a process will do is put people through a mental and emotional wringer for no purpose other than to demoralise the ability of the state to send troops into harm’s way, or indeed to recruit troops in the knowledge that they will be sent into harm’s way at the behest of the state. Not only will those troops have to face the violence of the enemy; they will also have to face the lies, distortions and blatant manipulations of a blind justice system after they have survived the dangers of combat. That is totally untenable and it has to stop.

A statute of limitations does not imply pardoning or guilt. It does not imply anything other than the realisation that if the settlement in Northern Ireland is to hold, it has to have fairness on all sides. We cannot have a situation in which one group of people are, if not amnestied, at least given a ceiling of a couple of years to any possible prison sentence, and are even enabled to hold positions of high authority in the political system, while the soldiers who were doing their job with integrity on behalf of the democratic Government are placed in harm’s way and pursued to the ends of time.

Tom Tugendhat: Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are other lawyers who might be included in the points he is making?

Dr Lewis: I would say that we have to find a system to ensure that what happened in Iraq is never allowed to happen again. At some stage, that might mean standing up to the provisions of international law, and if we were to do that, we would have to use the strongest possible case. What case could be stronger than the existence of a settlement in Northern Ireland in which one group of people were protected while the soldiers who represented the majority of the people were unprotected and left exposed indefinitely?

As I have only a few seconds left, I urge people to look at the website of the Defence Committee to see details of the hearing that we held on 17 January, at which the Minister was questioned on a whole raft of issues about the welfare of our service personnel. In particular, I should like to give a little comfort to my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) and to assure him that, in the light of the comments that he and others have made, and of the

issues that were raised in that meeting with the Minister, it is, shall we say, more than a little probable that we will be looking into the question of service accommodation in the not too distant future.

4.34 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) and the Backbench Business Committee for arranging this debate. In these interesting political times, it is important that issues such as this are not allowed to fall by the wayside. Today’s debate has been interesting and useful, with many considered and thoughtful contributions. I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) raised an important point about the pensions injustice for some war widows. I also pay tribute to the excellent contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) and for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows).

The SNP welcomes the publication of the report, and it is vital that we record our gratitude for the people who step forward and signal their willingness to put themselves in peril for the rest of us by joining the armed forces. That being the case, the least we can do is ensure that we drive this matter forward and establish which particular areas need concerted focus. I agree with other hon. Members that society is perhaps becoming more aware of the effects of military service on the mental and physical health of service personnel and veterans and also their families, an important issue that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw.

Like others, I am pleased that Scotland has a veterans commissioner, whose contribution is highly regarded, and it is a shame that that is not reflected more in the report. However, the report does highlight the work to engage with the Muslim community, with Nottingham’s Karimia mosque signing the armed forces covenant in December 2016. At a time when we are sending so many wrong signals to the Muslim community, that is to be absolutely welcomed. It would be helpful if future reports provided a more detailed analysis of progress in extending that kind of engagement with the covenant.

Approximately 1,800 men and women complete their military service and settle in Scotland every year. They are very welcome, but the transition can be challenging. The majority of veterans do manage to transition successfully, but we must acknowledge the hurdles that come with that magnitude of change. This week’s Combat Stress report provided a timely reminder of that and of the work that still needs to be done. Among the report’s key findings was the clear link between residence in areas with higher risks of deprivation and mental health difficulties. My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw made several valuable points on that topic, and I share her concern about the problems experienced by early service leavers in particular, 63% of whom live in the most deprived areas. In stark contrast, just 32% of those who served for 15 years or more live in the most deprived areas.

Nearly one in five veterans seeking support for mental health difficulties from Combat Stress was an early service leaver. They are shown to be most at risk of mental illness, with a suicide rate three times higher than their non-veteran counterparts. Members will have heard

[Kirsten Oswald]

today about the Scottish Government's commitment to make Scotland the destination of choice for service leavers, and that is important to us. The Scottish Veterans Commissioner's employability report has a useful focus on transferrable skills and attributes and on removing barriers to employment. On early service leavers, he notes that almost half of Army recruits leave school with levels of literacy and numeracy equivalent to those of an 11 year-old. Unsurprisingly, he reflects that they may become the early service leavers of the future. He highlights the story of Derek Boyd, who left school and quickly joined the Royal Engineers

"to keep himself out of jail."

Although he left after just four years, he managed to get a carpentry qualification and used that to get into college, eventually graduating with a degree in building surveying.

The Scottish Government have put considerable work into healthcare, and I am pleased that colleagues highlighted the excellent work on Veterans First Point centres and mental health. Many hon. Members also pointed out the importance of priority opportunities for housing, such as the new veterans homes supported by the Scottish Government in local authority areas across Scotland.

When asked about the possibility of a post in the Ministry of Defence similar to the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, the Minister said that, while well-intentioned, it would duplicate existing provision. However, in a survey conducted by SSAFA, 70% of clients expressing a view felt that the armed forces covenant was not being taken seriously, so I wonder whether that could be considered further.

Of those who left the armed forces in 2014-15 and used the career transition partnership, 11% were unemployed and 10% were economically inactive up to six months after leaving service. That represents an almost doubling of the level of unemployment among former service personnel. When broken down by service, gender and ethnicity, the figures are particularly worrying: 13% of former members of the Army, and all female service leavers in some categories, were unemployed six months after leaving. Some 81% of white service leavers were in employment after six months compared with 73% of black and minority ethnic service leavers. None of that is good enough.

Of those in employment six months after leaving service, 23% were employed in skilled trade occupations, compared with 11% of the UK population, which clearly emphasises the value of supporting members of the armed forces to improve their skills and qualifications while in service.

The National Audit Office report on the MOD equipment plan for 2016 to 2026 concluded:

"The risks to the affordability of the...Equipment Plan are greater than at any point since reporting began in 2012."

Some £1.5 billion of the required savings are to be provided from elsewhere in the defence budget, including through military and civilian pay restraint and savings from the running of the defence estate, which is already not a pretty picture in Scotland. That puts the pay of armed forces and civilian staff right in the frontline of meeting problems in the equipment budget, which is not acceptable.

The 2015 strategic defence and security review added £24.4 billion of new commitments to the MOD budget, including mechanised infantry vehicles, the Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft and accelerating the purchases of the F-35 joint strike fighter. Those are welcome commitments, but they appear to have created the Government's own version of the black hole that they frequently refer to having inherited from their predecessors.

After the Trident test malfunction, there is an obvious suggestion that the Government might refocus their defence spending on conventional defences, our military personnel and our veterans so that we can be sure they have the equipment they need, that appropriate support is provided for them and their families and that they receive a proper level of pay. Considering what we have heard from all the hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, surely that is what they deserve.

I conclude by echoing the sentiments of the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) and appealing to the Minister to work with the Foreign Office to bring the Chennai Six—my constituent Billy Irving and his colleagues, all military veterans—home from India and back to their families, where they belong.

4.41 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on securing today's debate and on her important work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant.

The covenant sets out a series of commitments that we, as a nation, have made to our armed forces in recognition of their service, dedication and sacrifice. We make those commitments to the entire forces community—to forces families and veterans, as well as to those who are currently serving.

When we were in government, Labour did much to pave the way for the covenant, with the first military covenant being published in 2000. It was my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) who, as Health Secretary, ensured that for the first time veterans got priority treatment on the NHS. It is encouraging to see such enthusiastic recognition of the covenant by businesses and by community and religious groups.

The annual reports on the covenant are an important way of making sure that it is being honoured and applied properly, but we must never become complacent about the covenant, particularly at a time of swingeing cuts to council budgets and the health service. We must defend and extend the services available to the forces community as a result of the covenant. Moreover, we can always do more to ensure that the two vital principles that underlie the covenant—that our forces should have special consideration and suffer no disadvantage—are a reality for all in the forces community.

I particularly welcome the work that the Royal British Legion will lead to establish a veterans gateway—a single point of contact for the forces community consisting of a gateway contact centre with a direct phone number and website. In my conversations with forces charities and service users, it is clear that the gateway could be a real benefit to the forces community, particularly to

veterans who may not know exactly where to turn when seeking support or advice. Indeed Cobseo, the Confederation of Service Charities, describes it as

“an extremely positive development which will be of great benefit to those in need.”

However, it is essential that the MOD does all it can to publicise the gateway, particularly to those who left the forces some time ago.

The report describes the many positive steps that have been taken by local authorities across England to deliver the covenant, such as Blackpool Council, where the armed forces champion, Labour councillor Chris Ryan, is responsible for consulting interested parties and for putting together and delivering an action plan. The purpose of an action plan is to address shortcomings and make improvements. Will the Minister tell us what monitoring and evaluation his Department does of action plans produced by local councils and health bodies? What discussions does he have with them about setting targets for improvement?

The report also lauds the impressive commitment of the devolved Governments of Scotland and Wales. The Labour Welsh Government have made particular strides to improve the support available to the forces community, including by investing £650,000 in specialist health services, to fund improvements in psychological therapies and develop a fast-track referral pathway to support injured service personnel in their return to fully deployable status.

So there is much in this report that I welcome, but it is clear from the observations of the external members of the Covenant Reference Group that there is still much more work to be done to ensure that the commitments made in the covenant are fully realised for all. The forces families federations express real concern about the current and future provision of housing for service members and their families. Indeed, the federations state that they have heard more complaints in the past 12 months than ever before about poorly maintained and substandard housing units. Such complaints were about, among other things: leaking roofs; no heating for months; and broken toilets left unrepaired. The federations issue a stark warning, saying that this situation represents a threat to recruitment and retention, as well as the morale of our service personnel, and is one for which they urge swift action.

However, we know that there have been serious questions about the maintenance of service housing for some time. In July, the Public Accounts Committee issued a damning judgment of both the MOD and CarillionAmey, concluding that they were

“letting down service families by providing them with poor accommodation, and often leaving them for too long without basic living requirements.”

This issue goes right to the heart of the covenant and to the duties we owe to our armed forces. I therefore ask the Minister to spell out what action he will take over the next 12 months to ensure that this sorry situation does not continue.

There is also great uncertainty and worry about the proposed changes to forces housing that are being considered by the MOD: the so-called future accommodation model. The families federations report increasing nervousness among the forces, not least because they suspect that these plans have more to do with

cost-cutting than improving provision for them. The Department must provide clear information to our armed forces about what could be very significant changes to forces accommodation, and the MOD must ensure that the views of our forces and their families are listened to and respected. If this is an opportunity to both modernise and improve housing provision, to provide flexibility, to facilitate home ownership and to recognise the realities of modern living, that is a good thing. But if, as I fear, this process is driven more by cost-cutting at the MOD, with fewer options for forces families and increasingly exposing them to exploitation by private landlords, that is something else entirely.

Another uncertainty apparent from this report concerns the Government's decision to close 91 MOD sites across the UK, which will see cities such as York and Chester losing their barracks and will affect some 22,000 military personnel and nearly 5,000 civilian staff. Of course the requirements of the defence estate will change over time, and there is a need to modernise and restructure to reflect that, but the complete lack of detail provided by the MOD to those affected by these changes is unacceptable. In many cases, we have no idea of the timeframe for a base closure and, crucially, whether civilian staff will be able to commute to other sites in their vicinity or whether they will lose their jobs altogether. I am concerned that one of the sites that has been earmarked for closure is the Defence Business Services site in Blackpool, which houses Veterans UK. All we are told in the Government's publication is that the site will be replaced by a “Government Hub” in the north-west. If that ends up being beyond a reasonable commuting distance—for example, if it is in Manchester—we risk losing experienced staff who have an expertise in supporting our veterans community. The forces families federations have said that the many questions relating to programmes such as “A Better Defence Estate” mean that service personnel and their families are living in a period of increasing uncertainty. I therefore ask the Minister to try as hard as he can to provide our armed forces with the answers that they deserve.

As well as ensuring that the commitments contained in the covenant are being delivered effectively, we must also ensure that the covenant applies across Britain and that its application is not patchy or subject to a postcode lottery. Cobseo notes in the report that:

“the delivery of the Covenant is very varied across the country with a clear need to ensure...that appropriate training is given to local authority staff to ensure that the policies are properly implemented.”

Research published last year by SSAFA found that just 16% of the veterans that it surveyed thought that the covenant was being implemented effectively. We also need the Government to look at monitoring and evaluation, and to develop strategies that ensure that service providers—health boards, local authorities and schools—are implementing the covenant effectively.

Central to this whole issue is the question of identifying our forces community to ensure that they can access the services they need. One starting point, highlighted in the best practice guide to the covenant, is the way in which some local authorities include a question on veterans on some of their forms to help them to collate data. I urge the Government to consider developing that into a standard format—for example, in the form of a question on GP registration forms.

[Nia Griffith]

The challenge is always to find ways to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the covenant in ways that are effective, but not too burdensome or bureaucratic. We should not forget, either, that many of our public bodies are under considerable strain as they face cuts and increased demands. The “Count them in” campaign has already been mentioned; will the Government make a firm commitment to that so that we have a better understanding of the nation’s profile and the needs and locations of our serving personnel?

Last year, the Government announced the new £10 million covenant fund. What evaluation has the Minister made of the use of that money and the measurable outcomes? How will that information influence the future use of the fund?

The armed forces covenant and the services it guarantees are a moral obligation on us all, as a society, to ensure that our forces are supported and honoured for their service. It is also crucial to retention and recruitment. It is therefore incumbent on us all to ensure that our forces community truly get the very best, because they deserve nothing less.

4.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): In the six minutes I have to respond to the debate—if I am to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) to wind up—I clearly will not be able to address many of the questions that have been raised. I shall therefore commit to write to Members after the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Her knowledge of this subject, as demonstrated in her speech, is second to none.

Before I outline some of the covenant’s key achievements, it might be useful to provide the House with some context. The notion of a special bond between the state and its armed forces is hardly new. Indeed, I was surprised that as early as 1593 the Elizabethans had introduced a statute ensuring disabled army veterans

“should at their return be relieved and rewarded to the end that they may reap the fruit of their good deservings”.

That is something we should be doing today.

The term military covenant was coined back in 2000, as my hon. Friend said. I remember first hearing the term around about the time I was serving in Kosovo. It was then little more than an informal understanding of the debt of service we owe to those who serve us. However, fears that the covenant was gradually being undermined led to its principles being enshrined in law in the Armed Forces Act 2011. Much of the progress over recent years has been highlighted in the debate, so I shall not dwell on that.

I shall focus in my speech on just three areas in which progress is most pronounced, but before I do so I wish to say a couple of words on the Northern Ireland legacy investigations, which have been raised by so many Members this afternoon. Although the Government firmly believe in upholding the rule of law, we are concerned that investigations into Northern Ireland’s past focus almost entirely on former police officers and soldiers. This is wrong, and does not reflect the fact that the overwhelming majority of those who served did so with great bravery

and distinction. That is why the Defence Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary are working together to ensure that veterans are not unfairly treated or disproportionately investigated compared with others, in an effort to create a Stormont House agreement Bill.

We are acutely mindful of the burden that historical investigations can place on veterans and their families. When veterans face allegations arising from actions that they undertook as part of their duties, taxpayer-funded legal advice and representation is available for as long as is necessary. In addition to legal advice, the MOD will provide pastoral support, either directly through regimental associations, through Veterans UK, or in partnership with the veterans charities, depending on the individual needs and circumstances.

As I said, I shall touch briefly on three areas, starting with veterans’ health. It is only right that those who have sustained life-changing injuries in the service of our nation receive the best medical care, so we have worked with the NHS to ensure that recent veterans with complex amputation-related complications can now be referred, when necessary, to a dedicated clinic at the world-class Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Headley Court.

We are not just thinking of rehabilitation. The most seriously injured service personnel also need assistance in making the transition to civvy street, and through life, so we are working across the MOD and NHS to develop an integrated personal commissioning for veterans model. This fully joined-up system aims to bring the NHS, the MOD and the charitable sector together to provide services specifically tailored to an individual veteran’s needs. At the same time, NHS England’s new veterans trauma network, launched at the end of last year, offers a safety net for those with lifelong healthcare needs. Increasingly, we recognise that the scars of war are more than just skin deep, so the Government are also channelling £13 million from LIBOR to provide support for mental health in the armed forces community.

I, too, have recently met Sue Freeth, the chief executive of Combat Stress, to explore how we can work more closely with that organisation. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) for all the work that he has done, and I am delighted that we have now completed and implemented most of the recommendations in his report. Equally, I wish to focus on the preventive action that we can take with our serving personnel, which is why I am pleased that the trauma risk management system is now fully effective.

Clearly, there was a bone of contention between my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) and I on the matter of housing. I absolutely understand what he is trying to tell me. I feel somewhat at a disadvantage, because it appears almost as if he is sure what format the future accommodation model should take. I simply seize this opportunity to tell him once again, and to reassure him, that the reason we had our survey was to give us the evidence base for how to proceed.

We have yet to make any firm decisions about what format the accommodation model will take. It will evolve. It will be a complex process, and one size will not fit all. I want to dispel one myth: we will not somehow scrap all service family accommodation. I invite anybody who challenges that to come to Ludgershall, where we are about to award a contract to build new service family

accommodation in Wiltshire. Off the top of my head, I think that we are talking about some 444 new homes. Why would we be building new service family accommodation if we will not be using it at all in the future?

It is absolutely right that, when we look at the accommodation needs of our service personnel, options should be available. We should recognise that young people, as the survey says, do not necessarily want to live in single-living accommodation. Why is it that more than 9,000 service personnel have now used our service Help to Buy scheme so that they can buy their own home and get into the private sector? It is all about delivering options and ensuring that our service personnel have those options. It is a complex model, and it is a controversial matter. Much of the problem is that we have not had the opportunity to communicate what the options will be in the future, and I am determined to address that.

I recognise that, having focused on that particular issue, I will probably have to conclude. To the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) I say that there is always a debate about where that line should be. I can tell the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) that I am very proud that some 95% of our new entrants are enrolled in apprenticeships. As for the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson), I am more than happy to meet him to talk about Dale barracks.

4.57 pm

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank all colleagues who have spent their Thursday afternoon here in the Chamber rather than in Stoke-on-Trent or Copeland, and the Minister who has sat patiently listening to all of us as we share our praise and our criticism of the way in which the armed forces covenant is rolling out.

There must be something about Kent, because my hon. Friends the Members for Canterbury (Sir Julian Brazier) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) are both passionate about housing. The fact that it is not just about the bricks is the critical point. I hope very much that the Minister and the Ministry of Defence will hear that message, because that is the families' message to them. The model needs to be good and it needs to be 21st century, but it is not just about the bricks.

Many colleagues talked about the statute of limitations. I know that the Minister is working on that. If the outstanding work on the Iraq Historic Allegations Team

of the hon. and gallant Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who could not be with us today, can change the Ministry's mind and drive forward some really good improvements, I hope very much that colleagues who have spoken today can push forward that statute of limitations and find a legal framework that can work.

The key to all matters to do with the covenant—the work that has been done over the past few years is extensive and very positive—is that unless our attempts at recruitment and retention succeed, we will not have the armed forces we need to take up the challenges that the world around us demands. Every decision that the Ministry makes cannot only be on cost-savings grounds. Value for money is about not cost saving, but about getting the right investment for our armed forces to ensure that we look after them and their families as they serve, and then for the rest of their lives.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Armed Forces Covenant Report 2016.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, you may recall that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union laid a copy of the White Paper before the House. I have my own copy with me. We have found that at least one chart in the document contains incorrect information. Chart 7.1 states that United Kingdom workers are entitled to 14 weeks of annual holiday, whereas the chart should state that they have 5.6 weeks paid holiday. The mistake has led to another error, as the chart claims that European Union minimum maternity leave entitlement is only 5.6 weeks, when it should be 14 weeks. The Scottish National party has corrected the chart for the United Kingdom Government. Perhaps the Minister would like a copy to save his blushes over what appears to have been only a desktop exercise today. Madam Deputy Speaker, would you please instruct me as to how this House can get the accurate, proper information to inform our already rushed debate on this rather important issue?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I think the hon. Gentleman has quite successfully just done so himself. I am sure that the Treasury Benches will have heard what he said and will take action.

Colostomy Irrigation

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

5.1 pm

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): When I secured this debate, I had not realised that it would be so close to World Cancer Day, which is on Saturday. Given the close connection between my subject and cancer, I could not have chosen a more appropriate date.

I begin by paying tribute to the colostomy nurses at the Royal Shrewsbury hospital, particularly Tracy Lunt, my personal stoma nurse, who helped me through a difficult time in my life and who encouraged me and introduced me to colostomy irrigation 14 years ago. I also thank colostomy nurse, Julie Powell, who telephoned me late one evening this week to help me to prepare after hearing that I had secured the debate. Colostomy nurses are special people, drawn to an unglamorous job that involves helping and encouraging people at the most difficult time in their lives. I imagine the subject of this debate is not often the subject of debate in Parliament. Madam Deputy Speaker, you have been an MP for longer than I have and may remember another occasion, but I do not. As far as I know, this may be the first time that this subject has appeared on the Order Paper.

I had best begin with some explanation of why the subject is of such importance to me and to many people—we do not know how many people because the subject is not talked about much. It is difficult to know how many people are irrigators, how many could be irrigators or how many would be if encouraged and helped by a sympathetic introduction process. At this point, I should introduce the background to my interest, which derives from bowel cancer. Colostomy irrigation has given me the freedom to live a full and active life. I will mention bowel cancer quite a lot because of its close connection with colostomy irrigation.

I am an ostomate—a person with a colostomy. I have owned my colostomy for almost 15 years, since undergoing an abdominoperineal resection to remove a cancerous tumour in 2002. I did not want a colostomy, but the alternative at the time was a far less attractive prospect. It was perhaps the most traumatic event in my life. I was uncertain about the future or, indeed, whether I even had a future at all. It certainly gave me a good understanding of how others feel in the same situation. I consider myself to have been extraordinarily lucky in that I made a full recovery.

One of the key reasons for my good luck and full recovery was that my cancerous colorectal tumour was diagnosed early in its development, before the disease had spread to my liver and elsewhere, when full recovery would be much less certain. Unsurprisingly, I have been a champion of early diagnosis ever since, and played a role in promoting bowel cancer screening programmes in Wales, when they were introduced a few years ago. The campaigning charity, Beating Bowel Cancer, is currently leading a campaign to reduce the age at which screening is offered from 60 to 50, as it is in Scotland. Instinctively, I support early screening, but realise that it serves no real purpose unless accompanied by the availability of sufficient endoscopy capacity.

Colorectal cancer, or bowel cancer, as it is commonly known, is one of the most common forms of cancer, with 110 new cases diagnosed every day. It is a traumatic shock for many when the tumour is first diagnosed, but the cancer is completely curable if caught early enough. It is possible to recover and do some fairly crazy things. For example, after recovery, I initiated the establishment of the Welsh parliamentary rugby team. In passing, I should say that, rather shamefully, our first game versus the Lords and Commons parliamentary team degenerated into a full-scale brawl, which received much coverage in the national media, and that is when I first met the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), a Labour MP. I went training with the late, great All Black Jonah Lomu, who had also suffered life-threatening illnesses, in preparation for that game. My friends, of course, think it was even crazier to seek election as a Member of Parliament.

The final introductory point I want to make concerns the title I have chosen for this debate. Until recently, I used the term “colonic irrigation”, like most people, but it is too often associated in the public mind with a lifestyle choice available in health and massage centres—a practice I have never really taken much interest in—so I now use the term “colostomy irrigation”, which has no such associations, and which accurately describes the process.

My speech has three main purposes. First, I want to explain what colostomy irrigation actually involves—what it is. Secondly, I want to explain why I decided to become an irrigator. Thirdly, I want to explain why I am seeking to raise the profile and awareness of colostomy irrigation, which I have been doing for 14 years. This Adjournment debate is the best platform to raise awareness that I have ever secured.

First, on the actual process, I am constantly surprised by how little is known about it. Even people suffering illnesses such as colitis or bowel cancer, who face the prospect of a permanent colostomy, seem to know little about the procedure. A colleague MP with a background in the clinical profession approached me today and said that not even all colostomy nurses know about it or encourage it. It seems not to be thought suitable for polite conversation; the human mind seems to go into “block” mode if the subject crops up.

However, the process is very simple. All it involves is hanging what is in effect a polythene bag, containing 1,000 to 1,500 ml of warm water, on some convenient hook—I usually use the bathroom curtain rail. One of the problems with smart modern hotels is that there are often no convenient hooks. Luckily, I am a farmer by background, so I am quite practical and naturally given to improvisation, and a coat hanger can be quite a handy hook. The water is then allowed to run by gravity, via a polythene tube, into that part of the lower bowel that my brilliant consultant surgeon left me with after surgery in 2002. Then, the water is allowed to just run out naturally; there really is not much more to it than that. The biggest downside is that the irrigator has to remain in the same location for about 45 minutes, but with complete freedom to read, write, telephone, prepare speeches for Adjournment debates, do sudoku, watch TV and a whole host of other things.

I want to emphasise that the process is not suitable for all ostomates. There can be insurmountable physical and, indeed, mental barriers that mean irrigation is just

not possible. There are additional bits of equipment, such as commercially available water pumps, that replace simple gravity, but my experience is that they are not usually needed.

There is another point of interest here—certainly to me and, I think, to the Minister. I am told that while a very small percentage of ostomates in the UK irrigate—less than 5%—a very high percentage do so in the US. That is thought to be because all the equipment associated with wearing a colostomy bag is free in the UK but has to be paid for in the US—1,000 ml of water comes free.

Secondly, why do I irrigate myself? When I am asked, I give the same answer as when I am asked why I voted to leave in the EU referendum on 23 June—it could one day become a pub quiz question: what is the connection between the EU referendum and colostomy irrigation?—and that answer is to take back control. I wanted to take back control of my own body and not allow my colostomy to rule my life, which it could well have done. I did not want to have to wear a colostomy bag. I wanted to continue my public life without being concerned about an “active” colostomy at inconvenient times. I can irrigate when and where it is convenient for me to do so. I take the decisions, not my colostomy. I have—as, indeed, have all the other ostomates who irrigate—genuinely taken back control.

Thirdly, I turn to the main reason why I am raising the issue in this debate. Having experienced the extra freedom, self-confidence and control that colostomy irrigation gives me, I want to encourage other ostomates to think about doing the same. I must emphasise that it does not work for every ostomate, and, in any case, it is a matter of choice. It is not a question of what one should do; it depends on what one can do and what one wants to do. All I want to do is to suggest to ostomates who have never thought about irrigation to consider it. There will be a few uncertain days to begin with while the body familiarises itself with the process, but, with the guidance and encouragement of their stoma nurses, they too may find the freedom and control that colostomy irrigation brings.

The background to every colostomy is some form of clinical need, involving fear, trauma, great uncertainty, great need for relief from pain or even simply a desire to stay alive. World Cancer Day is on Saturday, and I am really grateful that I have had the chance to play a small part in making life better for at least some of those who are suffering from the implications of bowel cancer.

5.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) on his excellent speech. I want to congratulate him on three more things: first, on securing the debate two days before World Cancer Day; secondly, on rightly saying that this is the first time that we have had a debate on the subject in this place—it is good that we are doing so—and, thirdly, on talking so passionately about his personal story in such a matter of fact way, if I may use that term. He spoke candidly and clearly about a subject that sometimes carries with it a stigma, or that is a taboo.

I have been looking after the whole area of cancer for the past six months. It strikes me that when people come into the system, we are as good as anywhere in the

world at treating them and dealing with the illness. Unfortunately, one problem we have is that too many people come into our system too late. As a result, first or second-stage diagnosis is not possible and their outcomes are worse. One of the reasons for that is awareness—my hon. Friend used that word—and such debates can only increase awareness, so it is good that we have them.

My hon. Friend rightly said that uptake of colostomy irrigation is low. We think that some 5% of all those who could do so use the technique, rather than an alternative. I will talk a little about why that is and what we might be able to do about it. We think that there are some 6 million people in this country with bowel incontinence issues. Of course, the majority of them are nothing like as serious as the story we heard this afternoon. Similar stories may result from bowel cancer, and perhaps also from other types, such as cervical cancer. The choice of whether to use irrigation or another technique is a personal one. There are pros and cons to each, and I will try to set them out. Before I do, perhaps I should talk a little bit about what the Government need to do, and what they are doing, regarding the prevention, screening and treatment of bowel cancer. Obviously, if we were more successful at those, we would reduce the incidence of the disease and the need for the techniques that we have heard about.

The Government's approach is informed by the cancer strategy, which came out about 18 months ago. It included 96 recommendations, all of which were accepted. It has been fully funded, and its implementation is now being led by Cally Palmer and Bruce Keogh from NHS England. We are finding that survival rates are increasing—we know that they are increasing quite sharply for most cancer types—but there is probably still a gap between us and the best in the EU. We are determined to close that gap, and although we are doing so, there is still work to do.

Of the parts of the cancer strategy that relate most to this debate, I want to talk about screening and about living with cancer and beyond—we have heard a story about doing so over the past 14 years. I also want to talk about one of the things that I think will be most important in improving cancer awareness and outcomes: the whole area of transparency.

One of my hon. Friend's points was that there are staffing issues in this area, particularly in relation to bowel cancer. He said that we do not have enough endoscopists—that is true. The Government are committed to training a further 200 by 2020. Indeed, we have not been able to do some of the things on screening that we want because of those staff shortages, but we are addressing that problem very firmly.

The current screening test is an FOB, or faecal occult blood test, which is in the process of being replaced by the FIT—faecal immunochemical test—from 2018. A contractor/supplier has been appointed. The expectation is that that will lead to a sharp increase in the incidence of screening, the numbers of people coming forward for screening and the efficacy of that screening, which is very important.

In parallel, we have introduced a bowel scope screening process for males and females at or around their 55th birthday. This one-off test involves a full endoscopy, as a consequence of which polyps are removed. Whether or not they are benign, that process sharply reduces the incidence and risk of future bowel cancer, which is also

[David Mowat]

very important. In the interests of full disclosure, let me say that I have also gone through the procedure. It was not anything like my hon. Friend's, but I nevertheless went through it successfully. The process is a very important part of this fight.

The second aspect of the strategy is living with and beyond cancer. When I gave a presentation to the all-party group on ovarian cancer, I was struck that a lady whom I met afterwards said that she had received a terminal diagnosis for that type of cancer, but was not receiving support. That is obviously not where we want to be. The Government's intention is that, by 2020, everybody who has a cancer diagnosis will have an individually designed package, with a cancer nurse specialist assigned to them. We are undertaking that programme in conjunction with Macmillan. It is important because cancer is increasingly curable, so we must increasingly put in place softer packages, as it were, to help people afterwards.

The final area I want to touch on is transparency. One of the frustrations is something that I often reflect on after talking to colleagues about the NHS and its effectiveness. Many of them are very concerned—almost certainly rightly—about the bricks and mortar of their NHS establishments, because they are very visible. Changes in configuration also concern them and their electors. I have fewer conversations with colleagues who are concerned about cancer outcomes in their areas. Those statistics are now published, so we know which are the best clinical commissioning groups, which are the worst and which are average.

One way in which we will increase the overall standard and quality of outcomes is through dialogue—with Members and the public more generally to act on the pressure points—about the performance of CCGs. I would argue that whether a Member's CCG is doing one of the best or one of the worst jobs in the country might be more important to their community than whether the accident and emergency department is open for 24 or 18 hours. However, we do not always have such dialogues in this place.

On innovations in treatment for bowel cancer, keyhole surgery is making a big difference to outcomes. There

are very clever people doing very clever things, which are leading to better outcomes and successful operations.

For many, however, a colostomy is needed. Broadly speaking, there is a choice of techniques: the irrigation technique that we have heard about this afternoon; or an appliance, which is typically a bag. There are pros and cons of each but, as my hon. Friend said, the appliance route is chosen 20 times more frequently than irrigation. This must be a personal choice, and NICE guidelines state that choices should be explained, but that is an extreme difference. As my hon. Friend said, the difference is far greater than that in the United States. It might well be that there is not enough awareness, so this debate has been one way to address that.

A recent paper by Sir Norman Williams, the senior clinical adviser to the Secretary of State for Health, set out the benefits of irrigation: there is no need for an appliance; the individual has control over timing; there is some evidence that fewer drugs are required, with a consequent increase in general wellbeing; and an individual is able to have a more varied diet. Those benefits suit many people. The technique might not be suitable for people with heart or kidney diseases or Crohn's disease, and some might find that the 45 to 60-minute process is too onerous. In addition, I think I am right to say that the best results from this technique tend to come if the process is carried out at roughly the same time every day, which might not suit everybody.

The NICE guidelines are very clear: both techniques should be offered by the clinician or stoma nurse. The choice should be based on facts and personal preference. Whichever technique is selected by the patient, the nurse is responsible for teaching the process and supporting the patient until they are up and running, because it is extremely important to get it right.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and raising awareness of the issue. He has talked frankly about a process that has been a massive help for many people in their day-to-day lives.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 2 February 2017

[ROBERT FLELLO *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Alcohol Harm

1.30 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered tackling alcohol harm.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello, and to speak on the importance of tackling alcohol harm. It is a measure of the concern across the House that there are not one but three all-party parliamentary groups concerned with alcohol harm. It was the three chairs of those APPGs who applied for the debate: myself, as chair of the APPG on alcohol harm; the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who chairs the APPG on children of alcoholics; and the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), who chairs the APPG on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. I will leave it to those Members to speak of the harm caused to children and unborn children through alcohol consumption, but as vice-chair of those two APPGs, may I commend and say how much I fully support their work?

We are all here to express, with one voice, our gravest concerns about the harm caused by alcohol consumption to individuals, their families and wider society. As we will hear, one thing is clear: the Government's alcohol strategy, which is now five years old, must be reviewed. Urgent and much more robust Government action is needed to address the devastating damage caused by alcohol harm. It all too often harms innocent bystanders, whether those injured in road traffic accidents, children and partners caught up in domestic violence, patients needing treatments for serious illnesses—they have to wait because precious NHS resources are being used to tackle the issue—and taxpayers, through the tax bill we all pay.

This is not about saying that people should not drink—like many other hon. Members here, I enjoy alcohol—but about promoting responsible drinking and the need to change our country's drinking culture and our relationship with alcohol. It is also very much about social justice, because the poorest and most vulnerable disproportionately suffer the most amount of alcohol harm. The Government need to wake up to the urgency of their need to take a lead on this. Urgent words were expressed in the 2012 alcohol strategy, but appropriately urgent action has sadly not followed.

The Minister will doubtless point to a few improvements in recent years, and they are welcome, although with major reservations. For example, although the number of adolescents who drink has gone down, the volume of alcohol that they are drinking has not. That sadly indicates that although fewer adolescents might be drinking, those who do are drinking to excess. A 2012 YouGov report revealed that 41% of 18 to 24-year-olds are drinking at harmful levels. We also hear reports of

women of a certain age—around my age—drinking too much, and even of much older people struggling with alcoholism as they try to cope with loneliness and isolation.

The fact is that there is a massive problem in this country resulting from alcohol consumption, both excessive and just above Government guidelines. To evidence that, I refer to the Public Health England report, published in December 2016 at the specific request of the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, entitled, "The Public Health Burden of Alcohol and the Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness of Alcohol Control Policies: An evidence review". It cannot be dismissed as just a thought piece; it has more than 200 pages of evidence-based information and conclusions, has been robustly peer reviewed no less than three times and was produced by Public Health England—an executive agency of the Department of Health that

"exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing".

The report paints a bleak picture. Paragraph 1 states that

"there are currently over 10 million people drinking at levels which increase their risk of health harm. Among those aged 15 to 49 in England, alcohol is now the leading risk factor for ill-health, early mortality and disability and the fifth leading risk factor for ill health across all age groups."

It continues:

"In recent years, many indicators of alcohol-related harm have increased. There are now over 1 million hospital admissions relating to alcohol each year, half of which occur in the lowest three socioeconomic deciles. Alcohol-related mortality has also increased, particularly for liver disease which has seen a 400% increase since 1970, and this trend is in stark contrast to much of Western Europe. In England, the average age at death of those dying from an alcohol-specific cause is 54.3 years... More working years of life are lost in England as a result of alcohol-related deaths than from cancer of"—

there are many of these—

"the lung, bronchus, trachea, colon, rectum, brain, pancreas, skin, ovary, kidney, stomach, bladder and prostate, combined."

I deliberately read that out as I wanted it recorded in *Hansard*.

The Institute of Alcohol Studies quotes Public Health England, stating that

"167,000 years of working life were lost to alcohol in 2015".

That is because alcohol is more likely to kill people during their working lives than many other causes of death—that is, it causes premature deaths. In fact, there were 23,000 alcohol-related deaths in England each year. Alcohol accounts for 10% of the UK's burden of disease and death, and in the past three decades there has been a threefold rise in alcohol-related deaths.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on everything that she has said. In the mid-1970s, a Home Office report showed that Britain had the second lowest level of alcohol consumption in the whole of Europe; we have risen rapidly while the rest of Europe has been coming down. They have learned from their previous mistakes, and we ought to as well.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, which reflects his long commitment to tackling the issue. I also thank him for his involvement with our all-party parliamentary group.

[Fiona Bruce]

The NHS incurs an estimated £3.5 billion a year in alcohol harm costs. Treating liver disease alone now costs £2.1bn a year, for example. However, that is just the financial cost, which I rather suspect is an underestimate. Many other costs are incurred as a result. The all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm recently produced a report called “The Frontline Battle”, which described the impact on the emergency services—the police, fire services, A&E departments, doctors and so on—of treating or helping people who are inebriated or suffering as a result of excessive alcohol consumption. It found that, on a Saturday night, 70% to 80% of all A&E attendances are alcohol-related.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend paints a graphic picture—some cities and towns are like warzones on a Friday and Saturday night. I am the president of the all-party parliamentary group on beer. Does she agree that the Government could work with the industry? For instance, AB InBev is looking to work on lower alcohol-by-volume beers. At the moment, anything below 2.8% ABV is incentivised, yet that is less than 0.5% of the market. If the incentivised ABV rate is increased to about 3.5%, it would introduce far more choice, could lead to people drinking lower strength beer and could hopefully attract people away from some of the higher ABV beers that cause so much harm, as she has so beautifully demonstrated.

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend represents Ribble Valley, which I know contains many beautiful public houses, some of which I have enjoyed visiting. I would not want any Member here to think that we in any way wish to denigrate community pubs, which we consider to be community assets. He makes a vital point and has saved me from going into detail on that, which I was going to, having been briefed by AB InBev, which has a base in his constituency.

AB InBev UK and Ireland says that the introduction of a reduced rate of duty on beers produced at an alcoholic strength of 2.8% has not had the intended impact. In fact, it is providing only 0.15% of duty receipts. The impact could be achieved if 3.5% beer was included. I very much support what my hon. Friend says. Apparently, the Treasury has said that there is an EU structures directive that might cause a problem regarding that. It is fortuitous that, following yesterday's vote, we should not be at all put off introducing a pro-health measure, for risk of upsetting our European partners.

Mr Evans: Apparently there is legal advice that this can be done within the current rules. If it is for the health of UK citizens, surely the British Government ought to press on and do it now.

Fiona Bruce: I absolutely agree. I am aware of that legal advice. I hope that the Government will do so and that the Minister will take note of that.

In preparing our report, the all-party parliamentary group discovered shocking harm, particularly to people working in our emergency services. I would like to refer to evidence we obtained from an emergency services doctor, Zul Mirza, whom I commend for his work in

this area. He talked about how patients coming into his wards inebriated not only can be violent towards staff, but on many occasions damage valuable equipment needed by other patients. Our report also found that over 80% of police officers have been assaulted by people who are drinking. I was deeply concerned to hear one police officer tell us this:

“There is one thing that is specific to female officers and that is sexual assault. I can take my team through a licensed premise, and by the time I take them out the other end, they will have been felt up several times.”

That is shocking.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this extremely important debate to the Chamber. Given the figures she describes, does she agree that alcohol-related aggression needs to be addressed in terms of treatment? Having worked in the criminal justice system, I agree on the wide-scale aggression that is found in A&E departments at weekends and that the police face mainly at weekends, but also on many days of the week. Given that a low number of Members have turned up to this debate, does the hon. Lady agree that politicians should be taking the issue more seriously? More politicians could probably be found in the bars of Westminster today than here in this debate. We should be addressing this problem.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is tragic that only 6% of dependent drinkers in this country access treatment, despite it being very effective. We need to do much more to make treatment available to them.

A concerning finding of our all-party parliamentary group's report was that many of those in the emergency services themselves are suffering from depression or are even thinking of leaving the services simply because coping with this kind of pressure day in, day out is proving too much for them. We must tackle that.

After reflecting on the many and varied aspects of alcohol harm in this country, the Public Health England report goes on to say:

“This should provide impetus for governments to implement effective policies to reduce the public health impact of alcohol, not only because it is an intrinsically desirable societal goal, but because it is an important aspect of economic growth and competitiveness.”

What does this Department of Health review recommend? It talks about tackling three things: affordability, availability and acceptability. Affordability means price; availability means the ease of purchase—in other words, the number of outlets and the times at which alcohol can be bought; and acceptability means tackling our drinking culture. I want to give other Members time to speak, so I will not talk in detail about all those things, but I will touch in particular on affordability.

I had the privilege of asking Public Health England's senior alcohol adviser this week what his top recommendation to Government would be to tackle alcohol harm, in the light of this substantial report. Without hesitation, he replied that it would be tackling affordability and putting in place policies that increase price. The report is absolutely clear:

“Policies that reduce the affordability of alcohol are the most effective, and cost-effective, approaches to prevention and health improvement. For example, an increase in taxation leads to an increase in government revenue and substantial health and social returns.”

However, since 2012 the Government have done the opposite: they cut the alcohol duty escalator. The report states:

“According to Treasury forecasts, cuts in alcohol duty since 2013 are projected to have reduced income to the Exchequer by £5 billion over five years”.

The very first recommendation in the 2012 strategy was to implement minimum unit pricing. Indeed, the most recent review states that minimum unit pricing is

“a highly targeted measure which ensures tax increases are passed on to the consumer and improves the health of the heaviest drinkers. These people are experiencing the greatest amount of harm.”

In the foreword to the 2012 strategy, the then Prime Minister said:

“We can’t go on like this... So we are going to introduce a new minimum unit price.”

Five years on, that has still not been done, while the alcohol duty escalator has been cut, even though the No. 1 policy recommendation to tackle alcohol harm in the Government’s own review is to address affordability. Will the Minister, who I know is a good woman, now take a lead on this and make it happen?

The Government introduced a ban on the sale of alcohol below the cost of duty plus taxation, but the review states:

“Bans on the sale of alcohol below the cost of taxation do not impact on public health in their current form, and restrictions on price promotions can be easily circumvented.”

Let us consider for a moment white cider products such as Frosty Jacks, which are almost exclusively drunk by the vulnerable, the young, the homeless and dependent drinkers. Just £3.50 buys the equivalent of 22 shots of vodka. The price of a cinema ticket can buy 53 shots of vodka. The availability of cheap alcohol, bought because of its high strength, perpetuates deprivation and health inequalities. Homeless hostels say that time and again the people staying with them drink these products, and many are drinking it to death.

Ciders of 7.5% ABV attract the lowest duty per unit of any product, at 5p, compared with 18p per unit for a beer of equivalent strength. There simply is no reason not to increase the duty on white cider, and 66% of the public support higher taxes on white cider. It is a matter of social justice that the Government should do that, and do it quickly. It need not impact on small, local brewing companies, which could have an exception, and it will not impact on pub sales. Tackling it would benefit the youngest and most vulnerable and save lives.

As I mentioned, the ban on below-cost sales has had no impact on sales of strong white cider. The current floor price of white cider, at 5p to 6p per unit—that is duty plus VAT—is so low that it can be sold for 13p a unit. Will the Minister ask our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer to increase the duty on white cider in the spring Budget on 8 March? This is not the first time that has been asking. Three hon. Members—my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and I, and no less a person than the Chair of the Health Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston)—tabled an amendment to the Finance Bill last September, asking for the duty regime for white cider to be reviewed. I urge the Minister to read the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate on 6 September.

Indeed, my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, who responded, said that the matter needed to be looked into.

Will the Minister press the Chancellor not only to work with her on that, but to introduce the promised minimum unit price and reintroduce the abandoned alcohol duty escalator, so that the tax system not only tackles alcohol harm, but incentivises the development of lower strength products and provides much-needed funding to help with treatment? Looking at all the evidence, we see affordability come out again and again as the most important driver of consumption and harm. Increasing the price of alcohol would save lives without penalising moderate drinkers.

Apart from tackling price, there are of course many other recommendations, both in the Public Health England report and in the APPG report, which came out a week before, that I would be grateful if the Minister would consider. I am grateful that she has already agreed to meet the APPG to discuss our report. Our chief recommendation is that the Government develop a cross-departmental national strategy to tackle excessive drinking and alcohol-related harm. Will the Minister take a lead on that?

Another key recommendation in the APPG report, which again is supported by the PHE report, is the implementation of training and delivery of identification and brief advice programmes and investment in alcohol liaison teams. I remember hearing one suggestion for brief advice to be given whenever anyone is having their blood pressure tested. Just in those few moments, it would be effective for whoever is doing the test just to ask the individual, “How is your alcohol consumption? Do we need to discuss that?” That kind of brief intervention can make people stop and think.

We must pursue earlier diagnosis of those with alcohol problems or potential alcohol problems. There are 1.5 million dependent drinkers, only 6% of whom access treatment. Many people are just drinking in excess of the chief medical officer’s low-risk unit guidelines. In fact, Drinkaware’s research shows that 39% of men and 20% of women are drinking in excess of those guidelines. It says that nearly one in five adults drink at hazardous levels or above. Many people need help through early intervention programmes, as well as more comprehensive treatment and support. Why are we not providing that when we know that it works?

Implementing such interventions is cost-effective for the NHS. I will give a powerful example that was drawn to my attention by Alcohol Concern. St Mary’s hospital in London has trained staff to give brief advice to patients presenting at A&E. It has designed the one-minute Paddington alcohol test to identify and educate patients who might have an alcohol-related problem. That is called the teachable moment and it has resulted in a tenfold increase in referrals to the alcohol health worker, who then carries out further brief interventions, resulting in a reported 43% reduction in alcohol consumption by the people referred. That is a very effective intervention.

It is interesting to note that the Public Health England report confirms that health interventions aimed at drinkers already at risk and specialist treatment for people with harmful drinking patterns are effective approaches to reducing consumption and harm and

“show favourable returns on investment.”

[Fiona Bruce]

However, it points out that their success depends on large-scale implementation and funding. Will the Minister look at how her Department can give a national lead to share and implement best practice in this field, such as that which I have described?

I would like to say much more on the subject, but I will turn now to the issue of drink-driving. Unpopular as it might be to talk about this in policy terms today, the Public Health England report is clear. It states:

“Enforced legislative measures to prevent drink-driving are effective and cost-effective. Policies which specify lower legal alcohol limits for young drivers are effective at reducing casualties and fatalities in this group and are cost-saving. Reducing drink-driving is an intrinsically desirable societal goal and is a complementary component to a wider strategy that aims to influence drinkers to adopt less risky patterns of alcohol consumption.”

That could not be clearer. The UK is out of line with almost all of the rest of Europe when it comes to drink-driving alcohol limits.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The hon. Lady might have seen the statistical release from the Department for Transport, which I think came out this morning, that says there has been a statistically significant increase in the number of drivers and riders who are killed or injured while driving over the limit in the last year.

Fiona Bruce: I have not seen that release, but I am very interested to hear of it. I hope that the Department of Health will look at that and work with the Department for Transport to review the policy. The APPG would like to see a reduction in the drink-drive limit in England and Wales from 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood to 50 mg. As we have heard, there is a direct link between increased alcohol consumption by drivers and an increased risk of accidents resulting in injuries or fatalities. The Government need to consider lowering the legal limit and possibly a further lower limit for young drivers. They also need to ensure proper enforcement and strong penalties. If we are taking stronger action against the use of mobile phones at the wheel because we know that such action will help to save lives, surely we should do that to reduce the damage from drink-driving. The signal that that would send out to reduce our drinking culture would be major.

I will close with this. During the first world war, the Government introduced controls on alcohol to help the war effort. The crisis of the war offered the opportunity to develop a national alcohol strategy. We have reached our own crisis today, and the Government must take action.

1.57 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Ffello, and it is an extreme pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who made a superb speech. She takes a very strong lead on all the serious matters relating to alcohol, and we are grateful to her. She has also taken the lead by securing this debate, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). I have supported as best I can of all their efforts, and I am pleased to take part in this important debate. I admired

the eloquence of the hon. Lady's speech. Some of what I say may overlap with what she said, but I hope that that will just reinforce what she said rather than causing difficulty.

Many serious problems arise from inappropriate alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a subject about which I have been concerned since I first entered the House in 1997, shortly after which I was elected chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol misuse, now the APPG on alcohol harm. Over many years I have spoken and asked questions in on the subject in the House, and I have tabled a number of early-day motions during the past 17 years, expressing concern and asking for action on the damage to people's lives and to society as a whole that is caused by alcohol. Several of my early-day motions have referred to foetal alcohol spectrum disorders—the lifetime damage to babies caused by alcohol consumption in pregnancy. I shall speak more about that later.

Just two weeks ago, I raised concerns about alcohol in my oral question to the Prime Minister, and a little earlier I put another oral question to Ministers about Britain's high drink-drive alcohol limits. It was disappointing that I received a most unsatisfactory, perfunctory answer to the latter question, which was little more than a brush-off. The Institute of Alcohol Studies had briefed me before that question and has again provided compelling statistics about the costs, in lives, injuries and money, of drink-driving. Indeed, it has provided today the statistics that my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill referred to. The total number of drink-drive accidents rose by 2% to 5,740 in 2015, there was a 3% rise in overall drink-drive casualties to 8,480 in 2014, and about 220 people are killed in drink-drive accidents each year. Going back, there were 240 deaths and 8,000 casualties just in 2013.

Our drink-driving limit is sadly higher than that in every other country in Europe except Malta. A lower limit would prevent a minimum of 25 deaths and 95 serious casualties a year—I suspect it would actually prevent a lot more. When the lower limit is imposed, as I am sure it will be at some point, rather than people perhaps having a couple of pints and thinking they are probably under the limit, the limit will be low enough to deter people from drinking at all before they drive in case they get too close to the limit. Reducing the limit to European levels would have a disproportionately beneficial effect. There is also wide popular support for a lower limit: 77% of the population, rising to 79% in towns. The limit must be reduced. In 2013, the death toll from drink-drive accidents rose by 25% in just one year.

Another serious component of Britain's alcohol problem—especially England's alcohol problem—is the burden on the health service, as the hon. Member for Congleton mentioned. That is another matter I have raised with the Prime Minister. According to statistics provided by the Alcohol Health Alliance UK, the NHS's costs related to alcohol are £3.5 billion a year—the hon. Lady was absolutely right in suggesting that is probably a significant underestimate—and one in five hospital admissions are alcohol-related. In the nine years to 2013, hospital admissions related to alcohol rose by a staggering 51%.

To bring us up to date, 70% to 80% of all A&E attendances on Friday and Saturday nights are alcohol-related, resulting in a massive burden on hospital staff

and resources as well as assaults on staff. I also understand from the report the hon. Lady mentioned that other patients, particularly children and elderly people, are often frightened by violent drunks on Friday and Saturday nights in A&E. Some 80% of police officers have been assaulted by people who have been drinking. As I said in my question to the Prime Minister, alcohol is heavily implicated in domestic violence and attacks on women. After that question, I was contacted by people concerned about child abuse, who again said that many cases of such abuse involved alcohol.

By far the most tragic of all the problems caused by alcohol, in my view—this view is probably shared more widely—are foetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Estimates suggest that each year some 6,000 babies are born damaged for life by alcohol consumed in pregnancy. It causes misery for those children and their families and costs the state vast sums of public money every year. In Canada, the lifetime cost to the state has been calculated as up to \$3 million dollars for every child suffering from FASD. The children concerned are referred to, somewhat unkindly, as “\$1 million-dollar babies”. I have a good friend who lives in Canada—a former school friend—and he tells me about the situation there.

FASD also causes learning difficulties and behavioural problems. A high proportion of people convicted of crimes and in our prisons are victims of FASD. Research by the Medical Research Council has concluded that even moderate drinking in pregnancy has an impact on IQ and learning abilities. There is no safe level, and that must be communicated to all women planning and experiencing pregnancy and, above all, to all professional medical staff. The recent report by the all-party parliamentary group on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, which I was happy to contribute to, made strong recommendations on such information; I was pleased to emphasise the information that is required. FASD is the leading known cause of learning disabilities, and much of what is thought to be autism is actually the effects of alcohol consumed in pregnancy. The Government must wake up to the tragedy of FASD and take urgent action to ensure that all women know about it.

Again, in Canada the Government take the matter so seriously that girls are made aware of the problem in primary school. They are asked in class what they must not drink when they have a baby in their tummy, and they all say, “Alcohol.” They know about the problem. In the US and elsewhere, alcoholic drinks containers are required to have warning labels—not just a small symbol of a pregnant woman, and not on a voluntary basis. The Government warning in the US states:

“According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects.”

If every woman was aware of that, I am sure that the levels of drinking in pregnancy would drop like a stone. However, women are not aware of that—even women I know have not been aware of it. I should say that my daughter-in-law did not drink at all during her pregnancies, and we have two delightful and very healthy granddaughters as a result.

Such a warning should be compulsory on all UK alcoholic drinks containers and should also be displayed in all NHS medical facilities—GP surgeries, clinics and hospitals—as well as all establishments selling alcohol. Women cannot be blamed for not knowing about the

dangers, but the Government must be responsible for ensuring that in the future all women are alcohol-aware and know the dangers of drinking during pregnancy. Tackling FASD must be the priority for the Government's alcohol policy.

Finally, we must do something to help prevent the consumption by young people in particular of strong, cheap alcohol, which the hon. Member for Congleton mentioned. It can, and does, quickly lead to addiction. In recent decades we have seen people as young as 30 dying of cirrhosis of the liver, which is quite appalling. That used to be a disease of older people, but now it is a disease of young people who are drinking vast quantities of cheap, strong alcohol.

As the hon. Lady said, minimum pricing is absolutely essential for reducing alcohol abuse and addiction. I emphasise addiction again because so many people talk about this as though it were a matter of choice. If any of us drank to excess over a prolonged period, we could become addicted. It is a serious danger. A 50p unit price would have no effect on pub prices—I am a lover of the great institution of the British pub and drink wine—but would stop the selling of vast quantities of cheap alcohol by supermarkets. In some cases, as has been reported many times, alcohol is actually cheaper than bottled water.

In recent decades Britain has had a dangerous love affair with excessive and damaging alcohol consumption. That must be stopped. Moderate and sensible consumption—as I have said, I drink myself—would not be affected. What I am suggesting would actually put a brake on the booze bandwagon, which has been out of control for some years now and has to be stopped.

2.7 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Ffello. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on leading the charge to secure this debate, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) on the work he does on this subject.

If we all knew that every year in this country 35,000 children were born with brain damage that could be prevented completely, we would of course do everything in our power to prevent it. Yet worrying evidence is emerging that that may be what is happening every year, and that the figures may be going up rather than down. I want to speak about the incidence of foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, which my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) just spoke so well about, among other things. I chair the all-party group on the subject and we produced an excellent report on it just over a year ago.

The worrying sign is that the numbers of people drinking in this country in general are increasing, as we have heard, including the numbers of women. That is especially worrying. It was the culture in the 1970s that few young people, especially young women, drank alcohol at all. That changed from the 1980s onwards and we now see an increase in the numbers. It was very unusual to come across children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders or, as a recent report in *The Lancet* put it, “prenatal alcohol exposure”—I will come back to that report, but these days it is increasingly evident. I became interested in this subject because as an adoptive parent,

[Bill Esterson]

I discovered how common it is among children who are adopted, including my own two children; I should declare that interest.

Fiona Bruce: If the hon. Gentleman recalls, when the all-party group received evidence about the impact of foetal alcohol syndrome on adopted and fostered children, one survey indicated that up to 70% of the cohort of adopted and fostered children assessed were affected.

Bill Esterson: Yes. I thank the hon. Lady for being the vice-chair of that group, and for the immense support that she has given to everybody in it. She is right; we took evidence from professionals in the children in care sector that as many as three quarters of children in care could be affected by alcohol damage during pregnancy. It is one of the major factors contributing to them ending up in care in the first place. I am glad that she raised that point. We also heard a suggestion that many children put up for adoption are damaged in that way, and we heard adoption described by one adoptive parent as a family-finding service for children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorders. It is a family-finding service with inadequate support; I will come to that shortly.

In our report, to which the hon. Lady rightly brings me, we identified that increasing prevalence, as well as the impact on children for life—not just while they are children—of irreversible brain damage and the impact on carers, parents, schools, health professionals and society of so many people with brain damage being unable to function fully in society, and all that that brings with it. As *The Lancet* reported on 12 January, the most extreme end of the spectrum, which is generally referred to as foetal alcohol syndrome, includes

“intellectual disability, birth defects and developmental disorders”. The article goes on to list

“secondary disabilities including academic failure, substance misuse, mental ill-health and contact with the law due to illegal behaviours, with huge resultant costs to our health, education, and justice sectors.”

In our inquiry, we heard that 40% of people in prison exhibit symptoms of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. High numbers of care leavers and people with mental illness end up in prison. Given the evidence that I have heard, it would come as no surprise to me, once we start to explore the root cause—I hope that such work can be carried out—to find that alcohol during pregnancy is a primary contributory factor.

Our inquiry took evidence from professionals who made the case that action must be taken. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton North spelled out how those in north America have managed to calculate the economic costs; the same will be true here. The societal costs are fairly obvious, from what I have described, but there is also an impact on families. If they must care for a child with the kind of disability that we are describing—believe me, it can be pretty challenging at times, from my personal experience—it can often have a dramatic financial impact, because people have to give up work to care full time, with little or no support.

Liam Byrne: My hon. Friend is making an extraordinary speech. As he will be aware, half of families living in poverty in this country have somebody with a disability in the household. It is not just a family issue or a public health issue; it is an inequality issue too.

Bill Esterson: Yes, that is right. My right hon. Friend has described his experience before, and I am sure that he will say more later. Many people are affected by being children of alcoholics; I think that the issue is directly related and a similar concern and challenge. Poverty and inequality are clearly linked to the damage done by misuse of alcohol, and I am afraid that the group on which I am concentrating is one of the most affected in our society.

We heard in our inquiry about the lack of support. There is only one specialist clinic in this country to diagnose FASD—it is in Surrey, and is led brilliantly by Dr Raja Mukherjee, who gave evidence to our inquiry—but that simply is not good enough. If 35,000 children are affected every year, we need a lot more than one clinic to help diagnose them, because diagnosis is needed in order to ensure that support is available.

Kelvin Hopkins: I applaud everything that my hon. Friend is saying in his speech. It was reported at one stage during our deliberations on the report that some medical staff literally do not know about FASD, even now. That is appalling.

Bill Esterson: That is right. The symptoms are misunderstood and significantly misdiagnosed, and too many professionals dismiss them. I have seen entirely contradictory diagnoses—doctors have described FASD symptoms perfectly well and then said that the child does not have it, due to the kind of misunderstanding that my hon. Friend just mentioned. We must improve understanding among health professionals. We must improve awareness, information and education among professionals, not just in health but in education.

In our inquiry, we also heard that children often cope at nursery, reception and key stage 1, and well into key stage 2, and it is only much later—from about year 6 onwards, as the expectation of independence grows in the school system—that the real problems start to emerge. Children who are damaged in this way find it difficult to cope in the school system, but because they have not been diagnosed early—because there has been no awareness or understanding, and they have got that far in the school system—it is assumed that FASD is not the problem, and that it might be due to what is going on at home or other external reasons, when the true cause is a disability. Again, we need greater support, awareness, understanding and training for education professionals as well as those in health and elsewhere.

What is needed? The Government should consider the following objectives. One objective should be to reduce the number of children exposed to alcohol during pregnancy. *The Lancet's* report goes into great depth: international research suggests that just under 10% of the world's population of women drink during pregnancy, but in this country, the figure is 41%, more than four times the international average. A similar figure was presented last year in the evidence of the FASD Trust, which serves as the secretariat for the all-party group and for which I am very grateful. That level of drinking during pregnancy suggests that the incidence of FASD may be four times higher in the UK than in the rest of the world. If we follow that logic, the World Health Organisation's international figure is 1%, so in this country it may be 4% or 5%—that is where the figure of 35,000 babies comes from.

As well as an objective to reduce exposure to alcohol during pregnancy, the Government should introduce an objective to increase support and understanding in schools, in the health and care sector, in criminal justice and in wider society. How should they go about that? During our inquiry, we heard that the phrase should be used is “no alcohol in pregnancy is best for baby and you”.

That fits the description of the strategy that we should adopt in this country. I welcome the fact that the chief medical officer revised the guidelines after we published our report—perhaps not entirely because of it, but I am sure we contributed. That was a big step forward. The guidelines now say that women who are pregnant or are trying to conceive should not drink alcohol at all. That is right, but by no means does it go far enough, because people do not know the guidelines—I am afraid that the increase in alcohol consumption suggests that, sadly, that is all too true.

As part of our strategy, we have to increase awareness, not only among professionals but among the wider population, of the support needed for women before pregnancy. In north America, which my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North mentioned, information is displayed in all the health facilities, education facilities and even airports—I have seen big signs in Canadian airports that say “Don’t drink if you’re pregnant or trying to conceive”.

Kelvin Hopkins: Another factor in America that I did not mention, because people draw back from it, is that people who are under the age of 21 cannot drink alcohol, and anyone who supplies alcohol to somebody under 21 can be sent to prison. That actually happened to a young Englishwoman who was on holiday in Florida: she provided alcohol to her younger sister and was sent to prison for corrupting a minor. It is taken very seriously indeed.

Bill Esterson: I am sure that the Minister has heard my hon. Friend’s comments. I agree that we must raise awareness among girls—and among boys too, because it is really important that boys and men play their part in influencing their partners in abstaining from drinking.

Awareness among professionals of how to prevent drinking during pregnancy has to be part of our strategy, but so does the support that is needed afterwards. Drinking during pregnancy will still happen, however much we are able to reduce it. Very sadly, some of the worst damage happens straight after conception; if someone has a drink before they know they are pregnant, it is too late to do anything about that drink. Support is essential throughout society, and it begins with awareness.

I was really disappointed that the briefing note for this debate did not make reference to foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. It made some really good points about other issues that we have discussed today, but it did not mention FASD. Given that FASD was one of the topics clearly indicated in the bid for the debate, that was really unfortunate—I shall not say anything stronger.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I share his concern about this matter. I also share his concern that the chief medical officer’s guidelines on this issue have not been sufficiently promoted by the Department of Health. I know that some of the chief medical officer’s other guidelines were contentious, but

the clear advice that women who are pregnant—or are considering pregnancy, I should add—should not drink has been received and accepted by everyone throughout the drinks industry and by all the organisations that seek to tackle alcohol harm. I join the hon. Gentleman in asking the Minister what her Department will do to ensure that that much needed guideline is much more adequately promoted throughout the country. It is shameful that that has not happened.

Bill Esterson: The hon. Lady’s comments are so good that I cannot really add anything to them. However, they bring me to the 2012 alcohol strategy, which makes the risks very clear and which refers to lifelong conditions that can have a severe impact on individuals and their families. Those conditions are caused entirely by drinking during pregnancy, so they are completely preventable. It is all already there in the strategy, which leads to the question of why the Government have not done more to promote awareness and reduce the incidence of this terrible problem. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

Let me cite some evidence from elsewhere. In Denmark, improved education and awareness led to an increase from 69% to 83% in the proportion of women abstaining completely from drinking during pregnancy. It did not eradicate the problem completely, but that is a significant improvement and a significant reduction in the number of children affected. It worked in Denmark and it can work here.

In 2015, I presented a ten-minute rule Bill on labelling—I am grateful to hon. Members present who supported it. Labels are just not adequate. They are so small and insignificant that they are ignored or are not noticed, and they are not enough anyway. Again, in north America, such information is displayed in big letters on the walls of pubs, bars and so many other places. That is another suggestion for the Minister: more awareness in places where people are drinking and more information on the bottles themselves.

It is crucial that we get the point across, because many women think that it is okay to have one or two drinks. But define “one or two drinks”! How much is one unit or two units? Most people have very little understanding of or insight into how much alcohol they are drinking—and anyway the evidence is that we just do not know whether there is a minimum level, which is why the only safe advice is abstinence.

Fiona Bruce: I apologise for intervening again, but I want to remind the hon. Gentleman of evidence that we have received. The reason that the recommendation has to be not to drink alcohol is that women’s individual alcohol tolerance levels during pregnancy are simply not known. I remember that he once mentioned a dramatic piece of evidence that showed—he will correct me if I have got it wrong—that a single drop of alcohol on an embryo resulted in that embryo becoming completely insentient for two hours. That is a startling piece of information.

Bill Esterson: I am pleased that the hon. Lady reminded me of that piece of evidence. Perhaps we should tour the country as a double act, because this is turning into one: she can remind me of all the bits I forget.

[Bill Esterson]

The hon. Lady is right about how important this is. It is not just about individual tolerance; tolerance changes as women get older and as they have more children. In families in which, sadly, more than one child is affected by exposure to alcohol during pregnancy, it is invariably younger children who are damaged most.

We all know about the dangers of smoking—now, nobody would dream of saying anything other than, “Don’t smoke during pregnancy”—but we have not got to that point with alcohol. FASD was first diagnosed in 1973. It has been known about since then, so why has so little been done about it in this country? Much more has been done in other countries; they have approached FASD far more effectively. We had good progress from the chief medical officer, but we need so much more.

What do we need to do? We need to have a prevalence study to understand the situation in this country fully, including why women are still drinking during pregnancy. Some of it is about awareness, but there are some other findings from Sweden that I will draw to people’s attention. In a Swedish study, women mentioned societal factors such as peer pressure, not wanting others to suspect that they were pregnant, and insufficient education, as some thought that drinking small amounts during pregnancy was harmless, and we have just heard about the problems that causes. Personal factors were also important, for example not wanting to miss the enjoyment of alcohol. Those were reasons that women in Sweden gave to explain why they felt that abstinence from alcohol during pregnancy was so difficult for them. We must understand those factors in order to do something about them.

That is why it is so long overdue for the Government to go so much further than they have already. We need a prevalence study to understand whether the 35,000 figure that I have cited is correct, and to understand why women are drinking during pregnancy to the extent that they are. Then we can start to make progress in reducing the incidence of problems and providing the support that is needed, because the cost to those children who are affected by alcohol and their families is catastrophic, and it is hugely expensive for us as a society and economy. The situation cannot be allowed to continue.

I urge the Minister to act. I think this is the first time that she has been involved in a debate on this particular issue—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood) *indicated assent.*

Bill Esterson: This is a chance for the Minister to start on the right footing and to really make some progress.

2.32 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this important debate and I warmly thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for securing it.

The costs that alcohol imposes on our society—the social cost, the health cost and the cost to families and communities—simply cannot be counted, because of course that cannot always be measured in pounds and pence. Across the UK, alcohol accounts for 10% of our burden of disease and death, and it is one of the three

biggest lifestyle risk factors for disease and death. Alcohol is 60% less expensive now than it was in 1980, and everyone knows that when the price of a commodity goes down, consumption goes up.

I will share with the Chamber today the alcohol-related challenges that we face in Scotland. NHS Health Scotland has reported that in 2014 retail sales data demonstrated that alcohol sales in Scotland were 20% higher than in England and Wales. Scottish sales of low-cost vodka are more than twice as high as those in England and Wales. It is estimated that one in three Scots are affected by a mental health problem each year, with depression and anxiety the most common illnesses. Alcohol and problems with mental wellbeing are closely related.

We in Scotland therefore have much greater and more pronounced challenges than the rest of the United Kingdom. The damage that alcohol is doing to our population is extreme, so bold solutions are required. In Scotland, such bold solutions have not been shied away from. The overall strategic approach in Scotland is different—I would argue that it has to be different—from that of the rest of the UK. A whole-population approach is required to reduce the harm caused by alcohol.

The important point is that, in addition to analysing existing data such as alcohol-related deaths and hospital admissions, our approach uses sales and price data from market research organisations to examine the relationship between price, consumption and harm. The effects of specific policies have also been examined, such as the policy on multi-buy discounts—it is worth noting that such discounts are now banned in Scotland. Scotland is the only part of the UK to produce such detailed information on alcohol, including sales data.

Whether we are talking about alcohol, gambling, obesity or lack of physical activity, we need to consider how all of our high streets and neighbourhoods can support good health, rather than contributing to our ill health. For example, we know that deprived areas have 40% more places to buy alcohol than more affluent areas. The more widely available and easily accessible alcohol is, the more we drink, and therefore the more harm that is caused.

As well as knowing that 20% more alcohol is sold in Scotland than in England and Wales, we know that Scottish male death rates are approximately 50% higher than those of other UK countries, while women’s mortality is 30% higher in Scotland than in other UK countries.

Kelvin Hopkins: I think this statistic is true: life expectancy in central Glasgow is the lowest in the United Kingdom.

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. That appalling and very sad statistic is one that has touched my own family, as I will come on to explain. Alcohol continues to cause premature deaths in some of our most socioeconomically deprived areas and we must take action—I will go on to say how the Scottish Government have taken action.

The hon. Gentleman’s intervention came at a very personal moment in my speech. Indeed, I have a very personal stake in this debate. By all accounts my own father, of whom I have no memory, was an extremely heavy drinker. Was he an alcoholic? He probably was, but alcoholism was not readily talked about in working-class communities in Glasgow in the 1960s. I did not witness my father’s heavy drinking, because he died when I was

nine months old, not least because of his heavy drinking. My husband's father was an alcoholic, which led to his early death. In Glasgow, where both my husband and I grew up, such deaths were not unusual in the past, and even today alcohol-related deaths are still more common in our communities across Scotland than many people would think.

Here is the main point: I am extremely proud of the fact that against much opposition—some of it, unfortunately, on tribal grounds—the Scottish National party Government in Scotland took a very bold decision. They decided that the damage that alcohol was doing to our population, our families and our communities could no longer simply be measured and talked about and that action was needed. What else could kill 22 people each week in Scotland, cause 670 hospital admissions each week in Scotland, cost Scotland £3.6 billion each year and not require bold action?

Such action came in the form of minimum unit pricing. In our supermarkets and similar outlets, alcohol can cost less than bottled water; in some cases, it sells for as little as 18p per unit, which is disgraceful. There is clear evidence from research that shows there is a direct link between changes in minimum pricing, and changes in alcohol harm and consumption. Estimates show that a 10% increase in the minimum price of alcohol is associated with a 32% reduction in the number of deaths that are wholly attributable to alcohol. Work undertaken by the University of Sheffield shows that a minimum unit price of 50p is estimated to result in 121 fewer deaths a year, a fall in hospital admissions of just over 2,000 a year, and a fall in hospital admissions of just over 2,000 a year by year 20 of the policy.

Minimum unit pricing is more effective than taxation, because it is better able to target the cheap, high-strength alcohol favoured by the heaviest drinkers. Such a public health measure is supported by Ireland, Norway, Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands. I know that England is looking at this measure and I urge everybody in this Chamber to support its introduction. It is bold, but it needs to be bold to help deal with the blight that alcohol has cast over too many of our communities.

Global corporations in the alcohol industry fought a hard legal battle against Scotland's introduction of minimum unit pricing, but the measure was passed with overwhelming support in the Scottish Parliament. It has been tested in the European courts. The appeal against it in the Supreme Court, following victory for the Scottish Government when the measure was tested at the Court of Session, is the final stumbling block to the introduction of the policy. I hope and believe that it will be resolved by the summer at the latest and introduced in short order thereafter.

Responding to the points made by the hon. Members for Congleton and for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), in Scotland we have already reduced the drink-driving limit to 50 mg per 100 ml of blood. That means that the rest of the UK—this is a cause for great alarm—has the highest limit in the EU, alongside Malta. I urge the Minister to follow the lead of Scotland and the rest of our EU partners. Reducing the blood alcohol level for drivers saves lives.

Fiona Bruce: I am interested to know from the hon. Lady directly how that change has not only saved lives, but changed the drinking culture. How have people

changed their attitude towards drinking? One of the points that has been made to us about the Scottish experience is, "Well, it's only a very few lives that have been saved," but there is a bigger picture, is there not?

Patricia Gibson: There is indeed a bigger picture. Laws do not necessarily change attitudes, but what they do over time is change a culture. They send out a clear signal. The point was made earlier that when people are out and using a car, they tend not to drink. They are more likely not to drink at all due to the reduction in the drink-driving limit. It has also been a great educator for people who are out drinking and not driving, but who might be driving the following day. They decide, "I had better not drink tonight, because I might still be over the limit tomorrow when I get in my car." We know that many of the people who have been pulled over, had their blood alcohol level tested and been found to be over the drink-driving limit were simply not aware of it, because it was from the previous evening; they had not considered that they might still be over the limit.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that the lower drink-driving limit has been particularly effective with younger drivers?

Patricia Gibson: Indeed. Our younger drivers are the most likely to be inexperienced. They are therefore not willing to risk it, after all the blood, sweat and tears to pass their test. The limit is helping to reduce the alcohol intake of young people for a whole variety of reasons.

Alcohol is killing too many people in our communities prematurely—I do not think anyone in the Chamber would dispute that. It is splitting up too many families. Its pervasive, insidious influence is the context in which too many of our children grow up. It is costing our NHS billions. It is exacerbating mental health challenges for too many people. It is rendering too many people economically inactive.

Alcoholism is a disease and, as with any disease, we need to find the cure. One silver bullet will not cure the disease. We need minimum unit pricing. We need all our high streets and neighbourhoods to look at how they can support and contribute to good health. There must be a presumption against an over-concentration of outlets selling alcohol, preying on our socially disadvantaged communities. All those things combined can make a difference, because they tackle price, availability and consumption. A serious problem and disease such as alcohol addiction or misuse requires a serious, bold solution. I urge the UK and Welsh Governments to look at the measures and the determination of the SNP Government in Scotland to tackle the issue head-on. It is one of the most serious health challenges of our time.

2.44 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Ffello. I offer my thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for bringing this debate to the Chamber.

I am here this afternoon to speak on behalf of Britain's 2.5 million innocent victims of drink. They are the children of hard-drinking parents, and I start my

[Liam Byrne]

remarks this afternoon with heartfelt thanks to such charities as the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, Childline, Turning Point, Aquarius in my home city of Birmingham and many, many others for all the difference they have made to hundreds of thousands of children. For every child they have helped, for every life they have saved and for every life they have changed, I want to say on behalf of us all, "Thank you."

I am here because I, too, am the child of an alcoholic. My father, Dermot, was an extraordinary man, and I would not be in politics—I certainly would not be in this place—had it not been for his inspiration. He was the son of Irish immigrants who came to Britain before the second world war. He was one of that generation of radicals in the 1960s. He was the first in his family to go to university. The first speech that really inspired him was Kennedy's inauguration, with that immortal line,

"ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

That inspired him and my mum to go into public service. It was that ethos of public service that he handed down to me.

My father loved new towns. He was a practical idealist, and that is how I ended up growing up in Harlow. The reality was that as he rose up the ranks of Harlow Council to eventually become its general manager, his dependence on alcohol became deeper. When my mum died of cancer of the pancreas when she was just 52, it knocked him over the edge. He moved from being what I guess would be called a functioning alcoholic to becoming a non-functioning alcoholic.

For much of my life, I have grown up with that gnawing insecurity that is all too common for children of alcoholics—that constant feeling of guilt, constantly asking yourself whether you are doing enough. Why can you not do more to stop your mum or dad from drinking? I know what it is like to feel that cold nausea when you find the empty bottles hidden around the house. I know what it is like to feel sick when you hear your parent being sick first thing in the morning because they have drunk too much. I know what those feelings are like, and I know what the psychological reactions are like. I know all about the drive for perfectionism as you try to make the world perfect and impose some kind of order on it. I know what it is like to build up that kind of armour-plating so that nothing can ever hurt you, and I know all about the insecurity and the shame.

I know what it is like to have your parent on the front page of a paper because he has been caught driving four times over the limit. In fact, it was my little brother who was delivering those papers on his paper round. I know what that insecurity and shame feel like, and I know how it lasts a lifetime. I know what it is like to spend lots and lots of time in A&E. I know what it is like to spend lots of time in intensive care units. In my case, I was holding my dad's hand as he suffered multiple organ failure, only to see him pull through and start drinking again. I know what it is like to spend the final days of your parent's life in a hospital. It was almost two years ago, just before the last general election, that I was called to my home town of Harlow to be told that my dad only had days to live. I will remember for ever the compassion and care of the staff of the Princess Alexandra

hospital in Harlow. I will remember for ever that cold dawn on St Joseph's day nearly two years ago when the staff of the hospital folded down my dad's blanket so that we could hold his hand as he breathed his last. I will never forget the compassion of those national health service staff and the way that they cared for us.

I know what those things feel like. I know how deeply they have affected me, and I know how deeply they have affected my brothers, but in a way I count myself as lucky, because since I first took the difficult decision to speak out on this a year and a half ago, I have been inundated with stories from colleagues here, whether they are in the House of Lords, staff or fellow right hon. and hon. Members. I have been inundated with stories from the public. I suppose I learned that like all children of alcoholics, we cannot change things for our parents, but we can change things for our children. What I want to do with others who are here is help use the experiences of the children of alcoholics in this country to change the policy of Her Majesty's Government. That is why I am glad to see the Minister in her place today.

The stories I have heard are terrible, and I want to bring some of the voices of children of alcoholics to this place this afternoon. One person wrote to me to talk about their experience, saying:

"I felt alone, confused, guilty and second best."

Another person said:

"Growing up with an alcoholic parent was not great. You feel like a failure, you feel like it's your fault, you feel second best to the bottle. You never know what state you're going to find your parent in."

Another talked about the feelings of helplessness, hate, devastation, frustration and denial. Some felt worthless. Some were carers. Some had behavioural problems. I have teachers write to me about children they look after who are in that position.

Another person wrote and said:

"I am 36 and grew up in an alcoholic home. My mother drank heavily until she died in 2010. She was a lovely person until she drank when she became hateful and emotionally abusive...She was in and out of rehab, detox centres and mental health units for all of her life."

Another said that they felt awful, that there was little love shown and that they felt alone the majority of the time, although luckily they had grandparents who were supportive until they passed away. Another described their childhood growing up with an alcoholic as

"horrible. I used to come home from school and see my mum drunk/passed out on the floor. I could never concentrate on school work because I'd constantly worry about her. Is she okay? Was she still alive for when I got home? It was a constant worry."

Another person talked about their feelings of loneliness and how much they hated the signs that their dad had been drinking or in their mother's speech. Another wrote:

"I wanted to die at 14. I tried but lived sadly."

One person described their experience as

"losing my childhood, and becoming a parent to my younger sister and trying to shield her as much as possible. I was quiet and withdrawn, not wanting any attention and associating all attention with the embarrassment I felt when my mum was drinking."

Another wrote about her experience of living in a household where "don't mention Daddy's drinking" was the byword. The year that he died, she got sober

too. I could go on and on and on. These are not the experiences of a few people; these are the experiences of 2.5 million children in our country—that is one in five children.

From a public policy point of view, should we care? Of course we should, because the evidence is that those children will be twice as likely to develop difficulties at school, three times as likely to consider suicide, five times as likely to develop eating disorders and four times as likely to become alcoholics themselves. This great epidemic of agony is cascading down the generations. The cost of alcohol abuse that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke about—that £21 billion, although some say it is £50 billion—is cascading down the generations. In this House, we have to stand together and break the silence and the cycle of this terrible disease.

Given the scale of the problem, we would expect that the Government, local authorities and the national health service would be all over it and on top of it, making sure there was action, yet the opposite is true. In a series of freedom of information requests that I conducted at the end of last year, we discovered that none of the 138 local authorities that responded have a specific strategy to help the children of alcoholics. Almost no local authority is increasing its drug and alcohol substance abuse budget, even though many of them are seeing rises in A&E admissions due to alcohol harm. Just 9% of the local authorities where A&E admissions are going up are increasing treatment budgets. A third are cutting the budgets.

In some parts of the country, referrals for alcohol treatment represent 0.4% of dependent drinkers. In other parts of the country, that figure is 11%. That is a wide variation. In some parts of the country, an average of £6.61 is spent per hazardous drinker. In other parts of the country, it is £419—that is in Sefton.

There is no uniformity in the data used to collect statistics across the system. What is clear is that children of alcoholics fall through the cracks because they sit at the junction and on the borders of three different systems: the adult social care system, the children's social care system and the public health system. Not one of those systems has explicit defined responsibility for helping children of alcoholics. So what happens? Children of alcoholics just slide through the gaps.

That is why charities such as the National Association for Children of Alcoholics are so important. When I was in an agony of public shame after the last election, it was Hilary Henriques, whose son is here this afternoon, who got me back on my feet. I had the prospect of the Prime Minister wandering around the country waving the leaving note that I left back in 2010, and that brought me immense public shame. What I could not describe at the time was the private shame that I felt, having just lost my father to alcohol. I was at my lowest ebb after the last election. It was Hilary who helped me see that there was something constructive and productive that I could do to aid this particular cause.

NACOA has had 1 million contacts in the last 15 years by phone, email or through the website. The demand for its services is going up and up. What I find most troubling is that a third of people who contact NACOA have not told anybody else about their issues. These poor children are suffering in silence. They feel a profound sense of shame and insecurity. They feel that it is their

fault. They curse themselves for not being able to do anything about it, and not only do they suffer in silence, but they feel like they are on their own. No wonder so many go on to suffer difficulties in the future.

On 13 February, we will mark international Children of Alcoholics Week, which is when we get the chance, around the globe, to stand up and speak for the children of alcoholics. Thanks to the concerted effort of the all-party parliamentary group on children of alcoholics, we will be able to launch on 15 February, the day after Valentine's day, the first ever manifesto of children of alcoholics. It has not been written by me, NACOA or by charities, but by children of alcoholics, many of whose stories I read out earlier. I want to give the Minister some highlights.

First, the clear message is that the Government have to take responsibility for children of alcoholics—no one else is going to help these children. Their parents are not going to help. They cannot tell their neighbours. The Government have got to step into the breach.

We need a national strategy for children of alcoholics. We talk about children's mental health and we talk about alcoholism, but, again, children of alcoholics are in the middle. They need a national strategy of support.

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

We have to properly fund support for children of alcoholics. Helplines such as those from Childline or NACOA are run on a shoestring, yet they make a world of difference. They need a little bit of extra help from the Government.

We need to increase the availability of support for families. There is clear evidence now that family therapy can make an extraordinary difference. We should be boosting education and awareness among children and for those who have responsibility for working with children. I cannot count the number of times that I was involved in talking to the national health service about my dad's condition. Even when I spent five days sitting on the ward of an intensive care unit, not once did anyone ever say to me or my dad, "Is there a conversation about alcohol that we need to have? And, by the way, are you okay?" We need to transform education and awareness among those who look after our country's children.

As the hon. Member for Congleton said, we need to develop a plan to change public attitudes, and we need to revise the national strategy to focus on price and availability. The evidence from Canada and Ireland—and I hope soon from Scotland—is very clear that price makes an important difference.

We need to curtail the promotion of alcohol, particularly to students. When kids put up posters of football teams with alcohol brands plastered across their strips, alcohol is being advertised in their bedrooms. We have to think anew and afresh about how alcohol is promoted in this country.

I say in support of the hon. Lady that the Government should take responsibility for reducing the rate of alcoholism. This is a public health question, pure and simple.

Fiona Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman gives me the opportunity to point out that the Public Health England report says that the evidence is sufficient to support policies to reduce children's exposure to marketing. They are needed, and that is what the report says.

Liam Byrne: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are a million and one ways in which we can do this. Someone called Gemma contributed to the report and said:

“Going down any street with a pub on it in the UK and there will be a sign outside with a quote such as ‘Drinking at 9 am doesn’t make you an alcoholic’. Well, to be honest, it probably does.”

There are common-sense restrictions that I think we should be debating.

Kelvin Hopkins: My right hon. Friend is making a very good point about the opening of pubs at all times of the day. I am one of those who opposed the relaxing of licensing hours. Sadly, it was our party’s Government who did that, and I think that was a mistake. I hope that one day we shall get into power and reverse that, if it is not done before then by the present Government.

Liam Byrne: Let us hope it changes even before then.

The Prime Minister has put great store on two things: first, restoring social mobility in this country, and, secondly, children’s mental health. I understand that it will not be too long before the social mobility strategy, or the social justice strategy, is produced. I do not mind or particularly care what it is called, but I look to the Minister for a cast-iron commitment that children of alcoholics will be discussed at the Cabinet Committee next week, and that we will insert into the strategy that is published in the weeks to come a commitment to develop some of the ideas I have talked about this afternoon.

The Government are well aware of our ambitions. We have written to all and sundry about them, including the Prime Minister. If the Prime Minister is in any doubt about the importance and urgency of this debate, I will close with a word from His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, who said:

“We all know that having a parent who abuses alcohol is one of the most disruptive experiences for any child and leads frequently to long-term effects in one’s self confidence, one’s capacity to relate, and even for some people in their own relation to alcohol itself. My experience, whether easier or more difficult than that of others, was fairly difficult...One of the things I most missed was the company of others who understood the issue.”

He concluded in the most powerful of ways:

“We are never ourselves when we are solitary, but in all of human history and community it has invariably been the case that it is in relationship that we become most fully what we are called to be, provided that relationship is healthy.”

3.3 pm

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I applaud the right hon. and hon. Members who secured this debate with the hope of influencing the Government to update the alcohol strategy, which is absolutely necessary. In particular, the all-party parliamentary group for foetal alcohol spectrum disorder would like an update on action on point 5.15 of the strategy. It reads:

“Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders...result from mothers drinking alcohol during pregnancy. They are lifelong conditions that can have a severe impact on individuals and their families—leading to a wide range of difficulties including low IQ, memory disorders”—such as forgetting how to swim, “attention disorders”, such as when people detach themselves from family members and adoptive parents—

“speech and language disorders, visual and hearing defects, epilepsy and heart defects. They are caused entirely by drinking during pregnancy, and so are completely preventable. We do not have good information about the incidence of FASD...FASD can be caused by mothers drinking even before they know they are pregnant; so preventing them is strongly linked to reducing the levels of heavy drinking in the population as a whole, and especially among women.”

The rate of alcohol consumption is much higher among women in my constituency than in many others. The alcohol strategy says that we need to reduce consumption in the population as a whole, especially among young women,

“including by increasing the awareness of health professionals.”

There is a lack of understanding and awareness about this problem.

Let me give a general overview. Some 10.8 million people in England drink at levels that pose a risk to their health. Most of us have a drink, which is why we do not recognise the problem—we say, “They are just having an extra one. They might have had a bit more than me, but they have not really got a problem.” Overall, alcohol costs the UK £21 billion every year. It affects millions of lives and places a huge burden on public services. The Government cannot afford not to do something about alcohol, because of the drain on the national health service, social services and children’s social care, and because of the number of children who have been placed in care or are up for adoption because of alcohol.

I have seen younger relatives die from alcohol. A great friend of mine died from alcohol—he was head hunted to work in this place some years ago. That professional, skilled person was lost to alcohol, and nobody recognised or faced the problem.

Alcohol is 54% more affordable now than in 1980, which has helped to drive the historically high levels of alcohol consumption. I could not believe, and could not convince my colleagues on the council, how much cheaper alcohol is than bottles of water. I took them round two local supermarkets where alcohol was cheaper than water—cheaper than milk, even. Supermarkets frequently use heavy discounts to sell alcohol more cheaply. The evidence is still around us today.

The figures suggest a modest drop in overall consumption in recent years, but we are still drinking at historically high levels. It is the culture where I come from. St Helens was born of Irish immigrants; it was as far as people could walk from the docks of Liverpool when they landed there after escaping the potato famine. They worked very hard in the pits and in glass and chemicals manufacturing, so it was normal to have a drink at night. But what has gone wrong is that many of the pubs and clubs where the working men could enjoy good company with their pals on a night out have closed down, largely because supermarkets are selling drinks so cheaply. People buy alcohol and drink it at home, where they do not get the company and other people do not see how much they are drinking—it is just their families, who are least able to cope with the problem.

Some 2.1 million children in England are negatively affected by other people’s drinking every year, and the Government have to do more for them. Children do not ask to be born. Young people in the UK tend to drink more and start drinking earlier than young people in other European countries because they see drinking in

the house more. Children exposed to a lot of alcohol advertising are more likely to drink heavily and start drinking at an earlier age—10 to 15-year-olds in the UK view more alcohol ads on TV than adults over the age of 25. By the age of 15, 44% of girls and 39% of boys in the UK have been drunk at least twice.

In England, 100 children end up in hospital each week due to alcohol. I could go on and on with the facts, but I would like to give a general overview. More than anything, I want to focus on children. As a member of the all-party group for FASD, I was driven to this issue. I was alarmed by the number of cases coming up at my surgery, many raised by parents seeking to adopt children. It was heartbreaking. I want to talk about one family in my constituency that came to see me. They were a couple with two children in their late teens and they were on the road to adopting a young child aged eight. They had fostered her and had been given no information at all on health issues, but it soon became obvious that the child was a victim of FASD. She had detachment disorder and had forgotten how to swim, even though she had been taught. She displayed inappropriate behaviour towards visitors and their families, and visitors stopped coming to the home.

A dreadful battle ensued to get a diagnosis and a care package from the local authority. It was difficult because the child was not from the local authority area that the family were living in. They were advised that if the adoption was not completed in a certain timescale, the child would be removed from them. The adoptive parents had taken time off work, but had to return to their jobs. They were prepared to reduce their working hours to care for the child, but they needed a diagnosis and a care package. They were at risk of losing their home—that is how much they loved that child.

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend is speaking incredibly well. I pay tribute to her for the work she has done as a constituency MP and for the support she has given the all-party group as well. The point she is making demonstrates the need for support for adoptive parents. All too often there is no post-adoption support, particularly with this condition of FASD. It is even more important than perhaps we knew in the past, so perhaps I can make that point via my hon. Friend to the Minister to pass on to colleagues in the Department for Education.

Marie Rimmer: I totally agree with my hon. Friend.

My constituents needed diagnosis and a care package. They were at risk of losing their home. They were heartbroken at the thought of the child being taken away from the family and put into another foster home, and then going through, again and again, more placements because families cannot cope with such children. It is so difficult to care for them and yet they are so lovable. The parents were absolutely heartbroken. Silent tears rolled down the cheeks of this professional couple. The tears rolled down quietly as they sat facing me. It was heartbreaking to watch them. The child was part of the family. The two teenage children were beside themselves at the thought of losing their little sister who had become a part of the family. It was only through my direct contact with the local authority chief executive that the child was allowed to stay with the family. In the end, the chief executive apologised and gave a commitment to the family that the necessary diagnosis, care and support would be provided.

More than 7,000 children affected by FASD are born in the UK each year. As a member of the FASD all-party group, I have raised the issue with officers at St Helens Council, where statistics show that alcohol-specific hospital admissions of females were the fourth worst in the country. It is a cultural thing. We see drinking in the family: it goes on, becomes the norm and then leads to an extra drink. Where I come from, we never used to see alcohol in supermarket baskets. There was certainly never any alcohol in our homes. Unfortunately, alcohol is in most homes now. That is where families and children see it being drunk and then becoming part of the culture. It becomes the norm and it is much harder to tackle.

In Peterborough, 75% of children referred for adoption have a medical history of pre-natal alcohol exposure. Most of the looked-after children in St Helens come from alcohol-related problem families. I have met officers at St Helens Council who have given me a principled commitment to progress matters. I am delighted that a training programme with all appropriate staff took place last year. It is estimated that 1% of babies born each year in Knowsley have FASD—that could mean 19 babies in the two wards in my constituency that are in that authority.

I am delighted that action is being taken locally by St Helens Council, but without a national response from the Government, FASD as an issue will continue to be overlooked by the population as a whole. As a local MP, I have done my best, but it is certainly not enough. I have supported the awareness strategy and campaign at Whiston Hospital maternity unit. A recent survey found that 72% of people in Merseyside believe the Government have a responsibility to reduce alcohol-related harm, which is a drain on services.

My understanding of where I live in the north-west—not just in the Merseyside authorities but outside—is that well over 50% of the children on looked-after registers and going forward for adoption are damaged by alcohol and are being raised in families with alcohol-related problems. How can the Government not look at that drain on services, but—more importantly—the damage to those children's lives? What will they grow up to be? What quality of life will they have? They do not ask to be born. The Government must do more than they are doing now.

I commend the hon. and right hon. Members who secured this debate. So many people and families are distraught at the damage caused by alcohol. More must be done and I plead with the Minister to act accordingly.

3.17 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck, and to take part in this important debate. I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on securing it and I praise the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for leading it. She mentioned that we have as many as three all-party parliamentary groups relating to alcohol. I had not realised that, but it reminded me of a lyric from an old country and western song:

“One drink is one too many and a thousand not enough”, which highlights the problem that many have—apologies for the corny remarks.

I am grateful for the hon. Lady's points. Although they relate to the English and Welsh alcohol strategy, they will strike a chord north of the border in Scotland.

[*Martyn Day*]

Many of the points are totally applicable and I agree with much of what she said, particularly with regard to minimum unit pricing and drink-driving limits.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that Scotland has a long-standing and problematic relationship with alcohol. The damage that misuse causes is indeed stark. It causes harm to individuals' health, employment and relationships, as well as to community wellbeing and public safety. Then we have the financial burden on the economy through costs to the NHS, police and emergency services, and lost productivity to businesses. Many points that illustrate that have been highlighted today by various speakers.

The hon. Member for Congleton advised us that 70% to 80% of accident and emergency admissions at weekends are alcohol-related, and that 80% of police officers have been assaulted by drinkers, which is absolutely shocking. The hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) gave us a wonderful summary of the lifetime damage to babies and the costs that obviously creates through foetal alcohol spectrum disorders. He also highlighted the drink-driving statistics, which paint a totally frightening scenario.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) included the risks to young women who drink. He highlighted the 40% of the prison population with FASD and the 41% of women who drink during pregnancy. Again, that is truly shocking in this day and age, given the knowledge we now have. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) reminded us that not every cost can be measured, which is entirely true. I am an ex-banker and I always think in terms of numbers and statistics, but it is the human tragedy that is more important. The problem falls disproportionately on the sections of society with the fewest benefits, and the most disadvantaged are at the greatest risk. In fact, the simple horror story is that alcohol is 60% less expensive than it was in the 1980s. Some things have not kept pace.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) gave a powerful personal account that dealt with the psychology of the issue. One of the inspirational points that he made was that we can change things for the next generation. That is a message we must all take away from the debate. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) highlighted the many avoidable conditions related to alcohol—they could so easily be prevented—and the need to improve health professionals' knowledge. I fully agree on that; there is great consensus in the Chamber today.

You will have noticed, Ms Buck, that I am male, Scottish and a Member of Parliament, which must be three of the worst demographics for alcohol harm, so perhaps I should confess that I finished a bottle of whisky last night, and when it comes to enjoying occasional refreshment I am certainly not teetotal. However, perhaps I should clarify that I opened the bottle in June 2015—I hope that I will be seen as an example of moderation, not excess. Sadly, not everyone's experience with alcohol is moderate. Excessive consumption has been responsible for many issues in society, including, at worst, the rates of alcohol-related deaths. Scotland's figures have shown higher death rates for males over the past 20 years than the other UK nations. The 2014 figures put that at 31.2 deaths per 100,000 compared with the English rate of 18.1.

Kelvin Hopkins: Another horrifying statistic is that Russia's population has been in fairly serious decline in recent years, and the major factor in that is alcohol consumption, which is epidemic.

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

There is sufficient evidence to show a clear link between levels of consumption and of harm. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran has already given several examples. It is particularly worrying that retail sales data show that sales in Scotland are higher than in England and Wales—they were 20% higher in 2014—particularly for low-cost spirits. It might surprise Members to hear that since 2008 vodka has outsold blended whisky by about 20% in Scotland. In 2015, 10.8 litres of pure alcohol was sold per adult in Scotland, which is equivalent to 41 bottles of vodka, 116 bottles of wine or 476 pints of beer. When I consider my consumption rates, or those of my friends and family, many of whom take less than I do, the average means that there are people out there consuming a phenomenal amount of drink. On average, alcohol misuse causes about 670 hospital admissions and 22 deaths a week, and it is costing Scotland £3.6 billion each year, or £900 for every adult in the country. How much better that would be spent on other aspects of the NHS.

I served for 13 years on the West Lothian licensing board and in that role learned a lot about the licensed trade and alcohol issues within many of the communities that I now represent in Parliament. One of the more encouraging developments that I saw during those years was the Best Bar None award scheme, which is a great example of partnership working. It has operated in West Lothian since 2008 and has 20 accredited venues, with the Glenmavis Tavern in Bathgate nationally winning overall best bar at the awards in 2015. Best Bar None is administered by the Scottish Business Resilience Centre, whose remit is to create a secure Scotland for business to flourish in. It promotes responsibly managed licensed premises in Scotland, with the aim of partner agencies working together with licensed premises to create safer and more welcoming city and town centre environments. The crux is that it is also about changing Scotland's relationship with alcohol—something that I believe can be achieved only by working together as a society.

The Scottish alcohol strategy, published in 2009, recognises that a whole-population approach is needed to reduce alcohol harm. Harry Burns, who was the chief medical officer of the Scottish Government at the time, said:

“Every one of us must ask frankly, whether we are part of the problem and whether we are going to be part of the solution.”

I wholeheartedly agree with that comment. The approach is correct, and indeed we have encouraging signs that it is working. Scotland had the steepest fall in alcohol-related deaths between 2004 and 2014. The rate fell from a staggering 47.7 per 100,000 to the current 31.2. Significantly, the fall in death rates over the period was greatest among the lowest income groups, which helped with some of the country's inequality issues.

A measure that has been particularly effective is the multi-buy discount ban, which has accounted for a 2.6% reduction in consumption, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran has pointed out.

In December 2014 the drink-drive limit was reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg, bringing Scotland into line with the majority of European and Commonwealth countries. There is international evidence that lower limits are effective in preventing alcohol-related road accidents.

Controlling availability through licensing has also been a feature of the Scottish strategy. There is a presumption against granting 24-hour licences to on-trade premises, and off-sales are allowed only between 10 am and 10 pm. There are also strict controls for displays and marketing materials, which are limited to single designated areas in supermarkets and shops. I agree with the point made by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill about sports advertising, and the UK Government should take that on board. We have seen the effectiveness of limiting marketing in supermarkets; cutting it out of people's bedrooms would have a massive effect. Scottish licensing legislation puts the objective of protecting and improving public health into the mix, and licensing boards may consider that when making decisions. My understanding is that there is no such public health objective in England and Wales. That is something that UK Ministers might want to consider.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the fact that pricing to reduce affordability is a key component of tackling alcohol harm. I believe that taxation is a means of doing that, but it does not deal with the reality that the availability and relative affordability of the cheapest and strongest drinks is at the heart of the problem. Minimum unit pricing is a more effective tool in targeting those cheap, high-strength products that are excessively consumed by heavy drinkers.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran informed us, evidence from Canada suggests that there is a direct link between changes in minimum price and changes in consumption. It is estimated that a 10% increase in minimum price might be associated with a 32% reduction in wholly alcohol-attributable deaths. That is significant, and it is an approach worth taking. As we heard, using updated modelling from the University of Sheffield, it was estimated that a minimum unit price of 50p would result in 121 fewer deaths and a fall in hospital admissions of about 2,000 per annum in Scotland. Significantly, 51% of off-sales are sold for less than 50p per unit—some for as little as 18p.

The Scottish Government will ensure that a minimum price policy is implemented as soon as possible. The policy had overwhelming support in the Scottish Parliament and it has twice been approved by the Scottish courts. The Court of Session's Inner House granted the Scotch Whisky Association and its partners permission to appeal to the United Kingdom Supreme Court in December 2016. The appeal will be heard in 2017.

In conclusion, our nations have a long history with alcohol, and somewhere along the way things have got out of hand for many in our society—often those from the most disadvantaged areas. There is much that can be done, and we must all take responsibility. There are many reasons why we need to take action, including the impact on police workloads and the weekend A&E admissions, all fuelled by alcohol. Perhaps the most important reason is premature death—20 years earlier than the average for a heavy drinker—and its impact on families and communities. Tackling that issue alone would greatly help reduce inequality in society.

3.28 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate everyone who has contributed to a well-informed and powerful debate. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who opened the debate with a comprehensive overview of the issues related to alcohol harm. I cannot do her speech justice—she was superb—but a couple of points struck me. Her point about attacks on emergency services workers was well made. I do not know whether she is aware, but there is currently a campaign to make such attacks a specific criminal offence, which I would support. I believe that other nations in the UK currently have, or are looking at, such measures. Perhaps the Minister would reflect on that. It was a superb speech, and I congratulate the hon. Lady on the way she made her remarks.

Other right hon. and hon. Members also gave impressive speeches. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) for his personal speech about working with children with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, including his own story about his adopted children. The detail he went into shows how deeply he has thought about it. He will campaign on alcohol harm for the weeks, months and years ahead.

I hope that through the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central and of other hon. Members, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer), who raised similar issues, we can see a change of public policy on such matters. I hope that the Minister will respond to some of what has been said today. If she cannot give us reassurance today, perhaps she will take the subject away, put it through the various policy-making machines behind the scenes in Government and get back to us with some proposals, because the points that have been made today, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central, were very powerful.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) brought us the Scottish perspective. I sensed that she might be suggesting or hinting that my colleagues in the Scottish Labour party are not entirely supportive of some of the policies that the Scottish Government are pursuing. Her argument, however, was well considered. As Labour's shadow Health Secretary in Westminster, I will look into what she was talking about. I enjoy political argument as much as anyone else, but we must learn from best practice, even if it comes from our political rivals.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) delivered an incredible, powerful and staggering speech, for which I pay full tribute to him. The way in which he put his personal experiences on the record was incredibly courageous. For most of my speech I will focus on the children of alcoholics, but at the outset I want to say that his bravery and his work for the APPG inspired me to tell my story as well, which I did over Christmas. I will go into that in more detail. My right hon. Friend made a fantastic contribution—I think your father would be proud today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

I will now run through some of the figures—they have been rehearsed already, so I will not go into great detail. We know that the effects of alcohol have a huge impact on society and a huge financial cost, whatever

[Jonathan Ashworth]

the figure—some have suggested £21 billion, while others say it could be as high as £50 billion. The cost to our society is not only to our health, to the emergency services and through crime and antisocial behaviour; there is also the drag on our economy and economic growth, because of the drag on workplace productivity.

Alcohol abuse and harm is the third biggest health problem after smoking and obesity. Ultimately, it can have devastating consequences. About 307,000 admissions are attributed to alcohol and 65% of those are male. It is estimated that about 35% of all A&E attendances at peak times at weekends are alcohol-related. The number of hospital admissions with a primary diagnosis for alcohol-related diseases has increased about 100% in the past 13 years. Alcoholic liver disease is the most common cause of death, according to recent statistics. The number of deaths related to alcohol has fallen since a peak in 2008, but it remains considerably higher than it was in the mid-1990s. I therefore join the call that others have made for the Government to come forward with a renewed alcohol strategy. I hope that the Minister will tell us whether that is in the offing.

In recent weeks in my own Leicester constituency I have had the privilege of seeing specialist GP services supporting people with alcohol and other dependency issues, and to visit and learn about the Anchor Centre, which is dedicated to supporting people with alcohol problems. However, they tell me that they are worried about the future commissioning of those services, because decisions are made locally and they might not be able to be made in future because of tight budgets. Will the Minister therefore assure us that adequate resources will be put in place to ensure that such specialised alcohol treatment services are at least maintained, or even built on in future? We also heard about the Scottish experience of minimum unit pricing, so will the Minister update us on the Government's position on that at the moment?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill made a powerful point about football team posters in people's bedrooms—people obviously want a poster of the Leicester City side, although perhaps not this season, but they might have done last season. His argument was about marketing, and we ought to reflect on that. The previous Prime Minister was prepared to take radical action on the marketing and advertising of sugary foods. If we are to believe the rumours in the newspapers—I do not always believe them—this Prime Minister has crossed all of that out of the obesity strategy. I am interested to know what the Government's position is on the advertising and marketing of alcohol, particularly as it affects an audience of children. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us a little about that.

I said that I wanted to focus on the children of alcoholics. As the shadow Secretary of State, I have chosen to speak in today's debate, although the usual practice is for another member of the team to speak, because I, too, am the child of an alcoholic. My parents divorced when I was about seven or eight years old. To be frank and candid, they divorced because of the strain that my father's alcoholism placed on the marriage. I am an only child and I lived during the week with my mum and at weekends with my dad. My dad would

spend the whole weekend drunk. In fact, from the age of eight I was in effect the carer at the weekend. It was typical for my dad to pick me up from school, but literally to fall over because he was so drunk. This was before the days of mobile phones, and I recall going to a phone box to call a taxi to take us home. The walk was not far, to be fair, but he could not walk up the street and I was a child.

On a Friday I would go back to my dad's and open the fridge, as people do when they get home from school and want some yoghurt, chocolate biscuits or whatever, only to find it completely empty apart from the huge bottles of white wine—four or five 1.5-litre bottles lined up; the supplies for the weekend. My job as a 10, 11, 12 and 13-year-old was to go down to the shops to get the food in for the weekend and to sort things out. There were loads of such occasions and similar stories. My dad was not bothered about Christmas or with having a Christmas tree, so I would have to go to the shop to get some decorations to make the house look a bit Christmassy, as my friends' houses were.

On another occasion, my dad played in goal at a works football match—I do not know why, because he was quite short, like me, so not a natural goalkeeper. I was about eight or nine and quite excited to be watching a football game, thinking I was going to a stadium, which it was not—it was an astroturf in Salford. It was the first time I had been to a football game and I was quite excited to watch my dad. I remember vividly his mates in the crowd shouting, "Jon Ash is in goal. All you have to do is throw a can of Stella in that direction, and he will go for that rather than the ball." That was a joke, just workplace laughing, but I remember thinking, "That's my dad."

Dealing with my dad's alcoholism coloured my upbringing and my life. As I was sitting here listening to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill, I remember all those feelings that he was talking about: the shame, the embarrassment, particularly as a teenager, and the anger. But I always loved my dad, and he always loved me. We were lucky; he was never violent or abusive. Millions of children—or perhaps hundreds of thousands—are not in that lucky situation.

To be frank, it was only when my right hon. Friend and other Members started speaking out about this matter that I began to realise that I was not unusual, that I was not alone and that other children were going through this. When he started publishing his reports and doing his newspaper articles, I began to look into the subject, too. That was when I learned that 2.6 million children—perhaps more, according to some estimates—are in these circumstances.

I attended this debate because I wanted to speak out, as my right hon. Friend has, and ask the Government to consider putting in place a strategy for children of alcoholics as well as an alcohol strategy. Like him, when I spoke out in the media over Christmas—entirely by accident, by the way; I was asked a question and sort of blurted it out—I was inundated by people getting in touch with similar stories and saying that they remembered leaving their parent in the morning to go to school, never knowing whether they would be the same person when they got home that night. People have also told me that they spent their childhood ensuring that they did not say something off-hand and just wanting to disappear into the background, because their parent

had not only an alcohol problem but a problem with violence, and anything that they said or did might cause their parent to turn because of alcohol.

When we read all those stories and study the research, it is clear that something has to be done. My right hon. Friend used a brilliant phrase. He said that children of alcoholics sit at a junction, where it is not obvious which public service should step in to support them, and too often they fall between the cracks. Is it the school's responsibility? Is it the local GP's responsibility? Is it the responsibility of children's social services? That is why I agree that we need a national strategy, and I ask the Minister to consider including in that strategy a statutory duty on local authorities to put in place local strategies, both to deal with alcoholism and to support children of alcoholics.

The arguments that have been made about collecting data are so important. We have heard that an estimated 2.5 million children are affected, but we are not entirely sure—some suggest it is 3.5 million—so please will the Government look at putting in place a way of collecting statistics so that we know the scale of the problem across the country?

I do not want to be partisan—this is not the place for that—but in a lot of communities across the country school nurses are being cut back. It strikes me that if we want to put in place an effective strategy to help children of alcoholics, school nurses would be a good place to start. I appreciate that such services are now commissioned locally, but will the Minister consider whether the Government can offer any more support to our school nurse and community health visitor networks? I also entirely endorse the comments that were made about labelling and support for mothers in pregnancy.

I am perhaps going off my portfolio as the shadow Health Secretary, but when the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned the high density of shops and so on in more deprived areas, I wondered whether a community's health needs should be taken into account in local authorities' licensing decisions. Perhaps the Minister could reflect on that, although I appreciate that she is not a local government Minister.

My biggest regret in life is that my dad moved away to Thailand when he was about 59. He literally said to me one day, at Christmas, "I'm going to Thailand." I said, "What?" He said, "I'm going." I did not believe him, but he went, and that was that. He just went. Six months later, I got married. He promised me that he would come to the wedding. The day before, he phoned me and said he was not coming. I was so angry I could hardly speak to him. I wanted him to meet my new wife. To be fair, he had met her once, very briefly, but I wanted him to meet the new family. I was so angry that I could not talk to him, as you would expect. A few months later, he was dead. I had to go to Thailand to get the body and deal with the funeral. The friends he had made over there told me he was drinking a bottle of whisky a day. They told me he could not come to the wedding because he did not want to embarrass me. We were from a working-class family in Salford. I had gone to university and become a politician, and posh people would be at the wedding, and he felt that he would embarrass me by being there. I will always regret that.

I am the shadow Health Secretary, so I will do a lot of criticising the Tories, because that is my job, but I say to the Minister that I will work with the Government on a

cross-party basis to put in place a proper strategy for supporting children of alcoholics because, quite simply, 2 million children are suffering. Let us send them a message that they should no longer suffer in silence.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) on securing this hugely important and deeply moving debate on tackling alcohol harm. I pay tribute to each of them for the work that they have done in leading their APPGs, raising awareness, holding the Government to account and developing policy. We have heard incredibly eloquent testimony from several Members about the harms that alcohol misuse can cause to individuals themselves, but just as much to their friends, family and children. We have also heard about the cost to wider society, and in particular to vital public services such as the NHS.

The majority of people who consume alcohol do so at low-risk levels and as a pleasurable part of their social lives. Pubs and restaurants play an important part in our communities, both as venues for gatherings and, as employers and businesses, as significant contributors to local economies. We should not forget that, but as we have heard, there are very serious harms associated with alcohol misuse that we must not forget either. I would like to take this opportunity to discuss those harms while noting that some progress has been made. I will outline some of the steps that the Government are taking to ensure that consumers have the information that they need to make good choices about their drinking, to equip frontline professionals with the training they need to intervene effectively and to invest in evidence-based services to help people cut back. Of course, that must all be underpinned by the right data and the expertise and advice of Public Health England.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, who gave an outstanding opening speech, rightly pointed to the recent PHE evidence review, which tells us that alcohol is now the leading risk factor for ill health, early mortality and disability among 15 to 49-year-olds in England. It causes 169,000 years of working life to be lost, which is more than the 10 most common types of cancer combined. It is also a significant contributor to some 60 health conditions, including circulatory and digestive diseases, liver disease, several cancers and depression. As many colleagues have said, alcohol-related deaths have increased—particularly deaths due to liver disease, which rose by 400% between 1970 and 2008. That is in contrast with the trends in much of western Europe. More than 10 million people drink at levels that increase the risks to their health, and there are more than 1 million alcohol-related hospital admissions annually, half of which occur in the most deprived communities. It is important for us to face up to that as a nation.

As we have heard, the public health burden of alcohol, including its health, social and economic harms, is wide-ranging. There are direct and tangible costs to the health, criminal justice and welfare systems. According to PHE's evidence review, the economic burden of alcohol is substantial; estimates place its annual cost at between 1.3% and 2.7% of GDP, and the estimated annual cost

[*Nicola Blackwood*]

to the NHS is around £3.5 billion. Harms can also be indirect, including the loss of productivity due to absenteeism or unemployment, and they can be intangible and difficult to cost, such as the poor quality of life or emotional distress caused by living with a heavy drinker.

Much of that burden of disease and deaths is preventable, so it is right that the matter is given our full attention. Of particular interest to the Government is the strong inequalities profile of alcohol harms, which fall disproportionately on more deprived communities. We estimate that if all local authorities had a mortality rate that matched the most affluent areas, about 4,000 alcohol-related deaths would be avoided each year.

Though I note my hon. Friend's calls for caution, there are some promising trends that give us cause for optimism. People under 18 are drinking less, attitudes are beginning to change and there has been a steady reduction in alcohol-related road traffic accidents. We have also seen real progress in Government working in partnership with industry. The industry removed 1.3 billion units of alcohol from the market through improving consumer choice of lower-alcohol products, and nearly 80% of bottles and cans now display unit content and pregnancy warnings on their labels.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton—and my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), who is no longer in his place—rightly said, partnership continues to play an important role in tackling alcohol misuse, and the Government are committed to that principle. In the report produced by the APPG that my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, recommendation 9 is to educate the public about the harms of alcohol and do a better job in prevention. We are taking a number of actions to try to help people manage their alcohol consumption, because we believe that the most sustainable long-term solution to alcohol misuse is informed and empowered citizens and consumers. To ensure that that is possible, we have a responsibility to provide the most up-to-date and clear information to enable people to make informed choices about their drinking. That includes publishing the low-risk drinking guidelines, as we did last year, which a number of colleagues mentioned. Those guidelines provide the public with the latest information from the four UK chief medical officers about the health risks of different levels and patterns of drinking.

Officials are now working with partners in industry to update the advice provided on packaging and labelling to reflect the latest evidence. That is to ensure, as the hon. Member for Sefton Central mentioned, that awareness is raised and people understand exactly what those low-risk drinking guidelines mean.

Fiona Bruce: The Minister talks about increasing knowledge and awareness, but her Department's own report says:

"Although playing an important role in increasing knowledge and awareness, there is little evidence to suggest that providing information, education...is sufficient to lead to substantial and lasting reductions in alcohol-related harm."

I support that action, but, without the type of policies I addressed in my speech, I do not believe we will see the difference we need to make.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is right that that is not enough in and of itself, but it was an important step, because we did need to review the latest evidence and provide updated risk guidelines. That is also why we remain committed to high-impact public education campaigns. Last year, PHE launched its "One You" campaign, which she may be aware of, which aims to motivate people to take steps to improve their health through action on the main risk factors, including alcohol consumption. "One You" has been used by more than 1.6 million people so far. It includes a drinks tracker app, which helps drinkers to identify risky behaviour and lower their alcohol consumption. PHE will launch a new "Days Off" app on 7 February to encourage people not to drink alcohol for a number of days a week, which is in line with the CMO's guidelines. Evidence supports that as an effective way to reduce drinking and a good, effective and manageable way in which to use the guidelines.

Bill Esterson: I am pleased that the Minister is making practical suggestions to address some of the problems that have been raised. I hope that she will take up the shadow Health Secretary's offer to work together on this. As an initial step, perhaps she could sit down individually with the three of us who initiated the debate to take things further, because we have said a lot today but there is a lot more to the debate that may be of assistance to her.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman put his finger on it when he said that a huge number of issues have been raised. I am trying to get through as many as I can. It is likely that I will not get through every point, so, if I do not, I will try to write. I will certainly try to give as much detail as I can. I think I noted everything down, but, if I did not, I am sure hon. Members will remind me with interventions. If they will let me make a bit of progress, I shall do my best.

In the report produced by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, recommendations 3 and 4 were to increase awareness and training for health professionals. A number of colleagues raised that as an important issue for identifying earlier and intervening on those who are misusing alcohol. We recognise that as important. All health professionals have a public health role, and we need to ensure that our frontline workforce are properly trained to tackle such challenges, especially alcohol misuse and drinking in pregnancy. I will come on to the points made by the hon. Member for Sefton Central in a minute.

Kelvin Hopkins: To be specific, will the Minister look carefully at what I suggested in my speech? We should have notices in all medical establishments and all areas where alcohol is consumed or purchased with the wording used in America about birth defects, and we should ensure that all medical professionals know about that problem and tell all women about it.

Nicola Blackwood: I will come in a moment to how we are dealing with the issues of foetal alcohol syndrome and foetal alcohol spectrum disorders, but I want to talk first about training for professionals, if that is okay.

By 2018, about 60,000 doctors will have been trained to recognise, assess and understand the management of alcohol use and its associated health and social problems. We think that is important so that future doctors can

better advise on the health impact and effects of substance misuse. One of the key areas for that must be primary care. Since April 2015, the standard GP contract has included the delivery of an alcohol risk assessment to all patients registering with a new GP, which offers the opportunity to raise awareness of alcohol as a risk factor. In addition, the inclusion of an alcohol assessment in the NHS health check is a good opportunity for healthcare professionals to offer advice. That check is offered to all adults between 40 and 74 in England.

That large-scale intervention has the potential to make a real difference, because we know that one of every eight people who receive the intervention moderate their behaviour. Put simply, evidence shows that that is one of the most effective interventions available to us. Since we mandated the alcohol assessment and advice component in 2013, more than 10 million people have been offered a check, and nearly 5 million people have taken up the opportunity, which is a take-up rate of about 48%. That is progress, but we want to go further.

Recent research has shown that referrals to alcohol services following an NHS health check are about three times higher than among those receiving standard care. We therefore think that the health check is a good way to prompt an adjustment in behaviour. We will continue to deliver it, although we will be happy to hear recommendations on how we can improve it.

Another thing we are doing to support frontline professionals to identify those who might need more significant intervention is that Public Health England is currently leading a review of the higher-risk drinking advice. That is being undertaken in partnership with the devolved Administrations, and the updated advice will be published once the evidence has been considered.

The hon. Members for Sefton Central and for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) gave important speeches on the risks of FAS and FASD. They were concerned about the availability and understanding of the CMO's guidelines. As I mentioned, we are working with partners in industry to update the advice provided on labels, which should disseminate those guidelines. I will certainly consider the comments made about putting that information on labels, in GP surgeries and in other appropriate locations. One of the other ways in which we are trying to get that information out is through the "One You" campaign and the drinks tracker, which I have just mentioned.

We are also trying to disseminate that information through health professionals in a more targeted way. Health professionals are supposed to discuss it with pregnant women as part of their routine work, but women who are heavy drinkers are much less likely to engage with antenatal care, so identifying them can be challenging. Over the past year, PHE has therefore been undertaking a piece of work to identify those at risk and provide advice. It has piloted in three regions of England a training programme developed in Wales called "Have a Word", which sounds much like what the hon. Member for Sefton Central proposed. PHE is considering the findings from the pilots with a view to rolling the programme out across England if it is effective. We are particularly looking at the findings on how pregnant women can be targeted. I am happy to share those findings with the hon. Gentleman, as I suspect they will address his concerns on raising awareness and targeting pregnant women.

The hon. Gentleman raised the problem of professionals dismissing foetal alcohol spectrum, which sounds familiar. One problem I have been made aware of is the lack of research in this particular field and the need to increase it. Although the World Health Organisation has started a global prevalence study, which he called for, it recognises that information is lacking in many countries, including the United Kingdom. That creates a number of challenges, because the feasibility of estimating prevalence is difficult given the ethical challenges associated with research in that area.

Public Health England recently published the most comprehensive and up-to-date review of current harms of alcohols and the evidence on the effectiveness of alcohol control policies. We are currently engaged in further work to understand the impact of parental drinking on children; we discovered during the initial work that we did not have sufficient evidence on that, so we are going forward with that work. Public Health England is also developing prevalence figures at local authority level, as well as a toolkit to support local authorities to respond to the issue of parental drinking. That is due to be published later next year, and I hope it will be of assistance to the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill in the work of his all-party parliamentary group as well.

One challenge we face is insufficient evidence, which is why we are trying to build the evidence base up so that we can assist medical professionals and local authorities as they try to make decisions; if they do not have the evidence, it is very difficult to make proper policy decisions in this area. I hope that reassures the hon. Member for Sefton Central, and I am happy to come back to him on any of the other points that he made.

We have also put several measures in place to ensure that children are provided with the information and tools they need, including through the Frank drug information and advice service. Family nurse partnerships help parents in vulnerable families to develop their parenting capacity, while tailored and co-ordinated support is offered via the troubled families programme. A lot of that needs to be delivered through local authorities; one of the recommendations in the report by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton was to promote increased partnership through local communities. We believe it is right that local authorities should lead on that work as they are best placed to understand the different challenges in their areas; what is perhaps a challenge in Birmingham may be slightly differently represented in Bournemouth. However, we must make sure that local authorities are properly held to account when they lead on that, which is why we are keeping a close eye on whether they are delivering on these investments in the first place.

Our data show an increase in local authority spending on alcohol services for adults—from approximately £200 million in 2014-15 to £230 million in 2015-16—which we think demonstrates their understanding of the need for a commitment to invest in those treatment services. Our data also show that 85,000 individuals were treated in 2015, of whom 39% successfully completed treatment. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill quoted different figures. I have not seen his freedom of information request or the response, so I am not sure why that is, but I am happy to investigate the variation between our figures and to discuss it with him to try to get to the bottom of exactly what is going on.

[*Nicola Blackwood*]

I am also happy to discuss the issues the right hon. Gentleman and the shadow Health Secretary raised regarding children of alcoholics; both made important and moving speeches about that. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his leadership on this issue. I know it is not easy to speak out in this place about personal trauma and loss, and I know that we too often feel it will weaken us and expose us to personal attacks. I hope that by his standing up in that way, more people—not only in this building but across the country—will feel that they can be open about their personal experiences of addiction and of being in families with those with addiction, and will be able to seek help.

This is an incredibly important step in tackling addiction and the stigma that still exists around it. I thank both Members for the steps they have taken in progressing what is a very challenging cultural area in the UK, and I hope they will accept my commitment to working with them to trying to progress it as well. I want to put it on the record that we are trying to take steps, through the troubled families programme, to improve the situation for children of alcoholics. The troubled families programme has a responsibility to tackle problem drinking and to commission appropriate prevention and treatment services—including to support the children of those families.

Liam Byrne: I pay tribute to the Minister and welcome her commitment to working together across the aisle, so to speak, to put a new strategy in place. The troubled families programme is very important, not least because there is a lot of money in it. That money is often focused on families in the most chaotic of circumstances, but our evidence shows that many families with alcoholic parents do not look troubled or chaotic to the outside eye—they are often functioning alcoholics. Our definition of what constitutes a troubled family may therefore need to be stretched a little in order to help those children.

Nicola Blackwood: The right hon. Gentleman is obviously an expert on the issue, but understanding how to identify those at risk is not specific to this area of public health; it occurs in other areas and is familiar to me from my mental health brief as well. This will be something that we need to sit down and discuss to understand more accurately.

It may be that we need to look at the troubled families programme to see how that could be addressed in order to work more effectively to target those in need of assistance. The key message today is that children of alcoholics in the United Kingdom should not feel as though they are alone—they should feel as though support is there, and they should know that they will find help when they seek it. I must go on to talk about some of the other issues that were raised; I hope I am not taking too much time.

The NHS remains critical to the prevention of alcohol harms. We must incentivise NHS providers to invest in interventions to reduce risky behaviours and prevent ill health from alcohol consumption. NHS England and Public Health England have worked together to develop a national commissioning for quality and innovation—CQUIN—payments framework, which is an important intervention. For those less familiar with the CQUIN payments framework, it was set up to encourage service

providers to continually improve the quality of care provided to patients. CQUIN payments enable commissioners to reward innovation by linking a proportion of service providers' income to the achievement of national and local quality improvement goals. In this case, it means that every in-patient in community, mental health and acute hospitals will be asked about their alcohol consumption. Where appropriate, they will receive an evidence-based brief intervention or a referral to specialist services, which should improve the treatment of children in the care of alcoholics, as in cases like those raised by the shadow Health Secretary. That is something we should be pleased about.

More than 80% of hospitals offer some form of specialist alcohol service, and investment in similar alcohol care teams in every hospital would potentially provide the NHS with an opportunity to maximise its delivery of identification and brief advice interventions to patients. As I said, that has been identified as one of the most important interventions to change behaviours.

Hon. Members will be aware that the NHS and local authorities have been developing sustainability and transformation plans—STPs. Those are now published on NHS England's website, and the vast majority include actions to reduce the harms from alcohol, including through investment in brief advice, which was one of the recommendations from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, and expanding the approaches for those with more problematic alcohol use. That is an encouraging sign. Underpinning all of our work is the expertise of Public Health England, as we have seen from its report. PHE staff work closely with local authorities and the NHS to try to tackle alcohol harms. Building on its recent review, we must ensure that it gives the right data analysis, so that local authorities know how to effectively target their policies.

One issue raised by a number of colleagues is the call for a review of the licensing legislation to include a health objective, as in Scotland. I have some questions about how effective that would be. Although it is easy to link a criminal justice problem to a specific location, it is much more difficult to link a health challenge to an individual establishment. It is quite hard to prove that buying a drink in an individual establishment has caused someone's liver disease.

PHE is leading our engagement with the Home Office's second phase of the local alcohol action areas programme and offering support and advice to participating areas that have identified improving the public health response to alcohol-related harms as a key focus of their approach. Successful applicants were announced by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), on 27 January, with 18 of the 33 successful areas looking at how they can improve the health of their residents. That is one way in which this is being done.

The House of Lords Select Committee on the Licensing Act 2003 is looking at that Act and is due to publish its report in March. We will, of course, carefully consider its recommendations. I gave evidence to the Committee, which is looking at health as part of that issue.

Fiona Bruce: On the issue of availability, the Minister's Department's own report indicates that reducing the number of hours during which alcohol is available and

looking at density—the number of outlets where alcohol is sold—can help to reduce alcohol harm. I hope she will look at that as she proceeds. The local licensing objective could have real teeth if those issues were introduced into it.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is passionate about this issue. I understand the argument for introducing the health objective. The problem is proving the risk posed by the individual establishment. However, we will consider the evidence that comes forward.

I will briefly turn to taxation, which was raised by a number of colleagues, including Scottish National party Members. I have to say at the outset that making changes to taxation is a matter for the Chancellor and slightly above my pay grade. We also have to note that the UK currently has the fourth highest duty on spirits compared with other EU member states, and higher strength beer and cider are already taxed more than equivalent lower strength products. We are considering the introduction of minimum unit pricing in England and Wales but are waiting for the outcome of the court case in Scotland. Until we hear the Supreme Court's decision, which is still unknown—we are supporting the process of that case—we cannot proceed with any policy decision in the United Kingdom. It is a little unfair to berate us for not introducing a policy that cannot yet be enforced in Scotland.

On targeted changes in taxation, I am advised that current legislation on alcohol duties requires that duty on wines and ciders is paid at a flat rate within defined bands of alcoholic strength. I understand that my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton and for Ribble Valley have advice that it is possible to do something else, which I would be pleased to see, although that is a Treasury matter. At the moment, my understanding is that the EU directive sets bands for alcohol products in relation to strength and that while we have some flexibility to set rates within the structure of those bands, we are not able to link a duty absolutely to alcohol strength. Obviously, with our vote just yesterday, there is an opportunity with Brexit to consider these issues more specifically going forward, but that is my understanding of EU legislation as it stands and the advice I have received on this specific point.

Fiona Bruce: The information I have received is that the Government could just split the general rate into two separate brackets, therefore achieving their goal without the need to go through the EU. If the Minister will permit me, I will pass to her the opinion we have received on that.

Nicola Blackwood: My hon. Friend is very kind; I would be happy to see it.

I will close now, as I have cantered through a large number of issues and am sure hon. Members are tired of hearing my voice. I thank colleagues from both sides of the House for taking part. This has been an important debate. There have been very moving speeches, especially from the hon. Members for Sefton Central and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill and the shadow Minister. They all illustrated powerfully the devastating impact that addiction and alcohol misuse have on not only people's own health but, as we heard

so eloquently, their families, children and local communities, not to mention the health and social care systems and wider society.

We have to give credit where it is due. We have to thank the many NHS workers, local authority staff, charities such as Childline and Aquarius and volunteers who are making such a difference in this area already. They are saving lives. We must recognise progress where it is being made, especially in the changing attitudes among young people. We must not despair.

However, as we have heard from today's debate, stories and statistics, we cannot be satisfied with this. There is much more we can and must do, and I hope I have reassured colleagues today of my personal commitment to ensure we strengthen the information, support and, if necessary, treatment we give people to reduce the harms of alcohol misuse. With a health challenge as culturally entrenched as this, it can sometimes feel as though it is a mountain we will never successfully climb, but I take courage from today's debate. Great social change requires three things: long-term political will, non-partisan partnership and bravery. I have heard all three of those today. I hope that each Member who has spoken here today will continue to work with me as we fight on to tackle this social injustice.

4.16 pm

Fiona Bruce: I would like to thank the Minister for her response, which showed that she has been as moved as everyone in the Chamber by the speeches we have heard. I not only welcome but deeply thank her for the commitment she has given to continue to work with colleagues who are concerned about the impact of alcohol harm.

I remember a debate in the main Chamber a few years ago about mental health, when many Members spoke for the first time of their personal experiences of mental health issues. That debate was something of a tipping point. Since then, the issue has been discussed again and again in the House, and the Government have taken action to address it. I hope that today will prove something of a tipping point with regard to the impact of alcohol harm.

I thank the hon. Members for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer), and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), for their well informed and, in all cases, deeply moving speeches. Although it is probably not normal procedure, I would also like to thank the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), for his equally moving and eloquent speech.

In my speech, I used many statistics on the wide-ranging harm caused by alcohol and its health, social and economic consequences, but I believe that what will really have stirred hearts and minds today—and, I hope, stirred the Minister and her officials into action—are the deeply moving personal accounts from Members of how alcohol has in many cases touched their lives and those of their families devastatingly.

This is not a minor issue. The harm can not only be devastatingly deep for the individuals but touches many more people right across the country than has been acknowledged to date. I have heard it said that there is

[Fiona Bruce]

barely a family in the land not affected by alcohol harm today. Having heard today's speeches, I doubt anyone could argue against that. I certainly believe it. I have just four members of staff working for me as a Member of Parliament, and of those four, tragically, one lost her husband to alcohol while she was in her 50s, just a short time ago, and another lost her father to alcohol when she was not yet one year old. I thank them for allowing me to relate that. The impact of alcohol harm on our nation is far wider and deeper than we have acknowledged in the House to date.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting a three-hour debate—I believe that was justified. I also thank the Minister not only for her reply but for her willingness to meet us in the future. I look forward to working with her, and across parties, on this issue. If there is any point that she did not manage to address in her very detailed response, we would appreciate it if she were good enough to write to colleagues.

As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, there is no one silver bullet that will solve this issue. But one thing is for sure: we need the Government to take a lead on tackling alcohol harm, which is one of the most serious health challenges of our time, and to do so urgently. We need action—enough reviews have taken place. Public Health England's report clearly says that there are policies that have significant potential to curb alcohol-related harm, but we need action to be taken urgently. Successive Governments have completely underestimated the challenge. I appreciate what the Government are doing now, but we need more to be done.

As I have said, this is not some moral crusade, it is a matter of social justice. Taking effective action will help literally all of our society, but disproportionately the poorest, the most vulnerable and the youngest. We have heard today about the financial costs of excessive alcohol consumption, but the cost in the loss of life chances and potential, for children in particular, and the sheer heartache that people have suffered and continue to suffer are incalculable. I am pleased that the Minister is determined to look particularly at how we can help the children of alcoholics who are suffering now—how we can help to protect them and prevent that from happening in the future—and, I hope, unborn children, too. Those are real priorities, and I am delighted that she has committed to emphasising that work in particular.

I will close with the following quotes, which are all from David Cameron, the former Prime Minister, in the Government's own 2012 strategy. He said that

“the responsibility of being in government isn't always about doing the popular thing. It's about doing the right thing.”

He also said:

“My message is simple. We can't go on like this...fast, immediate action...is needed”

and

“we have to do it now.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered tackling alcohol harm.

4.23 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 2 February 2017

CABINET OFFICE

State of the Estate 2015-16

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to Section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, the “State of the Estate in 2015-16”. This report describes the efficiency and sustainability of this Government’s Civil Estate. The report is published on an annual basis.

[HCWS449]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Growth

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In the last Parliament, £7.3 billion of the Local Growth Fund was awarded to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) through the first two rounds of Growth Deals. In the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor announced the regional breakdown of a further £1.8 billion of the Local Growth Fund. Today I am pleased to announce the individual awards that LEPs in the East of England and in London and the South East will receive.

Table A: Growth Deal 3 Funding Awards for LEPs in the East of England and in London and the South East

LEP	Funding Award (£m)
Buckinghamshire Thames Valley	20.48
Coast to Capital	66.06
Enterprise M3	71.12
Greater Cambridgeshire, Greater Peterborough	37.62
Hertfordshire	43.95
London	141.28
New Anglia	69.06
Oxfordshire	24.16
Solent LEP	31.02
South East LEP	102.65
Thames Valley Berkshire	35.56

This flexible funding sits alongside £475 million for Local Transport Majors and £2 billion long-term funding for housing transactions through the Home Building Fund. This was the most competitive round yet, and allocations were made based on a bidding round that took place last year. This honours our manifesto pledge to agree an expanded set of deals to empower the towns, cities and counties across the country to fulfil their potential and create an economy that works for all. The expanded deals will provide LEPs in the East of England and in London and the South East with the power and funding to support local businesses, unlock housing where it is most needed and develop vital infrastructure to allow places to thrive. The funding will also be used to create jobs, equip a new generation with

the skills they need for the future and attract billions of pounds of private sector investment. This investment is Government stepping up, not stepping back, building on our strengths to boost national productivity and growth.

This adds to the £2.2 billion we have already invested in Growth Deals in the East of England and in London and the South East in previous rounds, providing targeted financial support to locally-determined projects in order to unlock growth.

The Government announces the award of £556 million to LEPs in the northern powerhouse on 23 January. We will announce the awards for LEPs in other regions over the coming weeks.

[HCWS454]

DEFENCE

War Pension Scheme Up-rating 2017

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The new rates of war pensions and allowances proposed from April 2017 are set out in the tables below. The annual uprating of war pensions and allowances for 2017 will take place from the week beginning 10 April 2017. Rates for 2017 are increasing by 1% in line with the September 2016 consumer price index.

<i>War Pensions Rates</i>		
<i>Rates</i>	<i>Rates</i>	
<i>(Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2017</i>
WAR PENSIONS		
<i>Disablement Pension (100% rates)</i>		
officer (£ per annum)	9,298.00	9,392.00
other ranks (weekly amount)	178.20	180.00
<i>Age allowances payable from age 65</i>		
40%-50%	11.95	12.05
Over 50% but not over 70%	18.35	18.55
Over 70% but not over 90%	26.10	26.35
Over 90%	36.70	37.10
<i>Disablement gratuity (one-off payment)</i>		
Specific minor injury (min.)	1,136.00	1,147.00
Specified minor injury (max.)	8,474.00	8,559.00
1-5% gratuity	2,834.00	2,862.00
6-14% gratuity	6,300.00	6,363.00
15-19% gratuity	10,018.00	11,128.00

SUPPLEMENTARY ALLOWANCES *(WEEKLY)*

Unemployability Allowance

Personal	110.10	111.20
adult dependency increase	61.20	61.80
increase for first child	14.20	14.35
increase for subsequent children	16.75	16.90

War Pensions Rates

<i>Rates</i> (Weekly rates unless otherwise shown)	<i>Rates</i> 2016	<i>Rates</i> 2017
<i>Invalidity Allowance</i>		
higher rate	21.80	22.00
middle rate	14.20	14.30
lower rate	7.10	7.15
<i>Constant Attendance Allowance</i>		
exceptional rate	134.40	135.80
intermediate rate	100.80	101.85
full day rate	67.20	67.90
part-day rate	33.60	33.95
<i>Comforts Allowance</i>		
higher rate	28.90	29.20
lower rate	14.45	14.60
Mobility supplement	64.15	64.80
Allowance for lowered standard of occupation (maximum)	67.20	67.88
Therapeutic earnings limit (annual rate)	5,590.00	6,240.00
Exceptionally severe disablement allowance	67.20	67.90
Severe disablement occupational allowance	33.60	33.95
Clothing allowance (£ per annum)	230.00	232.00
Education allowance (£ per annum) (max)	120.00	120.00
<i>WIDOW(ER)S BENEFITS</i>		
Widow(er)s'—other ranks (basic with children) (weekly amount)	135.15	136.50
Widow(er)—Officer higher rate both wars (basic with children) (£ per annum)	7,187.00	7,259.00
Childless widow(er)s' u-40 (other ranks) (weekly amount)	32.37	32.69
Widow(er)—Officer lower rate both wars (£ per annum)	2,496.00	2,521.00
Supplementary Pension	90.41	91.31
<i>Age Allowance</i>		
(a) age 65 to 69	15.40	15.55
(b) age 70 to 79	29.60	29.90
(c) age 80 and over	43.90	44.35
<i>Children's Allowance</i>		
Increase for first child	21.20	21.40
Increase for subsequent children	23.75	24.00
<i>Orphan's pension</i>		
Increase for first child	24.25	24.50
Increase for subsequent children	26.55	26.80
Unmarried dependant living as spouse (max)	132.80	134.15
Rent Allowance (maximum)	50.90	51.40
Adult orphan's pension (maximum)	103.85	104.90

[HCWS450]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council: 6 February

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 6 February. The Foreign Affairs Council will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include Ukraine, Egypt, Libya and the middle east peace process.

Ukraine

Ministers will focus on the importance of sustained international support for Ukraine's reform process. The UK strongly supports Ukraine's reform agenda which is crucial to build a modern, stable state. We expect discussion will also cover developments in relation to the Minsk agreements.

Egypt

Ministers will discuss Egypt's bilateral relationship with the EU and Egypt's role in the region. We expect discussions will cover Egypt's political and human rights situation, including the growing restrictions on civil society. Ministers are also likely to discuss how the EU can help strengthen Egypt's internal security, co-operate on regional stability and work together on combating illegal migration in the region.

Libya

Discussions will cover the latest developments in the Libyan political process. We will encourage the EU to consider how it can best continue to support the Libyan political process.

Middle east peace process

Ministers will discuss progress on the middle east peace process (MEPP) and may reflect on obstacles to peace including incitement, terrorism, demolitions and recent settlement expansion.

[HCWS453]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The first (informal) meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Maltese presidency took place on 26 and 27 January in Valletta. The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), and I represented the UK.

Interior day began on 26 January with a discussion on reform of the common European asylum system. I intervened to reiterate the benefits of separating the proposed relocation mechanism for redistributing asylum

seekers between member states from the draft revised Dublin regulation—which the Government have not opted into—and to support activity, including engagement with third countries, aimed at controlling inward migration flows. Ministers agreed to take forward further work to define “solidarity mechanisms”, and on upstream engagement with third countries.

In the afternoon Ministers discussed IT systems for borders and security. There was broad support for the use of biometric data for law enforcement and border security purposes. I reiterated the Government’s call for more proactive sharing of criminal records and to encourage practical solutions, but warned that proposals for a single EU repository/system for fingerprint and DNA data may infringe on member state competence.

In the margins of the meeting, the Policing Minister and I held a number of discussions with other member states on issues including the extension of passenger name records (PNR) exchanges to high-speed rail links, and on the impact of the recent judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJE) in the Watson/TELE 2 case. Member states agreed to work together to make progress in addressing both issues.

On Justice day, Ministers held an exchange of views on the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) and moved towards agreeing in principle a text that can subsequently be taken forward by member states under enhanced co-operation. The UK did not intervene in this discussion as we will not participate in the EPPO. The next General Affairs Council (7 Feb) will be asked to agree to ask the European Council whether this measure can be pursued under enhanced co-operation.

This was followed by discussion on a proposed insolvency directive to harmonise insolvency standards. The Policing Minister intervened to support the broad objectives of the measure, which reflect many existing principles of insolvency law in the United Kingdom, but highlighted that we still needed to analyse the detail of the measure. Most member states who spoke cautioned against over-harmonisation as this is an area where national laws and practices diverge.

Over lunch, the Commission presented its new draft legislation aimed at tackling money laundering and terrorist financing. The Policing Minister expressed support of the aims of the legislation as our criminal law is already in line with the proposal harmonising criminal offences and penalties. However, he reminded member states that the UK’s general position on refusing to be limited by EU common rules in relation to criminal law means we may not choose to opt in.

[HCWS452]

Avon Fire and Rescue Authority: Statutory Inspection

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): There have been long standing allegations made against Avon fire and rescue authority in respect of its governance.

In June 2016, the chairman of Avon fire and rescue authority approached the Department requesting assistance with launching an inquiry into concerns raised by members of the authority. That request was subsequently withdrawn by the chairman. In August 2016, and again in October 2016, I asked the fire and rescue authority to commission

a full investigation, independent of the authority, into the allegations but the chair and vice-chairs of the authority have made clear to me that they do not intend to commission such an investigation.

In light of this response, I have today commissioned a statutory inspection under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 into Avon fire and rescue authority’s compliance with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions in respect of governance are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. The inspection will focus on the authority’s functions in respect of governance, including, but not limited to, the authority’s duties of accountability and assurance under the fire and rescue national framework.

I consider that the extent, seriousness and persistence of the allegations made against the authority, together with the alleged failures to properly deal with complaints, if well founded, would indicate that the authority is failing to comply with its duty to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. Such allegations would suggest that the authority is unable to deliver economically, efficiently and effectively now or in the future. As a result, I consider that a statutory inspection is appropriate in this instance and is in the public interest. I should make it clear that I express no view about whether or not the allegations are well founded, as that is a matter which will now be considered by the inspection.

It is in the public interest to ensure that allegations of this seriousness are carefully considered by a suitably qualified person of impeccable standing. Dr Craig Baker will be appointed as the inspector. Dr Baker is an independent consultant who has advised public sector organisations for over 30 years in the UK and overseas.

[HCWS451]

TRANSPORT

Airport Capacity and Airspace Policy

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Today I will be laying before Parliament a draft airports national policy statement and beginning a period of extensive public consultation on the policy proposals it contains. National policy statements were introduced under the Planning Act 2008 and are used to set out Government policy on nationally significant infrastructure projects. This draft airports national policy statement sets out the need for additional airport capacity, as well as the reasons why the Government believe that need is best met by a north-west runway at Heathrow.

The draft airports national policy statement, appraisal of sustainability of the draft airports national policy statement, incorporating a strategic environmental assessment, an assessment of the policy under the habitats and wild birds directive, a health impact analysis, and an equality impact assessment will be made available online.

The airports national policy statement, if designated, will provide the primary basis for making decisions on any development consent application for a new north-west runway at Heathrow Airport.

For a scheme to be compliant with the airports national policy statement, the Secretary of State would expect Heathrow Airport Ltd. to:

- demonstrate it has worked constructively with airlines on domestic connectivity—the Government expect Heathrow to add six more domestic routes across the UK by 2030, bringing the total to 14, strengthening existing links to nations and regions, and also developing new connections;

- provide compensation to communities who are affected by the expansion including noise insulation for homes and schools, improvements to public facilities and other measures. This includes establishing a community compensation fund and a community engagement board;

- honour its commitment of payments for those people whose homes need to be compulsorily purchased to make way for the new runway or for those who take up the voluntary scheme of 25% above the full market value of their home and cover all costs including stamp duty, reasonable moving costs and legal fees;

- put in place a number of measures to mitigate the impacts of noise, including legally binding noise targets and periods of predictable respite. The Government also expect a ban of six and a half hours on scheduled night flights;

- set specific mode share targets to get more than half of airport users onto public transport, aimed at meeting its pledge of no more airport-related road traffic with expansion compared to today;

- implement a package of industry-leading measures to limit carbon and air quality impacts both during construction and operation; and

- demonstrate that the scheme can be delivered in compliance with legal requirements on air quality.

I have appointed Sir Jeremy Sullivan, the former Senior President of Tribunals, to provide independent oversight of the draft airports national policy statement consultation process and ensure best practice is upheld.

Consultation on airspace

We need to think about how we manage the rising number of aircraft in an efficient and effective manner. By taking steps now to future-proof this vital infrastructure, we can harness the latest technology to make airspace more efficient as well as making journeys faster and more environmentally friendly.

I am therefore also publishing proposals to modernise the way UK airspace is managed, which will be consulted on in parallel. The policy principles set out in this airspace consultation influence decisions taken later in the planning process for a north-west runway at Heathrow, if the airports national policy statement were to be designated, including how local communities can have their say on airspace matters and how impacts on them are taken into account.

It is an important issue and one that will define the principles for shaping our airspace for years to come. It is therefore sensible to allow members of the public to consider both matters at the same time.

The proposals being published for consultation today include the functions, structure and governance of an Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise, which we will establish. The Commission would build relationships between industry and communities, embed a culture of best practice, and ensure an even fairer process for making changes to airspace.

The proposed new call-in function for a Secretary of State on airspace changes, similar to that used by the Secretary of State at the Department for Communities

and Local Government for planning applications, create a democratic back-stop in the most significant decisions, much called for by communities.

The consultation on airspace policy, new air navigation guidance and the strategic rationale for upgrading the UK's airspace will be made available online.

Aviation strategy

The aviation sector is a great British success story, contributing around £20 billion per year and directly supporting approximately 230,000 jobs across the United Kingdom. It also supports an estimated 260,000 jobs across the wider economy.

I want to build on this success. My Department is currently progressing work to develop a new strategy for UK aviation.

This strategy will champion the success story of the UK's aviation sector. It will put the consumer back at the heart of our thinking. The strategy will also explore how we can maximise the positive role that our world class aviation sector plays in developing global trade links, providing vital connections to both the world's growing economies and more established trading partners. Connections that will only grow in importance as our trading network expands.

I will come back to the House to update you on our plans for the strategy as they develop over the coming weeks.

Consultation and parliamentary scrutiny

These two consultations will last for 16 weeks and close on 25/05/2017. At the same time, and as required by the Planning Act 2008, a period of parliamentary scrutiny (the "relevant period") now begins for the airports national policy statement, ending by summer recess 2017.

I will be placing copies of all relevant documents in the Libraries of both Houses. Following consultation and parliamentary scrutiny, and assuming that in the light of these processes the decision is made to proceed, we expect to lay a final airports national policy statement before Parliament for debate and an expected vote in the House of Commons by winter 2017-18.

[HCWS447]

WORK AND PENSIONS

"Fuller Working Lives: A Partnership Approach"

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): Today, we are publishing "Fuller Working Lives: A Partnership Approach", a new employer-led strategy which outlines the demographic change facing the UK and the opportunities and challenges an ageing workforce present for employers, individuals, Government and for wider society.

We are living on average almost a decade longer than our grandparents. While this is good news, it also has implications for employers and the economy, as well as people's own personal financial security, health and wellbeing.

In 2010, one in four of the working age population was aged 50 and over; and this is projected to increase to one in three by 2022. By 2035, people aged 50 and over will comprise half of the UK adult population (source: ONS (2014) population estimates and 2014-based population projections). Fuller working lives are important for individuals, employers and the economy.

For individuals, analysis shows that by delaying retirement until 65 instead of 55, a male average earner could have £280,000 extra income and might increase his pension pot by 60%. By retiring at 63 instead of 55, a female average earner who took a 10-year career break, could have £180,000 extra income and might increase her pension pot by 50% (source: DWP modelling, “Fuller Working Lives Evidence Base 2017”). Moreover, being in appropriate work is good for an individual’s health, both physical and mental.

For employers, in order to meet future demand it will be increasingly important to recruit, retain and retrain older workers. Over the next five years to 2022, there will be just under 2 million more people aged 50 years and over and 300,000 fewer people aged 16-49 (source: ONS (2014) population estimates and 2014-based population projections). We particularly want to support older workers to remain in and return to the labour market; one in four men and one in three women reaching state pension age have not worked for five years or more.

For the economy, adding just one year to people’s working lives could add 1% to GDP per year; that would be equivalent to £18 billion in 2015, according to ONS data (2015).

Leading employers have worked with us to identify the steps needed to ensure the retention, retraining and recruitment of older workers. The new strategy sets out the case for action business to business, as well as the importance of fuller working lives for individuals and the key actions that Government are taking. It is underpinned by analysis of the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of individuals and employers which are integral to the achievement of the fuller working lives ambition. To support individuals aged 50 years and over to remain in and return to the labour market and tackle the barriers to doing so.

I will place a copy of this strategy document and supporting evidence base 2017 in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS448]

Petition

Thursday 2 February 2017

OBSERVATIONS

JUSTICE

Sentencing for death by dangerous driving

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the death of James Gilbey in a hit and run on a pelican crossing is appalling; further that the driver who killed James was racing another car at speeds in excess of 90mph in a 40mph residential zone; further that the impact (adjudged to be 80mph) was such that James landed 70m down the road and was killed instantly from receiving multiple injuries; further that it is often the manner in which an object is used that makes it a weapon; further that the driver, leaving James on the road, fled the scene, disposed of the vehicle and burnt his clothes; further that we believe that choosing to drive and behave in this way is a calculated act, that should bring charges of manslaughter and not causing death by dangerous driving; and further that there is an e-petition on this subject, titled "Death caused by racing should bring a charge of manslaughter not dangerous driving" at <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/164488>.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to change the law so that death caused by racing should bring a charge of manslaughter and not causing death by dangerous driving.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Claire Perry, *Official Report*, 25 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 408.]

[P002003]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah):

In December the Government issued a consultation on driving offences and penalties relating to causing death and serious injury. It proposed that the maximum penalty for the most serious offences should be life imprisonment.

Driving offences can have devastating consequences for victims and their loved ones. Sentencing in individual cases is always a matter for the courts, which are independent from Government.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) can and will charge a person with murder or manslaughter where the evidence supports that charge, where it is in the public interest to do so and there is a reasonable prospect of a conviction.

The consultation proposed that those most serious driving offences of causing death by dangerous driving and causing death by careless driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs should have a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, the same maximum penalty open to the courts as manslaughter. The consultation closed on 1 February and the Government will consider the responses received and publish their response within 3 months.

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