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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 1 March 2017

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

MIDDLE LEVEL BILL (*BY ORDER*)

Second Reading opposed and deferred until Wednesday 8 March (Standing Order No. 20).

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Taxation Powers

1. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on taxation powers. [908898]

11. **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on taxation powers. [908908]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): The Chief Secretary to the Treasury attended a Joint Exchequer Committee with the Scottish Government's Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Constitution in November. They discussed the ongoing work between both Governments to implement these and other powers. There are, of course, regular and ongoing discussions between officials from both Governments.

Edward Argar: Does my hon. Friend agree that these taxation powers, coupled with other powers that have been devolved to Holyrood, make it one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world? Does she also agree that, quite rightly, they make the Scottish Government accountable for their actions in respect of taxation, and that the Scottish Government are responsible for making Scotland the most highly taxed part of the United Kingdom?

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The new devolution settlement does indeed deliver one of the most powerful and accountable devolved Parliaments in the world, and the people of Scotland will look to their Government to use those tax powers wisely to make Scotland as competitive and attractive a place as possible in which to do business. We obviously want the Scottish Government to use those powers to

deliver that and it is for them to choose how they use them, but they do have to account for their use to the people of Scotland.

Simon Hoare: Does my hon. Friend share my confusion that the Scottish Government prefer the narrative of whinge, whine and waffle to using the powers that this Parliament has given them to prove their competence in running the country?

Jane Ellison: As I am sure many hon. Members also know, I am very aware from many of my conversations with businesses—particularly those thinking about their plans for the future, especially since the referendum last year—that they often see competitiveness through the prism of tax and that they want to know the Government are entirely focused on creating the conditions in which businesses can grow and thrive. I really think that all of us need to focus on pursuing our plans to make our respective countries very competitive. In Scotland, the Government have to understand that the decisions they take about using their powers are part of such a package for businesses.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Tories at Westminster are facing rebellion on their Back Benches on business rates. What advice are they taking from the Government in Scotland, who have listened to local businesses and put on a cap of 12.5% for businesses in the hospitality sector and particularly those in Aberdeen that have been hard hit by the oil price?

Jane Ellison: I think that is just an attempt to make a political bragging point. My right hon. Friends the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government have made it quite clear that they will have more to say about that. They are listening carefully to the concerns of particularly the smallest businesses and of those hardest hit by business rates in England.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Will the Minister explain to me how, simultaneously, the Scottish Government can, first, be not using the taxation powers they have, and secondly, be the highest taxed part of the country, particularly when neither of those statements is in fact true?

Jane Ellison: It is for the Scottish Government to account to the Scottish people for their plans. These points might be interesting ones to bring to Westminster and knock about in this Chamber, but real people are looking at the impact of those plans on their family income and the Scottish Government will have to account to them for those plans. It is far more than just a debating point.

13. [908910] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Scottish Government's decision to make Scotland the most highly taxed part of the United Kingdom will reduce the country's competitiveness and ultimately make Scotland a less attractive place in which to live, work or do business?

Jane Ellison: These are all very important points. It is for the Scottish Government to use the powers that have been devolved to them and to account to their people

for using them, but there is no doubt that people look at the competitiveness of tax regimes, whether personal or business, and that those regimes are important in the key decisions that people make about competitiveness and other things.

Leaving the EU: Trade

2. **Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of trade opportunities for Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [908899]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Following the EU referendum, Scotland Office Ministers have regularly met representatives of Scottish industry and business. What comes out clearly is the appetite to seize and make a success of the opportunities afforded to us by leaving the EU, forging a new role for ourselves in the world to negotiate our own trade agreements and be a champion for free trade.

Heidi Allen: I am a bit scared to ask my supplementary question because I think my Scottish National party colleagues have had three Weetabix this morning. My question is about exports, of which Scotland has made a fantastic success, particularly in food and drink. How confident or worried should we be if we come out of Europe that those markets will be damaged, and what can the Government do to support them?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight food and drink as Scotland's top manufacturing export, accounting for £8.9 billion in 2015. Leaving the EU offers us the opportunity to negotiate new trade deals across the globe and create even more opportunities for Scotland's world-renowned food and drink.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Agriculture and fisheries are key parts of the Scottish economy and Scotland's export sector. Powers for both are devolved to the Scottish Government. Under the Secretary of State's Government's plans, will all decisions on agriculture and fisheries be taken by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government after Brexit?

David Mundell: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have confirmed in the White Paper that all the powers that the Scottish Parliament currently exercises in relation to agriculture, fisheries and all other issues will continue. We wish to have a dialogue with the Scottish Government, the other devolved Administrations and stakeholders about what happens to powers that are currently held in Brussels and where they will rightly rest after the United Kingdom leaves the EU.

Angus Robertson: Anybody watching this will realise that the Secretary of State did not answer the question. During the Brexit referendum campaign, people were told that decisions currently taken in Brussels on agriculture and fisheries would revert to the Scottish Parliament. The Secretary of State has not given a clear answer to the question, which really matters to our rural industries, our rural economy and Scotland as a trading nation. Let me try the same question again, and I would be grateful if the Secretary of State answered it. Under his Government's plans, will all decisions on agriculture and fisheries be taken by the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government after Brexit—yes or no?

David Mundell: This Government's plan is to engage with the Scottish Government and with the other devolved Administrations to discuss those serious issues. It is not to go out and tell the people of Scotland that the devolved settlement is being undermined by Brexit, which will lead to the Scottish Parliament exercising more powers. I can give the right hon. Gentleman an absolute guarantee that, after the United Kingdom leaves the EU, the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Ministers will have more powers than they have today.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Before I ask a question, I take the opportunity to send my condolences to the family of my great comrade, Gerald Kaufman, a genuine parliamentarian.

On 12 October, the Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and said

"whatever support is put in place for businesses in the north of England will apply to businesses in Scotland."—[*Official Report*, 12 October 2016; Vol. 615, c.287.]

That was in relation to the deal struck with Nissan. Does he stand by that promise?

David Mundell: I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman's comments about Gerald Kaufman. He was a near neighbour of mine in the previous Parliament and I always found him to be the perfect gentleman.

I made it clear in previous answers that the Government's approach will be consistent across the United Kingdom.

Mr Anderson: While some businesses and workers are aware of that welcome reassurance, I have yet to meet any businesses in Scotland that know about the commitment to give them the same deal as was done with Nissan. Why has the Secretary of State not been more public about the commitment? Why is it the best kept secret in Scotland?

David Mundell: I have made it clear to the hon. Gentleman how the UK Government are approaching the Brexit negotiations and how we are fully engaged with businesses in Scotland to ensure that we understand their concerns. We can go forward on a basis that will ensure that Scotland and the whole United Kingdom get the best possible deal from the UK leaving the EU.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Scotland's international exports have increased by 41% since the Scottish National party Government came into office in 2007, which is a fantastic success story for Scotland. Will the Secretary of State therefore explain why the UK Government failed to negotiate any geographical indications for Scottish produce in the EU-Canada CETA trade deal?

David Mundell: I hope the hon. Lady's approach on the EU-CETA trade deal is more consistent than that of her parliamentary group. On the Monday of the week when the Canada deal was discussed, SNP Members voted in favour. By the Wednesday, they somehow found that they were against.

Scottish Government: Draft Budget

3. **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): What recent discussions he had with the Scottish Government on their draft budget for 2017-18. [908900]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):

As I have mentioned, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has regular engagement with the Scottish Government's Finance Minister. They discussed matters relating to the Scottish Government's budget for 2017-18 at a joint Exchequer committee in November, and at a Finance Ministers' quadrilateral in February.

Seema Kennedy: What does my hon. Friend believe will be the consequences of the Scottish Government using their new powers for the Scottish economy to make Scotland the most highly taxed part of the United Kingdom?

Jane Ellison: Colleagues are rightly focused on tax and competitiveness. The increased tax powers delivered through the Scotland Act 2016 mean that the Scottish Government have responsibility for raising more of what they spend. It is for them to decide how to use those tax powers to shape Scotland's economy, growth and jobs. I might not like their plans to make Scotland a higher-tax nation—it is up to them—but they have to explain those plans to the people they represent.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The publication of this year's draft Scottish budget had to be delayed because the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not make financial information available until the autumn statement. What impact will the move to the autumn Budget have on the Scottish Government's ability to plan effectively for their budget process?

Jane Ellison: There are many good reasons for moving to a single fiscal event in the autumn—allowing for longer-term planning is one of them. On the subject of planning for the long term and increasing certainty, I would add that taking the threat of a second referendum off the table is the single biggest thing that the SNP and the Scottish Government could do for certainty and confidence among the business community.

Leaving the EU: EU Nationals in Scotland

4. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU on the status of EU nationals living in Scotland after the UK leaves the EU. [908901]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell):

I have regular conversations with the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU on a number of issues. The UK Government have made it absolutely clear in their White Paper that securing the rights of EU citizens in the UK and of UK citizens in the EU is one of our top priorities in the Brexit negotiations.

Ian Murray: The Secretary of State's answer is not very reassuring given the speculation about a potential cut-off date for EU nationals later this month. The other place will vote on an amendment today that will secure the residency rights of EU nationals. If that is passed, will the Secretary of State urge his colleagues to end this disgraceful uncertainty on residency rights for EU nationals, who contribute so much to the Scottish and UK economies? If he does not, he will send out a

very strong message that he is willing to use the lives of EU nationals as a bargaining chip for a hard Tory Brexit.

David Mundell: I agree with one thing the hon. Gentleman says: EU citizens in Scotland, and indeed in the whole United Kingdom, make a significant contribution to civic life and the economy of our country. As the Prime Minister has repeatedly made clear, we want those people to stay. She has sent out a very clear message, and it is clearly set out in the White Paper. We do not believe that the Article 50 Bill is the place to set it out.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Shailesh Vara.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): I have No. 12, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has a very similar question and I rather assumed he wanted to come in.

12. [908909] **Mr Vara:** I will certainly bear it in mind that it is a similar question, Mr Speaker. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that the business community in Scotland shares a far more positive and optimistic outlook, rather than the forever-negative comments from the Scottish Government?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is on the importance of the rights of EU nationals. I am sure that that is what the hon. Gentleman meant.

David Mundell: I know that businesses across Scotland value the contribution that EU citizens make to their businesses, and I am clear with them that even when the UK leaves the EU, it will be important for EU citizens still to come to Scotland and play an important part in our economy.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): A recent report from the British Medical Association shows that 40% of European doctors might leave the UK after Brexit because of the Government's shameful inaction on giving a clear guarantee to EU nationals. Why will the UK Government not do the right thing and give a clear guarantee to EU nationals, who are a valued part of our society in Scotland, that they have the right to remain?

David Mundell: I am absolutely clear about the importance we place on the role of EU nationals in the economy and the health service, but I would take the hon. Lady's comments about encouraging doctors and other medical professionals to come to Scotland a lot more seriously if her Government had not decided to tax them more than any other part of the UK.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that as well as safeguarding the role of EU citizens in the UK after we leave the EU, it is vital that we safeguard Scots people who have gone to live in other parts of the EU?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is vital that we secure the position of UK citizens in the EU, many of whom are Scots, and it is perfectly

legitimate to take forward that issue in conjunction with securing the rights of EU citizens in Scotland and the rest of the UK. I am hopeful that that can be dealt with very early in the negotiations.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): It is clear that the Government are happy to play political football with these people's lives. It shows contempt for 12,000 people working in our health and social care service in Scotland and for 20,000 people working in the food industry, which the Secretary of State has just bragged is the most important part of Scottish industry. When will he stop treating these people this way and give them the guarantee they need to live a happy and secure life in Scotland?

David Mundell: I have made it absolutely clear, as has the Prime Minister, how much we value the contribution that EU nationals make in Scotland to both the economy and civic society. We want them to stay, but we also want UK nationals elsewhere in the EU to be able to stay where they are.

Joint Ministerial Committee

5. **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Joint Ministerial Committee. [908902]

10. **Mr Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Joint Ministerial Committee. [908907]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The Government are committed to getting the best deal for Scotland and the UK in the negotiations with the EU. The Joint Ministerial Committee on EU Negotiations was established to facilitate engagement between the UK Government and devolved Administrations and has had substantive and constructive discussions in monthly meetings since November.

Ben Howlett: At the last meeting of the JMC, the Prime Minister committed to an intensified engagement with the Scottish Government on their EU proposals. Can he update the House on that process?

David Mundell: When I appeared last week before the Scottish Parliament's Culture, Tourism, Europe and External Relations Committee, I was able to tell it that in the two weeks since the plenary meeting of the JMC, six substantive meetings had taken place between senior officials so that both Governments could discuss the proposals set out in the document, "Scotland's Place in Europe". We regard this as a serious contribution to the debate and continue to engage with it.

Mr Jenkin: May I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to the fact that the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has been taking a great interest in the inter-institutional relationships within the UK, that we produced a report in December on this subject, which I commend to him, and that the main thrust of the recommendations are not about structures and institutions but about natural adversaries sitting down together and developing relationships and bonds of trust and understanding?

David Mundell: Obviously, I very much take my hon. Friend's work seriously. Despite what often appears in the media, it is possible for the two Governments to engage in a constructive way. We are already in agreement on many issues in the Scottish Government's document.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is not just a matter of trying to keep the EU nationals who are currently in our health and social care service. The workforce is the biggest challenge that NHS Scotland faces, so will the Secretary of State support Scotland having the powers to attract EU nationals in future, not just keeping the ones who are here now?

David Mundell: I have said previously from this Dispatch Box that I do not support the devolution of immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament, but I do support arrangements that will ensure that the vital workers needed in depopulating areas, skilled areas and in areas that rely on seasonal workers can come to Scotland.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Earlier, the Secretary of State refused to confirm that Scottish fishing and Scottish agriculture would become the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament. When will his Department present to the Joint Ministerial Committee a list of powers that will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament after Brexit, or will he refuse to do so and simply follow instructions from No. 10?

David Mundell: What I want to do and what I have attempted to do is engage in a constructive discussion and dialogue with the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament about how we repatriate powers from Brussels. I do not try to make a serious and wrong political point that this is an attempt to destabilise the Scottish Parliament, because I know that when the process is complete, the Scottish Parliament will have more powers than it does today.

UK Single Market and Scotland's Economy

6. **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): What assessment he has made of the importance of the UK single market to Scotland's economy. [908903]

7. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What assessment he has made of the importance of the UK single market to Scotland's economy. [908904]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Sales from Scotland to the rest of the UK are worth nearly £50 billion, a figure that has increased by over 70% since 2002 and that is four times greater than the value of exports from Scotland to the EU. There is no doubt that the United Kingdom is the vital Union for Scotland's economy.

Dr Offord: Does the Secretary of State agree that we must not create barriers or do anything to impede the functioning of the UK domestic market as we leave the EU, given its vital importance to the economy of Scotland?

David Mundell: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I find it strange that those who make such a fuss about the EU single market seem to have a complete disregard for a market that is four times as large to Scotland's economy.

Maria Caulfield: Given that Scottish whisky is the largest net contributor to the UK's balance of trade and goods, is the Secretary of State encouraged by the fact that if we move from the single market to World Trade Organisation arrangements, Scottish whisky will have a zero tariff?

David Mundell: It is important to note that there is a zero tariff for Scotch whisky under WTO rules. As to our future relationship with the EU, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it absolutely clear that we want to negotiate a free trade agreement with the EU, which would be enormously to the benefit of the Scotch whisky industry.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): All this UK single market business is quite interesting, but is the Secretary of State trying to suggest that a Brexitised isolated UK, desperate for friends and any trading partners, would not trade with an independent Scotland?

David Mundell: What I am suggesting is that if an independent Scotland were to put up tariffs and barriers with its vital largest trading partner, which provides four times as much economic development as the EU, that would be a disastrous series of events.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): How is job creation in Scotland affecting the Scottish economy?

David Mundell: It is vital that both the UK and the Scottish Governments work together to maximise the number of jobs created, but it is clear that the one thing the Scottish Government could do to help job creation in Scotland most is take the suggestion of a divisive independence referendum off the table.

8. [908905] **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State previously told the Scottish Affairs Committee that he attends Cabinet Brexit meetings based on whether he thinks the agenda items are important to Scotland. Will he tell the House which Brexit policy areas he thinks are important to Scotland and which areas he thinks are not important?

David Mundell: I also made it clear to that Committee that it was not appropriate to give a running commentary on the Government's internal discussions on Brexit. What I am committed to do is delivering the best possible deal for Scotland in these Brexit negotiations.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908983] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 1 March.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing people in the UK, and across the world, a happy

St David's day. I am also sure that the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to our former colleague, Sir Gerald Kaufman, who died over the weekend. He was an outstanding parliamentarian and a committed MP who dedicated his life to the service of his constituents. As Father of the House, his wisdom and experience will be very much missed right across this House. I am sure that our thoughts are with his friends and family.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Andrew Bridgen: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks, and assure the many relatives and friends of our former colleague that they are very much in our thoughts and prayers at this difficult time.

Does my right hon. Friend believe that last week's historic by-election victory in Copeland was an endorsement of her Government's plans to maintain a strong economy, bring our society together and ensure that we make a huge success of leaving the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. First, I wish to congratulate my hon. Friend, the new Member for Copeland, and look forward to welcoming her to this House very shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) is absolutely right that last week's historic result in Copeland was an endorsement of our plans to keep the economy strong and to ensure that places such as Copeland share in the economic success after years of Labour neglect. It was also an endorsement of our plans to unite communities where Labour seeks to sow division and of offering strong, competent leadership in the face of Labour's chaos.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I join the Prime Minister in wishing everyone in Wales, and all Welsh people around the world, a very happy St David's day? May I also express the hope that, today, the workers at the Ford plant in Bridgend get the assurances that they need about their job security and their futures?

I echo the Prime Minister's tribute to Gerald Kaufman, who served in this House since 1970 and was the longest serving Member. He started in political life as an adviser to Harold Wilson in the 1960s. He was an iconic, irascible figure in the Labour party and in British politics. He was a champion for peace and justice in the middle east and around the world. Yesterday at his funeral, Mr Speaker, the rabbi who conducted the service conveyed your message on behalf of the House to his family, which was very much appreciated. Afterwards, I spoke to his family and to his great nephews and great nieces and asked them how they would describe Gerald, and they said that he was an "awesome uncle". We should remember Gerald as that, and convey our condolences to all his family.

Just after the last Budget, the then Work and Pensions Secretary resigned, accusing the Government of "balancing the books on the backs of the poor and vulnerable."

Last week, the Government sneaked out a decision to overrule a court decision to extend personal independence payments to people with severe mental health conditions. A Government who found £1 billion in inheritance tax cuts to benefit 26,000 families seem unable to find the

money to support 160,000 people with debilitating mental health conditions. Will the Prime Minister change her mind?

The Prime Minister: Let me be very clear about what is being proposed in relation to personal independence payments. This is not a policy change—[*Interruption.*] This is not a cut in the amount spent on disability benefits, and no one is going to see a reduction in their benefits from that previously awarded by the Department for Work and Pensions. What we are doing is restoring the original intention of the payment agreed by the coalition Government, and agreed by this Parliament after extensive consultation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Extensive consultation is an interesting idea, because the court made its decision last year, the Government did not consult the Social Security Advisory Committee and, at the last minute, sneaked out their decision.

The court ruled that the payments should be made because the people who were to benefit from them were suffering “overwhelming psychological distress”. Just a year ago, the then new Work and Pensions Secretary said:

“I can tell the House that we will not be going ahead with the changes to PIP that had been put forward.”—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 1268.]

The court has since made a ruling. The Prime Minister’s colleague, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), said:

“In my view, the courts are there for a reason. If they have come up with this ruling, which says that the criteria should be extended, then I believe we have a duty to honour that.”

Is she not right?

The Prime Minister: First, on the issue of these payments and those with mental health conditions, the personal independence payment is better for people with mental health conditions. The figures show that two thirds of people with mental health conditions who are claiming personal independence payments and in receipt of it are awarded the higher daily living rate allowance, compared with less than a quarter under the previous disability living allowance arrangements.

This is the second time that the right hon. Gentleman has suggested that somehow the change was sneaked out. It was in a written ministerial statement to Parliament. I might remind him that week after week he talks to me about the importance of Parliament; well, we accepted the importance of Parliament and made the statement to Parliament. He also referred to the Social Security Advisory Committee, and it can look at this matter. My right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary called the Chairman of the SSAC and spoke to him about the regulations on the day they were being introduced; he also called the Chairman of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions and spoke to him about the regulations that were being introduced; and he called both offices of the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, but there was no answer and they did not come back to him for four days.

Jeremy Corbyn: Calling—[*Interruption.*] Calling the Chairs of two Committees and making a written statement to the House does not add up to scrutiny, and as I

understand it no call was made to the office of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), the shadow Secretary of State.

The reality is that this is a shameful decision that will affect people with dementia, those suffering cognitive disorders due to a stroke, military veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder, and those with schizophrenia. Will the Prime Minister look at the effects of her decision to override what an independent court has decided, and think again?

The Prime Minister: The issues and conditions that the right hon. Gentleman raises are taken into account when decisions are made about personal independence payments. The court said that the regulations were unclear; that is why we are clarifying the regulations and ensuring that they respect and reflect the original intention that was agreed by this Parliament.

If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the support being given to people with disabilities, I say to him that this Government are spending more than ever in support for people with disability and health conditions, and we are spending more than ever on people with mental health conditions. What we are doing with personal independence payments is ensuring that those who are most in need get most support.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Government have overridden an independent court decision, and they should think long and hard about that. The Prime Minister’s hon. Friend, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), said this week that the Government have to

“make it very clear that physical and mental health has the same priority”.

In 2002, the Prime Minister made a speech to the Conservative party conference. I remember it very well; I was watching it on television. She described her party as the “nasty party” and said:

“Some Tories have tried to make political capital by demonising minorities”.

This week, her policy chair suggested that people with debilitating conditions were those who were

“taking pills at home, who suffer from anxiety”

and were not “really disabled”. Is that not proof that the “nasty party” is still around?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has rightly apologised for the comments that he made, and I hope that the whole House will accept his apology. The right hon. Gentleman asks me about parity between mental health conditions and physical conditions. It is this Conservative Government who introduced parity of esteem in dealing with mental health in the national health service. How many years were Labour in government and did nothing about it? Thirteen years!

Jeremy Corbyn: It was a Labour amendment to the Health and Social Care Bill that resulted in parity of esteem being put on the face of the Bill. I am surprised that the right hon. Lady has forgotten that; she could have taken this opportunity to thank the Labour party for putting it forward. The Prime Minister made a speech earlier this year supporting parity of esteem for mental health, and I am glad she did so. However,

40% of NHS mental health trusts are having their budgets cut, and there are 6,600 fewer mental health nurses and 160,000 people with severe mental health conditions who are about to lose out on support. Can she not recognise that parity of esteem means funding it properly and not overriding court decisions that would benefit people suffering from very difficult conditions? We should reach out to them, not deny them the support they need.

The Prime Minister: As I say, we are spending more than ever on mental health—£11.4 billion a year. More people each week are now receiving treatment in relation to mental health than previously. Is there more for us to do on mental health? Yes, there is. I have said that in this Chamber in answer to questions that I have received—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Well, do it!

The Prime Minister: The shadow Foreign Secretary shouts, “Well, do it” from her normal sedentary position—*[Interruption.]* We are doing it. That is why we are putting record amounts of money into mental health. That is why we are seeing more people being provided with mental health treatment every week under this Government. There is one thing that I know: if we are going to be able to provide that extra support for people with disabilities and health conditions and provide treatment for people with mental health conditions, we need a strong economy that enables us to pay for it. And the one thing we know about Labour is that they would bankrupt Britain.

Jeremy Corbyn: That is rich, coming from a Government who, by 2020, will have borrowed more and increased the national debt by the total borrowing of all Labour Governments.

The mental health charity Rethink has said:

“The Government has spoken forcefully about the importance of parity esteem between physical and mental health, yet when presented with the chance to make this a reality...it has passed on the opportunity”.

As a society, we are judged by how we treat the most vulnerable. The respected mental health charity Mind has said:

“This misguided legislation must be reversed”.

Will the Prime Minister look again at the decision of the court and its consequences, withdraw this nasty decision, accept the court’s judgment and support those who are going through a very difficult time in their lives? That is how we will all be judged.

The Prime Minister: The way we are dealing with disability benefits is to ensure that payments are going to those who are most vulnerable. What we are doing in relation to personal independence payments is ensuring that the agreement of this Parliament is being put into practice. The right hon. Gentleman talks about funding and he talks about borrowing. I understand that today—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot have a constant debate while the Prime Minister is answering the question. The question has been put and was heard, and the answer must be heard without a constant hubbub in the background.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about accepting the court’s decision and paying for that. When asked how Labour would pay for the increase if it was put in place, I understand that the Labour shadow Health Secretary said today, “Err, we’ve not outlined that yet.” That just sums up the Labour party and the Labour party leadership. After the result in Copeland last week, the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) summed up the by-election result by saying that it was an “incredible result” for the Labour party. I think that word describes the right hon. Gentleman’s leadership: incredible.

Q3. ^[908985] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): On Monday, I chaired a seminar at the Royal Society looking at the priorities for the science community as we start our Brexit negotiations, and a report of the meeting will be launched here in Parliament on 21 March. While I of course understand that the Prime Minister may be too busy to attend, will she meet me once the report is published so that I can present to her in person the collective concerns of the science community, particularly those around collaboration and people?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue, which he is right to raise. We want the UK to be the go-to place for innovators and investors across the world, and we want to secure the best possible outcomes for the UK research base as we leave the European Union. Indeed, one of the objectives that I set out for our negotiations with the European Union relates to science and research. We already are a leading destination for science and innovation, and we would welcome an agreement to continue to collaborate with our European partners. I am interested in what my hon. Friend has said, and I am sure that that report will be looked at carefully by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): We on the SNP Benches join the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour Party in extending our condolences to the family and friends of Sir Gerald Kaufman. We also extend our best wishes to the people of Wales on St David’s Day.

In Scottish questions just prior to PMQs today, Ministers were unable to answer basic questions about the Government’s plans for agriculture and for fisheries. Those are important industries for the rural economy and are devolved to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. With Brexit ending the role of Brussels in those areas, will all decisions about agriculture and fisheries be made at Holyrood—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman knows well that we are discussing with the devolved Administrations the whole question of the UK framework and devolution of issues as they come back from Brussels. The overriding aim for everything that we do when we make those decisions is to ensure that we do not damage the important single market of the United Kingdom, a market which I remind the right hon. Gentleman is more important to Scotland than the European Union is.

Angus Robertson: That is a very interesting answer because people in Scotland, including those working in the agriculture and fisheries sectors, were told during the Brexit referendum that farming and fisheries powers

would be exercised fully by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. Judging by the Prime Minister's answer, however, it seems that that will not be true. Will the Prime Minister confirm today—she has the opportunity—that it is her intention to ensure that UK Ministers will negotiate and regulate over large areas that impact on Scottish fisheries and agriculture post-Brexit?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman seems not to have understood this point, so I will repeat it. We are in the process of discussing with the devolved Administrations the whole question of which of the powers that currently reside in Brussels will be returned and will remain at a UK level for decisions and which powers will be further devolved to the devolved Administrations. That is the discussion that is taking place at the moment. He asks about the Brexit negotiations with the European Union, and it will be the UK Government that will be negotiating with the European Union, taking full account of the interests and concerns of the devolved Administrations and, indeed, of all the regions of England.

Q8. [908990] **Nigel Adams** (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that, when tickets to a teenage cancer charity gig by Ed Sheeran are being resold on the viagogo ticket website for more than £1,000, with none of that money going to the charity, and tickets to the hit musical "Hamilton" are being touted for upwards of £5,000 when viagogo knows only too well that resold tickets are invalid for entry, it is unfair and not indicative of a market that works for everyone? What will the Government do to ensure that genuine fans are not fleeced by ticket touts and rogues?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue, which I know he has been working on for some time. He is absolutely right to identify circumstances where websites are acting in that way and causing those problems for people who genuinely believe that they are able to buy tickets for what they wish to attend. I understand that he recently met my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and Culture to discuss the issue. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Consumer Rights Act 2015 introduced new rules on ticketing and a review of online ticket sales. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport will shortly respond to the independent report by Professor Michael Waterson on this issue, but as a Government we are looking at the general issue of where markets are not working in the interest of consumers.

Q2. [908984] **Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab): I add my condolences to those already expressed about the former Father of the House, and I welcome my new hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) to his place.

Young black men who use mental health services are more likely than other people to be subject to detention, extreme forms of medication and severe physical restraint, and, in extreme cases, this has led to death, including that of my constituent Seni Lewis. Too many black people with mental ill health are afraid to seek treatment from a service they fear will not treat them fairly. Will the Prime Minister meet me and some of the affected families to discuss the need for an inquiry into institutional racism in the mental health service?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to welcome the new hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) to this House.

It is precisely because of concern about how various people were being treated within our public services that last year I introduced a racial audit of the disparity of treatment within public services. As Home Secretary, I saw this when I looked at the way that people, particularly black people with mental health issues, were being dealt with by the police and in various forms of detention. That is exactly the sort of issue that we are looking at. I am very happy for the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) to write to me with the details of the particular issue that he set out.

Q9. [908991] **Jo Churchill** (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating my West Suffolk College, all its staff and, in particular, its principal, Nikos Savvas, on winning the prestigious teaching and learning initiative award for the whole country at last week's *Times Educational Supplement* further education awards by combining the teaching of maths, art, religion and science? I am sure the Prime Minister will agree that that initiative drives forward inquisitive minds and grows the skills that future generations will need to succeed.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating West Suffolk College on being given that award for best teaching and learning initiative for its MARS initiative. The college has put in place a really interesting initiative, and I congratulate all its staff. This award is a sign of the dedication of the staff and students at West Suffolk College. All colleges across the country should be aspiring to reach these standards, and she is absolutely right that we need to ensure that young people have not just a skillset but an inquiring mind that enables them, as they look forward to what may be different careers throughout their life, to embrace new skills and change.

Q4. [908986] **Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): My constituent Joanne Good's 16-year-old daughter, Megan, tragically died after drinking half a three-litre bottle of Frosty Jack's cider, which is 7.5% and, at under £4 a bottle, contains 22 vodka-shot equivalents. Does the Prime Minister accept that cheap, super-strength, white cider is a health hazard and should be banned or at the very least carry a much higher duty per unit?

The Prime Minister: First, I am sure that Members from across the whole House will want to join me in offering our deepest sympathies to the family of this 16-year-old constituent—former constituent—of the hon. Lady. She raises an important issue, which is why the Government recognise the harm associated with the problem consumption of alcohol. We have taken action through the duty system, so that high-strength ciders and beers are taxed more than equivalent lower-strength products. We have also, of course, taken action on the very cheap alcohol by banning sales below duty plus VAT. But another element is involved, too, which is making sure that young people are aware of the dangers and harms of alcohol misuse. Public Health England and the NHS have run campaigns offering advice and support to young people, and they also work with charities and in schools to help to raise that awareness. I think that is an important part of this.

Q11. [908993] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): We are rightly proud that young people can study at our colleges and universities regardless of race, creed or colour, yet this week Jewish students are being subjected to intimidation, fear and anti-Semitism as the result of the so-called Israeli apartheid week. What action can my right hon. Friend take to make sure that chancellors and principals ensure that anti-Semitism is not allowed to prosper on campuses?

The Prime Minister: First, I want to assure my hon. Friend that higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure that they provide a safe and inclusive environment for all students. We expect them to have robust policies and procedures in place to comply with the law, and to investigate and swiftly address hate crime, including any anti-Semitic incidents that are reported. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation has recently written to remind institutions of these expectations, and he has also urged them to follow the Government's lead in adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism.

Q5. [908987] **Roger Mullin** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): There is a flaw in the legislative reform order with which the Government are seeking to create private fund limited partnerships, which allows criminal-owned Scottish limited partnerships to convert easily to these new types of partnerships. Will the Prime Minister step in and delay the LRO until such time as the current Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy review on SLPs is completed?

The Prime Minister: We have taken important steps to tackle money laundering, terrorist financing and other economic crimes; I oversaw the establishment of the economic crime command in the National Crime Agency. On the question the hon. Gentleman raises on SLPs, I understand that BEIS consulted last year on further transparency requirements for SLPs and will be publishing proposals soon, and that my right hon. Friend the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Secretary is gathering evidence which may lead to further reform.

Q13. [908995] **Andrew Bingham** (High Peak) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the concerns about the new business rates. Although there is a welcome from many of the businesses in the High Peak that will be taken out of business rates, there is a concern among those who have seen an increase—in one case one of as much as 85%. Can she give me an assurance, and give those businesses an assurance, that we will do all we can for these people, who work incredibly hard to be the engine room of our economy, as a rise of this size may threaten their livelihoods?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend will know, business rates are based on property value and it has been seven years since property values were last looked at, so I think it is absolutely right that we update them. But of course, as I recognised last week, there are different impacts on different businesses, and it is important that we have already put significant sums into transitional support for businesses so that we help the companies that are facing increased bills. As I said in this House last week, I have asked my right hon. Friends the

Chancellor and the Communities and Local Government Secretary to make sure that the support that is provided is appropriate and is in place for the hardest cases. I would expect my right hon. Friend the Chancellor to say more about this next week in the Budget.

Q6. [908988] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): A recent National Audit Office report exposed massive Government overspend on new free school sites, and the Department for Education estimates that it will need to spend a further £2.5 billion on land for these schools. Schools throughout my constituency are reporting chronic levels of underfunding. Will the Prime Minister please review the plans for new free schools and provide existing schools with the investment they need?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to say to the hon. Lady that we have, of course, protected the core schools budget in real terms. Yes, we have had free schools—I understand that she raises a concern about them—but we have seen the programme of free schools and academies continue under this Government to ensure that we are creating more good school places throughout the country. That is what we want to do and that is what our policy will continue to do.

Q14. [908996] **Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I join the Prime Minister in wishing Wales a happy dydd Dewi Sant—St David's day. The Secretary of State for Wales has been working with colleagues across Government to send out to the world the message that Wales is one of the best places in the United Kingdom to live, work, visit and trade with. Does the Prime Minister agree that Welsh interests must remain at the heart of our United Kingdom? As we leave the European Union, the future of the UK Union has never been more important.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is absolutely right to raise the importance of Wales. My right hon. Friend the Wales Secretary is doing important work to remind the world that Wales is one of the best places in the UK to live, work and trade with. In the forthcoming negotiations we are committed to getting a deal that works for all parts of the UK, including Wales. The best way to achieve that is for the UK Government and the devolved Administrations to continue to work together. I am pleased to say that I am going to be hosting a St David's day reception in Downing Street tonight to celebrate everything that Wales has to offer. I once again wish all Members of this House dydd Gwyl Dewi hapus.

Q7. [908989] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): Congestion, journey times and connectivity between Bradford and Leeds are among the worst in the country. Will the Prime Minister support the campaign to ensure that Bradford is part of the High Speed 3 network? Will she commit to delivering the investments we so desperately need for our West Yorkshire powerhouse?

The Prime Minister: I apologise to the hon. Lady, but I missed the first part of her question. I think she was talking about investment in infrastructure in her area. *[Interruption.]* HS3, right. The Government have obviously already set out the commitments we have made on

infrastructure. As she will know, we believe infrastructure plays an important part in encouraging the growth of the economy and ensuring that we see increased productivity around the rest of the country. Over time, we will of course be looking at further projects that can do just that.

Q15. [908997] **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): When I was canvassing in Copeland recently, people there wanted to talk about the future of their local maternity unit; it was just like being at home in Banbury. Rather than politicise the NHS, would the Prime Minister agree to a review of maternity services, encouraging care that is not just safe but kind and close to home?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point about local maternity services. As I have said, I am looking forward to welcoming the new Member for Copeland to this House very shortly. During the recent campaign, she made it very clear that she did not want to see any downgrading of the West Cumberland hospital services. She also did something else. She put forward a powerful case for what my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) has just suggested: a review to tackle the recruitment issues that affect the maternity services up there. A professionally led review seems very sensible, and I know that the Health Minister is looking into it.

Q10. [908992] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): A 19-year-old constituent of mine faces being discharged by the Tees, Esk and Wear Valley mental health trust for a second time because the trust has neither the skills nor the cash to provide the support he needs. What is the Prime Minister's message to him?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry, but I obviously do not know the full details of the individual case raised by the hon. Gentleman. We are ensuring that more money is being—and will continue to be—put into mental health conditions over the year. I am sure that the Secretary of State for Health will look into that case, if the hon. Gentleman wants to write to him about it.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As a leader who wants to spread wealth and opportunity as widely as possible, will the Prime Minister ensure that we end the practice of developers buying freehold land on which they then sell new houses on a leasehold basis? Many first time buyers on Help to Buy feel that they are being ripped off by this practice and look to the Government for help.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for mentioning that issue, which he has raised with me previously. I know he is concerned about it and working on it. Our housing White Paper clearly sets out that developers should be building homes for people to live in. That means that we will act to promote fairness for the growing number of leaseholders, but we will consult on a range of measures to tackle unfair and unreasonable abuses of leasehold, as the Housing Minister has said. Other than in certain exceptional circumstances, I do not see why new homes should not be built and sold with the freehold interest at the point of sale.

Q12. [908994] **Sir Kevin Barron** (Rother Valley) (Lab): May I add my condolences to the family of Gerald Kaufman, who was one of my friends in this place?

I received an email yesterday from a local pharmacist who, since the Government announcement in October last year, has had to implement cost-cutting measures, including to staff and services. This week he received a notification of the payment for prescriptions dispensed in December last year, and has had a reduction of nearly £9,000, which represents an 18.8% cut—well beyond the 4% that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat)—the pharmacies Minister—spoke about in October. Will the Government commit to revisit community pharmacy funding as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: We all recognise the important service that pharmacies provide, which is why spending on them has actually risen in recent years. There has been an increase of more than 18% in the number of pharmacies over the past decade. The system needs to reform so that NHS resources are spent efficiently and effectively. Let us look at some of the figures: two fifths of pharmacies are within 10 minutes' walk of two or more other pharmacies; the average pharmacy receives roughly £220,000 a year in NHS funding; and most pharmacies receive the £25,000 establishment payment, regardless of size or quality. We looked at this concern when it was raised last summer, and made changes to ensure that greater support was available to pharmacies in particular areas.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): One of David Cameron's greatest legacies was his effort to fight human trafficking under the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Last year, this country looked after 800,000 children in Syria or the surrounding countries for the same investment as looking after 3,000 in this country. By doing that, we help to defeat human trafficking. Will the Prime Minister confirm that we will continue with that policy?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to David Cameron. I was pleased that he supported the Modern Slavery Act when I proposed introducing it. We are, indeed, committed to continuing our policy in this area. I have set up, and chair, a modern slavery taskforce at No. 10, bringing together various parties to ensure that we are doing what is necessary across Government to break the criminal gangs, deal with the perpetrators and provide the necessary support for victims.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I, on behalf of my hon. and right hon. Friends, join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in expressing condolences to the family of the late Father of the House? He will be greatly missed.

The Prime Minister cannot fail to have noticed the recent intervention in the Brexit debate by two former Prime Ministers; I am sure they were very helpful. I am sure that she will know what they and everybody else mean by "hard Brexit" and by "soft Brexit", but we are all now wondering what is meant by a "soft coup", when it might be triggered, and when, indeed, we will know whether it has been triggered. Perhaps the Prime Minister will elucidate on that since she has been so

helpful in many other ways. Will she take the opportunity today, however, to make it clear that, whatever former Prime Ministers or Members of the unelected upper House may say, the reality is that her plan to trigger article 50 by the end of March is now clearly on track?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. It is, indeed, my plan to trigger by the end of March, and when I refer to that, I refer, of course, to the triggering of article 50, rather than attempting to trigger any coup, soft or otherwise, that might take place. It is still our intention to do that. It is important; the article 50 Bill, of course, does respond to the judgment of the Supreme Court, but it also ensures that we are responding to the voice of the United Kingdom, when people voted to ensure that we do leave the European Union, and that is what we will do.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Mr Speaker, perhaps you, like many other hon. Members here today, took a shower this morning—[*Laughter.*] I am sure you were very careful to check whether the shower gel contained microbeads. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”]

Mr Speaker: Order. We must hear the thrust of this fascinating question. Mrs Pow, let’s hear it.

Rebecca Pow: Shower gel products containing microbeads can result in 100,000 microbeads or microplastics being washed down the drain every time we use them—into the water system, and then into the marine environment, damaging these precious habitats. Would the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the steps this Government are taking to introduce a ban on microbeads used in cosmetics and personal care products, with the consultation ending just a few days ago?

The Prime Minister: I think I should say for clarity to Members of this House that I am not in a position to know whether or not you took a shower this morning, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend has raised a very important point. It is completely unnecessary to add plastics to products like face washes and body scrub, where harmless alternatives

can be used. As she said at the end of her question, our consultation to ban microbeads in cosmetics and personal care products closed recently. We are aiming to change legislation by October 2017, and we also ask for evidence of what more can be done in future to prevent other sources of plastic from entering the marine environment, because we are committed to being the first generation ever to leave the environment in a better state than when it was inherited. I am sure that, together, we can all work to bring an end to these harmful plastics clogging up our oceans.

Mr Speaker: I think both Philip and Sally are very reassured by what the Prime Minister has just said.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Along the M4 corridor in south Wales, over 1,000 families woke up this morning deeply worried about potential job losses at Ford in Bridgend. Families in Ogmere and Bridgend are particularly frightened—frightened that Ford is not going to be able to bring new contracts into the factory, with the uncertainty of Brexit ahead. Can I have an assurance from the Prime Minister that she will arrange for her Ministers to meet Ford and Unite the union to see what can be done to support Ford to ensure continuity of engine production in the Bridgend plant?

The Prime Minister: Can I reassure the hon. Lady that our automotive sector is one of the most productive in the world? We want to see it going from strength to strength. That is why Ministers in this Government have been engaging with various companies within the automotive sector, including Ford and other companies. Ford is an important investor here; it has been established here for over 100 years. We now account for around a third of Ford’s global engine production, and Bridgend continues to be an important part of that. We have had, as I said, dialogue with Ford; we will continue to have a regular dialogue with Ford about the ways in which Government can help to make sure that this success continues.

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Trudy Lynne Harrison, for Copeland.

Points of Order

12.46 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): May I associate myself and Liberal Democrat colleagues with the tributes paid to Sir Gerald Kaufman and express our condolences to his family?

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. I am concerned that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and, indeed, the Prime Minister may have inadvertently misled the House in relation to claims that they have made about the changes to the personal independence payment. I have checked the Government's response to the PIP consultation dated 13 December 2012, sections 6.13 and 6.14 of which make it clear that the Government were going to award points to those whose mobility was impaired by their mental health. How can I set the record straight to make it clear that the policy change to restrict PIP is a wholly unacceptable policy change for which this Conservative Government are solely responsible?

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the warmth and courtesy of his remarks in respect of the late Sir Gerald Kaufman.

The right hon. Gentleman raises an important matter, but it is a matter of debate. I would say two things to him. First, as he will probably have noticed, this matter was treated of by the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and others yesterday, although that does not preclude further consideration of it today. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman is a wily old hand in this House, and he knows that by raising the matter in this way on the Floor of the House in front of Members on the Treasury Bench, he has found his own salvation. I cannot help but think that on this occasion he is more interested, as I often observe, in what he has to say to me than in anything I have to say to him.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you give guidance to the House? Is it not more appropriate that these matters are raised in departmental questions, and is it not a fact that no Liberal Democrat was present during Work and Pensions questions?

Mr Speaker: It is better for these matters to be raised in the relevant Question Time session. The hon. Gentleman is well seized of that age-old principle of campaigning, namely quantity, persistence and, above all, repetition. I think my short-term memory serves me well. His observation about the absence of members of a particular political party was made the other day, but he has opportunistically seized his chance to repeat it this afternoon. He has made his own point in his own inimitable way.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Gentleman—I am saving him up.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I thank you for responding to my point of order yesterday, which had the immediate effect of securing answers to overdue

parliamentary questions from the Department for Communities and Local Government? One question that was due for answer last Friday has still not been answered and you, Mr Speaker, may think that it is very exacting. It asked the Secretary of State when he intends to respond to the letter from the mayor of Christchurch. I cannot understand why we cannot get an answer to that question and I hope that this point of order will embarrass the Department into giving an immediate response.

Mr Speaker: As I advised the hon. Gentleman yesterday, it is the normal expectation that responses from Ministers to written parliamentary questions are both timely and substantive. Moreover, I suggested to the hon. Gentleman that there was a growing spectre of potential embarrassment for Ministers from the relevant Department, the Department for Communities and Local Government—namely, if they did not respond speedily to his question, he might feel inclined to raise points of order over and over and over again about the matter. That would be gravely embarrassing to Ministers and I was sure that they would not want that to happen.

Ministers will have heard, or will hear very soon, of the hon. Gentleman's perfectly reasonable question last week and of his point of order about it today and I am sure that they will not want the embarrassment of his coming back to the Floor and raising further points of order about the non-answer. The hon. Gentleman is starting to copy the tactic that has long been followed by the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) and that was followed regularly by the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton, the late Sir Gerald Kaufman, of raising in the form of either a further written question or a point of order the fact of a non-answer. That is gravely embarrassing and I feel sure that Ministers will not want it to continue for any length of time. I know the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope)—I have known him for 30 years—and he is a very persistent fellow.

Dr Offord: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I be the first to take the opportunity to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), who is from a part of the country I know well from when I lived in Cumbria?

I was fortunate, Mr Speaker, to be selected for the 90-minute debate this morning in Westminster Hall on Iran's influence in the middle east, but I was unfortunate in taking the Northern line from my Hendon constituency to the Houses of Parliament. The Northern line was suspended, meaning that I and many of my constituents were unable to get here. First, on that basis, may I ask whether a mechanism can be introduced so that if a Member is physically prevented from attending a debate or any other business of the House, someone else can take their place? Secondly, will you look favourably on having an Adjournment debate or another Westminster Hall debate on this issue before the festival of Nowruz on 21 March?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order and, first, thank him for his courteous tribute to the new Member for Copeland, which will be warmly received and appreciated by her and a great many other colleagues to boot.

Secondly, I am sure that the delay on the Northern line, which is not an uncommon phenomenon—a fact of which I am well aware, hailing from that part of the world myself—was not deliberately contrived to disadvantage the hon. Gentleman in pursuit of his Adjournment debate, but it is nevertheless a very considerable inconvenience.

Thirdly, I would say to him that hard cases make bad law and I am cautious about the idea—I hope that he will forgive me—that on the basis of his bad experience a new rule should suddenly be introduced. That is something that the Procedure Committee could consider and I would be advised by the House, but I would be reluctant to make any precipitate judgment in his favour on that point.

Fourthly and finally, seeing as the hon. Gentleman raises his concern with me, I would simply say that the track record shows that on the very rare occasions—two spring to mind, but I will not name the Members for obvious reasons—on which Members unavoidably missed their Adjournment debates, their applications for another such debate soon in substitution were met favourably. I have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said and recognise the importance and urgency of the matter. Perhaps we can leave it there for now.

Companies Documentation (Transgender Persons)

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

12.54 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable transgender persons to apply to the registrar of companies for England and Wales for documentation relating to their change of name to be treated as protected information under the Gender Recognition Act 2004; and for connected purposes.

May I, too, welcome my hon. Friend the new Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) and wish her every success in her tenure?

One of the privileges of being a Minister is having the opportunity to find out more about other people's lives and concerns. In July last year, I was pleased to be able to publish the Government's response to the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee's report on transgender equality. I am sure that the response did not satisfy all the Committee's demands, but I believe that it was another step to acknowledging that although we have the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and although the coalition Government published the world's first transgender action plan in 2011, there is more that could be done by the Government, among others, to address the remaining inequalities, unfairness, violence and discrimination faced by trans people.

I am sorry that I did not have the opportunity to steer the Government's continued response on these matters, but I know that my successor as Minister for Women and Equalities, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), and the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, my hon. Friend the excellent Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinéage), are continuing that important work.

We were aware that many loopholes remained, and that for every loophole a trans person can worry that something will inadvertently reveal their transition. In my experience, some trans people are quite comfortable telling their own stories. In fact, many trans people are doing inspirational advocacy work in our schools and across our society to break down barriers and to tackle stigma and discrimination about transgender issues. However, for some trans people, their transition and history are very personal and something that they want to choose to share, rather than being forced to do so by someone else. That is the situation that my Bill aims to address.

In September 2016, I received a letter from Alex, who wrote:

"I am the sole director of a company I set up some years back to manage a small property portfolio...When I changed my name and title the process to inform Companies House was actually very easy and my name was updated quickly...I noticed afterwards however, that this change of name and title was recorded in the company filings that are freely available for public inspection on the Companies House website. The document in question is a...Change of Particulars for Director form and clearly states my original name and title and subsequently my new name and title. This very obviously discloses my change of gender to anyone who happens to look at the filing history of my company, publically outing me without my consent. The main issue I take with this is that of safety. In future there will be many people I meet and interact with who will have no idea of my transgender status because I simply will not tell them. If someone later finds out, this could potentially lead to violence, which is a reality that you are already aware the trans community faces."

The potential for inadvertent disclosure comes about because of a conflict between section 22(4)(j) of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and section 1087(1)(k) of the Companies Act 2006. In her letter to me dated November 2016, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James)—the Minister responsible for small business, consumers and corporate responsibility—makes it clear that the companies registrar must make available to the public all information held on the public register unless he is specifically forbidden to do so by section 1087 of the Companies Act.

Section 22 of the Gender Recognition Act generally prohibits the publication of protected information held on a transgender person. However, section 22(4) details the circumstances under which it is not an offence to disclose protected information, which are if

"the disclosure is in accordance with any provision of, or made by virtue of, an enactment other than this section."

The Minister's letter states:

"The Government is satisfied that this applies to the disclosure of a director's former name as this is required to be placed on the public record by enactments in the Companies Act. In conclusion the data is not considered to be material excluded from public inspection by the Gender Recognition Act for the purposes of section 1087 of the Companies Act."

I do not disagree with this interpretation, but I think that this is an unintended loophole that needs to be closed. That is what my Bill would do.

Alex also told me:

"In 2004 the GRA came in to place with the clear main goal of protecting people who were at risk of being vulnerable, and it was a world-leading piece of legislation which frankly I'm proud to say came out of the UK. What is happening now with Companies House is an entirely accidental and unfortunate flaw in the way that the GRA 2004 and CA 2006 interact with each other. This flaw is entirely against the spirit of the GRA 2004, and I think that anyone would be hard pushed to argue against that...I'm currently able to protect myself when it comes to my credit profile, my tax profile at HMRC, the FCA register, Government Gateway. I just personally think it is the right thing to do to force Companies House to be held to the same standard."

The Bill would close the loophole by amending the 2004 Act in a way that would allow transgender persons to apply to Companies House to withhold from public inspection information about a director's former name and for that information to be treated as protected information under section 22 of the 2004 Act.

Hon. Members and people outside this House might ask why such a disclosure matters. I argue that, as a country, we have provided a legal mechanism for people to change their gender. In my experience, this is not a decision that anyone enters into lightly, and nor does it happen quickly. Again, in my experience, once that decision is made, transgender people want to be able to move on with their lives, to be treated with respect, and to live without the fear of being inadvertently outed or subject to violence.

I am afraid to say that violence and discrimination do still occur. Home Office figures show that, in England and Wales in 2015-16, there were 858 transgender hate crimes, a 41% increase from the previous year. Living in fear because of who you are is unacceptable in the modern United Kingdom. Can hon. Members imagine what it must like for someone to live in fear of violence because of official documents that they have filed in compliance with a particular Act of Parliament?

Amending the law can be, even for lawyers, a rather dry topic. As always, however, behind the law lie real lives. In spite of such a fear, I thank those who have contacted me, including Alex. For example, in the course of preparing for these proceedings, I was contacted by another trans person who said to me:

“My current position is that I am unable to start my business without running the very real risk of outing myself as a transgender woman. Presently I want to start a business to provide technology and web development services. However as I cannot yet transition I am in the unfortunate position where if I started a business now and then transitioned this information would be publicly available.”

I thank the accountant who told me that the advice that they were given was to resign as an existing director and register a new director’s appointment in the new name, although clearly details such as their date of birth would be the same; or to close the company down, have it struck off and then set up a new company, with all the administrative expenses entailed in that course of action.

Just to illustrate the point, let me quote another message that I received:

“I used to do IT contracting and did so via a limited company. I changed my name and title by deed poll in 2012 and also need to change my details at Companies House as a director of my company. I’ve now had gender reassignment surgery and will be applying for my gender recognition certificate as soon as I receive the necessary report from the Gender Identity Clinic. Whilst this will give me a lot of protection in law it will still be possible for people to find out my deadname by interrogating the records of my company at Companies House which could possibly put me at risk if someone found out those details for malicious purposes.”

This small legal change would send out a big signal. Altering the Gender Recognition Act would be a simple change to make, yet it would mean a great deal to the many trans people who suffer this problem in silence. The House has an opportunity, by giving me leave to bring in this Bill, to close this inadvertent loophole and to show that we will tackle unfairnesses wherever we find them. I hope that hon. Members will support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Nicky Morgan, Mrs Maria Miller, Ben Howlett, Mike Freer, Mrs Flick Drummond, Norman Lamb, Angela Crawley, Jess Phillips, Peter Kyle and Anna Turley present the Bill.

Nicky Morgan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March, and to be printed (Bill 149).

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The next item on the agenda is Second and Third Reading of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill. Standing Order No. 56 states that we shall not have a debate and that both Questions will be put forthwith. The Bill says that we will spend £254,713,662,000, but we will be agreeing to it without any debate or scrutiny. We have had the estimates days, but on those days we are not supposed to talk about the estimates and the budget lines provided. Will you give me some guidance, Mr Speaker? At what stage is this House able to scrutinise properly the departmental estimates that come before it, and is there any place in which we can do so adequately?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. Now is not the occasion for me to dilate on the procedure for such matters. I can tell her that her hon. Friend sitting immediately behind her, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), is very familiar with this procedure; he is certainly very familiar with his own discontent with it, upon which he briefly expatiated earlier in the week.

The way in which we treat of these matters is based on decisions that the House has made, and on the relationship between the House as a collective entity on the one hand, and our Committees on the other. If the hon. Lady is dissatisfied with the procedure—she has every right to be—that is a matter she should properly pursue through the appropriate channels in the House. For example, she could legitimately raise her concern with the Procedure Committee. My responsibility as the occupant of the Chair is to give effect to the procedure that is extant and has been approved by the House. If she wishes to change it, she can seek to do so, and if it were changed, I would operate the changed procedure. I think we had better leave it there for today.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 56), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Question put forthwith, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Bus Services Bill [Lords]

[Eighth Report of the Transport Committee, Bus Services Bill, HC 611, and the Government's response, HC 918.]

Second Reading

1.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Buses are England's most used form of public transport. With over 4.65 billion passenger journeys a year, they account for over 60% of all public transport trips. Buses support our economy, and they connect our communities to the workplace and vital public services, such as healthcare and education. They help to reduce congestion, and cleaner bus technologies also contribute significantly to improving air quality. The Government continue to regard this as a priority, and we are helping to drive it forward through investing in schemes such as the £30 million low emission bus scheme and the £7 million in the clean bus technology fund.

Across England, the bus industry is delivering excellent services for passengers. According to the most recent bus passenger survey by Transport Focus, 86% of passengers were satisfied with their services. Buses today are very different from the buses of 30 years ago: over 90% are accessible; many have free wi-fi, CCTV and USB charging points; and nine out of 10 have smart ticketing equipment. That is all thanks to significant private sector investment in the industry. I am particularly pleased that the five largest operators are continuing to invest in better services and that they will bring contactless payment to every bus outside London during the next five years. We have an industry of large and small firms, with large firms doing a good job and small firms doing a good job.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State congratulate our municipal transport company, Blackpool Transport, on not only introducing a new fleet of accessible buses, but making a profit last year of £1.38 million, £1 million of which was returned as a dividend to the council? Does not that make the case for extending rather than stifling municipal bus companies?

Chris Grayling: There is no doubt that in a small number of places, municipal bus companies have survived and that, in a place such as Blackpool, they play an important role in the local transport system. However, the Government do not believe that extending the provision of bus services to council after council is the right approach. It will stifle the private sector investment that has made such a significant difference. However, I pay tribute to Blackpool, which has also done excellent work on the tram system. Those of us who look back to the days of taking "The Ship" and the other historic trams up and down the seafront are slightly disappointed that that can now happen only at illumination time.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State has talked about the bus service 30 years ago. Of course, the biggest difference is that buses are now genuinely accessible. Does he agree that it is welcome to see provision for audio-visual information, which my constituents have regularly raised with me?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right. It is of paramount importance that we look after people with disabilities on our buses. An important part of that is ensuring that the right information is available and that we have the most accessible possible bus fleet. I am particularly pleased about the number of our newest buses that are manufactured in this country by some excellent firms.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm my understanding that the Bill is an enabling measure, and that there will be no compulsion on local authorities to change bus services when the arrangements between the council and the bus operators mean that a good service is already provided?

Chris Grayling: As I go on to talk about the Government's approach to the Bill, I absolutely assure my right hon. Friend that it is not about forcing anybody down a route to change. No local areas should countenance asking or pushing for change unless they have a clear plan for delivering improvements for passengers. The Bill is not and should not be simply about moving deckchairs around.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the Secretary of State. Bus passengers in many parts of England will think that he is living in a different world from them. In the 30 years since the deregulation of buses, fares have gone up and services have been withdrawn from poorer, often isolated communities. The picture that the Secretary of State paints would not be recognised in Greater Manchester. If the policy has been a success, would not bus patronage have increased? Will he confirm that, in those 30 years, it has gone down, down and down throughout England?

Chris Grayling: If people step on to a bus today, it is a wholly different experience from doing so in the past. We have a relatively new fleet and much better buses, and the purpose of the Bill is to ensure that we have the best possible services for passengers in future. I made the point to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) that any change that arises out of the Bill should happen only if it will benefit passengers. My expectation and belief is that mayoral authorities and others will pursue change only if it will obviously improve things.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State—change should be made if will improve benefits to passengers. That will certainly be the case for my constituents, as I am sure he will agree. Currently, one company serves the route in one direction, a different company serves the journey back and my constituents have to buy two tickets. Does he agree that that is nonsense?

Chris Grayling: Having parties on both sides for several years has led to partnership agreements and now the Bill will ensure that we have the best possible arrangements for passengers. It is indisputable that the investment from the private sector over a long period has led to the improvements that I described in the bus fleet.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I have a note from the chief executive of one of the main bus operators in South Dorset. Although, as private bus operator, he

welcomes the Bill, believing that working together is a good idea, he thinks that franchising is a slightly perverse route for a Conservative Government to follow. He states:

“If a franchise model was adopted, this could lead to a future layer of bureaucracy being introduced, and the local authority would be designing the bus network and setting prices.”

Will my right hon. Friend comment on that point?

Chris Grayling: The essence of the Bill is that franchising will be available to mayoral authorities automatically, but to deliver change, they will still have to demonstrate that it would benefit passengers. They will have a legal duty to do that, otherwise their decision will be subject to judicial review. Other authorities will have a duty to demonstrate to the Secretary of State that they will transform services to get permission to make a change. Ultimately, the Bill is about the passenger, who has to come first.

Bus networks in England’s six metropolitan areas are estimated to generate £2.5 billion of economic benefits every year. They are a lifeline for many rural communities, which I will talk about shortly.

Let me make it very clear: the Bill does not introduce wholesale re-regulation of the bus market. It is not a return to a pre-1986 world of local councils running bus services. Private operators will continue to dominate the bus market. They will still deliver services, whether through the current arrangements, improved partnerships or franchising. The aim of the Bill is to increase bus passenger numbers and to improve bus services by giving local authorities and operators new options. The Bill builds on existing partnership powers, making them more attractive and easier to use, and introduces new, enhanced partnership scheme powers, which will enable local authorities to work with bus operators and introduce a set of standards for bus services in their areas. They both operate in a deregulated environment where commercial operators can make decisions about where and when buses run.

The Bill also refreshes bus franchising powers, honours our devolution deal commitments and recognises the successes of the franchising model that was introduced for London in 1984. One of those successes is the easy access that London bus passengers have to information about their bus services, with over 500 smartphone apps available. The Bill will make it easier for passengers throughout England to get such information on timetables, fares and routes. That is particularly valuable in rural areas where bus services may be less frequent.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): In 1986, South Yorkshire had a renowned bus service. It was cheap, frequent and comprehensive and 268 million passenger journeys were made. Since deregulation, that figure has fallen by 62% to 102 million. I welcome the regulatory powers in the Bill, but if the Secretary of State does not extend them beyond mayoral combined authorities, what criteria will he use to judge other requests for franchising from areas that do not automatically get it under the Bill?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, there has to be a point of accountability. That is the mayor in a mayoral authority and the Secretary of State in other areas. Any change must deliver benefits to passengers. Since 1986,

this country is more prosperous, with broader car use. We want improved public transport, particularly in cities, where there is congestion and better bus services can make a real difference. We will offer those cities the opportunities to develop schemes that they believe will work for them locally, but we are clear that any change should deliver benefits to the public.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): On data, in London, Transport for London owns the data and was able to make them freely available to all the creative web developers out there who wanted to make interesting apps. The problem outside London is that the data are owned by private sector companies, which hoard them in the hope of monetising them in some way. The powers in the Bill to force those companies to make the data open source and stimulate innovation in the app market are important.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Lady is right. There is no reason in today’s world for such information to be anything but widely available to the public. We believe in open data and the best possible passenger information right across our transport system. The Bill will make a significant difference in that respect.

That point is important. The focus of every option in the Bill should be on what delivers for the passenger. I want and expect the industry and local authorities to use the powers in the Bill, whether on franchising or enhanced partnership, to work together to put the travelling public first.

I make it absolutely clear that the Bill in its current form is not the Act that the Government wish or intend to pass. A number of changes were made to the Bill and the proposals we tabled that we believe are not in the interests of passengers, and that we will seek the consent of the House to reverse. The changes are also not in the spirit of the devolution deals we have reached. After I have given way a couple more times, I will describe what the Government intend each of the main parts of the Bill to achieve.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I remember you, Mr Speaker, warning me that making remarks about bus companies is one of the most dangerous things any MP can ever do. Nevertheless, like my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), I have had representations from my local bus company, Bluestar, which welcomes the provisions of the Bill in so far as they enhance partnership schemes, but which worries about the potential of franchising arrangements to introduce rigidity into the system and lessen the circumstances in which an enterprising bus company will introduce, for example, new routes at its own risk, unlike a cautious local authority that would be unprepared to take that risk. Will the Secretary of State comment on that?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. I make it clear again that, while we are extending the kind of franchising powers we see in London to other big cities and mayoral areas, it is not the Government’s intention to offer automatic franchising powers to other areas. Other areas that want to make franchising proposals will have to demonstrate clearly that they can provide an improved service for passengers. When making those decisions, we should bear in mind the flexibility and rapid innovation he describes.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will be aware, the Government signed a devolution deal with Cornwall in 2015 to give Cornwall Council bus franchising powers. Does he agree that, in a county that has historically suffered from poor public transport, that will enable more buses to be on the road and more routes, and make Cornish communities more resilient and connected?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right, but the interesting thing about Cornwall is that it is proceeding without seeking to use those powers, precisely because it has forged a better and stronger partnership with the local bus companies, which are already enhancing those services. That is my point. We are not seeking particular structures in particular places. We are seeking to ensure that we provide the best possible services for passengers around the country. Cornwall is already doing a very good job of that.

John Pugh (Southport) (LD) *rose*—

Chris Grayling: I will give way one more time and then make a good deal of progress, because other hon. Members wish to speak.

John Pugh: The Bill will do all sorts of good things, but it conspicuously fails to do anything for young people's travel or mandate local authorities to consider it. Why not?

Chris Grayling: It is somewhat ironic that the hon. Gentleman, whose party has always argued for localism, argues for centralisation of something that I believe should be a local decision. That is a matter for local decision making and local priorities. I have no doubt that Southport Council will take wise decisions about what is best for that town, as will others around the country.

As I said, the franchising powers are not entirely new—they have been available in London for many years—but are being refreshed. Franchising enables local authorities to specify the services that should be provided to local communities, with bus companies competing for contracts to provide those services. Local authorities that implement franchising will have more influence on where and when services run, but they will remain commercial operations, with the private sector providing those services.

That is what happens in London. The deregulation of the London bus market took place in the 1980s, but took a path different from the market outside London. Competitive tendering in London was introduced in 1985, and privatisation of the bus companies took place in the mid-1990s. That has evolved into a network with almost 2.3 billion passenger journeys a year. Those powers are being extended to other Mayors in other parts of the country, to give them the opportunity to operate in the same way as London. The Bill therefore provides for the Government's intention for all combined authorities with elected Mayors to have automatic access to franchising powers.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to the Secretary of State. He praises the London model. Is he therefore saying that the model and experiment inflicted on the rest of the country has, as Labour Members believe, been a total disaster? Is he saying that deregulation as introduced in 1985 was, in hindsight, a major mistake?

Chris Grayling: I do not believe it was a major mistake, because we have seen substantial investment from the private sector that would not otherwise have happened. The interesting test for the right hon. Gentleman if he is successful in his mayoral bid in Greater Manchester—I say "if" because he has issues to deal with, such as the reputation of his party leader and the strength of other candidates—is whether he manages to use those powers to deliver the better bus services for which he argues. I will watch with interest if he is successful.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, but the Secretary of State is on a very thin point when he justifies what has happened over the past 31 years with investment in new buses. Does he realise that that investment has come from the extreme exploitation of bus passengers, particularly in metropolitan areas, where bus companies exploiting monopoly positions have been able to get a rate of return on capital that is much higher than they would get from real competition, and much higher than companies get in the franchised London area?

Chris Grayling: In a sense, the hon. Gentleman argues against himself. He complains about competition in those areas, but at the same time says that bus companies have been able to exploit monopoly positions. That is inconsistent. We will see whether the next Mayor of Manchester manages to demonstrate that he or she can do a better job than the private sector. That is the test. Let us see whether they can deliver that. If the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) is successful in his campaign, we will watch with interest.

This is not just about mayoral authorities but about authorities elsewhere. I want to be clear that, while we are open to plans from other authorities to take franchising powers, we will give them only if they can demonstrate that they can do a better job than the current one. A compelling case needs to be made before any other authority receives consent. The key point is that we have the point of accountability with the Mayor, who will have a legal duty to demonstrate an enhanced service, or a point of accountability in the Government, who likewise will judge whether a proposal will deliver that enhanced service.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): One of the great successes in London was the introduction of smartcard ticketing, which increased the number of passengers on public transport. Will our excellent Conservative candidate for the West of England Mayor, Tim Bowles, be able to introduce smartcard ticketing using the Bill?

Chris Grayling: Smartcard ticketing is important, and the Bill should give the powers and flexibility to introduce it. I want not smartcard ticketing that links simply to one mode of transport, but integrated ticketing on a common platform, so people do not have to have a different card for every city. One of the good things we see is bus companies almost entirely using ITSO technology. The same technology is now used for smartcards on most of our railways, so we have the potential for interoperability and to make our transport system properly integrated.

Ninety per cent. of buses operating local services in England are fitted with smart ticketing. Major operators have committed to introducing contactless payment on all their buses by 2022, but the vast majority of bus

fares are still payed in cash. Some operators even require exactly the right change. In response to my hon. Friend's point, we are updating in the Bill the existing powers to establish multi-operator ticketing schemes to recognise that latest technology. The Bill will allow a local authority to require all operators within its area to sell and accept a particular multi-operator smartcard. Under the powers, local authorities will not be able to set the price of the products—they cannot fix the fares, but will be able to determine the technology, which is important in ensuring that we get integration locally.

That might be enough to improve services for passengers in some areas, but if not, the Bill offers further options. For example, new enhanced partnership schemes enable greater integration of ticketing. They allow authorities and operators not only to agree the price of multi-operator tickets, but to set common ticket zones or concessions and to join other modes, with their agreement, to offer an integrated ticket.

I will pick up briefly on the open data point made by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). I want to make it simpler for passengers to plan their journey and to know when their bus will arrive and how much it will cost. She is absolutely right that there is enormous variability across England, and it is essential that that changes. Where the service is good, passengers have access to real-time information, but where it is not good, they do not, and it is important that the former becomes universal. The open data provisions in the Bill are designed to allow public transport app providers, such as Citymapper and Traveline, among others, to develop a new generation of products that will do precisely that.

The Bill will also introduce new arrangements for local authorities and bus operators to work together in partnership. Partnerships between bus operators and local authorities appear to be working well in some areas and passengers are happy. Liverpool, for example, the city of origin of the right hon. Member for Leigh, the Labour mayoral candidate in Manchester—an unusual achievement, if I might say so—has developed strong partnerships with the private sector. It might be something that the next Mayor of Manchester, Conservative Councillor—[*Interruption*]—Sean Anstee, will decide to introduce when he beats the right hon. Gentleman to the post. [HON. MEMBERS: “He didn't know his name!”] The note is about something completely different.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Now that the Secretary of State has found out the name of the Conservative mayoral candidate for Greater Manchester, and given that the Labour candidate has said what his policies are, can he name one policy on transport from the Conservative candidate in Greater Manchester?

Chris Grayling: The note is actually about my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

I will tell the House what my colleague in Manchester will do. He will deliver an efficient system, end some of the failures of Labour administrations of Greater Manchester and build on the excellent work done by Conservatives in councils such as Trafford. We will work together to deliver improvements on the Northern rail franchise that will benefit Greater Manchester and the rest of the north and we will discuss ways to improve further the Metrolink, in which the Government

have invested. I am proud of the work the Government are doing in Greater Manchester. The Ordsall Chord, the construction of which, funded by the Government, has already begun, will deliver trains between Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Victoria for the first time, creating a wholly different experience from the days when I commuted into Manchester city centre by bus from the other side of Salford.

Kate Green: I had not wanted to divert the House from buses to trains, but happily the Secretary of State has already done it. He is right that the Ordsall Chord is incredibly important for transport links in Greater Manchester. Will he confirm that the Government will also ensure investment in platforms 15 and 16 at Piccadilly station, because without it the investment in the Ordsall Chord will be wasted?

Chris Grayling: I am committed to ensuring that we enhance Manchester suburban rail networks and have the capacity we need to deliver it. Going back to buses, I remember what the buses in Manchester were like back in the early 1980s. I used to commute from Worsley into the centre of Manchester on a bus through Salford, and believe me the quality of bus today is better than it was then.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): In reflecting upon regional mayors, will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the policy focus from Andy Street, the West Midlands Mayor, on east-to-west connectivity across rail and bus networks? Is this not in the sharp contrast to Sion Simon, the Labour Mayor—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have two problems: they cannot both be Mayor—they are both candidates—and I do not want us to get into electioneering.

Mike Kane: Who is the Lib Dem candidate?

Chris Grayling: I suspect that none of us knows the name of any Lib Dem mayoral candidate in any part of the country. That certainly unites us today. On Andy Street and Birmingham, I would say that Birmingham is a great city that would really benefit from the wisdom and expertise of an experienced business leader, rather than a failed Labour MP.

Richard Drax: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way to me one more time, and I hope he will forgive me for butting in on his eloquent address, but I have to go to a Committee in 10 minutes. My bus operator is concerned that, if in the franchise modelling the revenue is reduced, there is a risk that the shortfall will be made up from other means that will affect the local taxpayer and business rates payer.

Chris Grayling: This is the essential point. We have to ensure both public and private funding for buses. Those who seek to make a change need to understand the impact and be certain that they will bring improvements to passengers. There is sometimes a dogma and ideology that assumes that greater state control means a better service, but often a lack of private sector investment means nothing happens at all—so it is the other way around.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I wonder whether the Secretary of State is as familiar with the bus services in Newcastle as he is with those in other parts of the country. In Newcastle in the '80s, we had a bus service where someone could travel across the region, on Nexus, and use the metro and the buses on one ticket using a transfer. He says that it is not likely that the state will be as innovative as the private sector. Will he acknowledge that in Newcastle we have been innovative, and hope to be again when we have proper control of our buses?

Chris Grayling: We have never argued, and I do not seek to argue, that the state has no role to play. Indeed, one of my Department's priorities is to drive forward with smart ticketing across the country on our rail networks in a way that integrates with our bus networks, given the widespread use of the ITSO system on our buses. I do not disagree with the hon. Lady about the desirability of integration, although we might differ over the role of the private sector, which I think adds value that the public sector cannot add.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is interesting to hear colleagues representing metropolitan areas talk about the hundreds of routes they have available. Will the Secretary of State comment on the effect of the Bill in rural areas where there are no routes? I welcome the flexibility and focus on community transport it will bring, but will he say how it might lead to a greater provision of bus services in rural areas?

Chris Grayling: I was about to come to that. The essence of the Bill is partnership. In the public transport arena, partnership between the state and private sector is really important. Through the provision of greater flexibility, the Bill will allow for enhanced partnerships that take forward existing partnership arrangements. In a rural area—where it is not always about building bus lanes, for example, but about other ways of improving services—the Bill will give local authorities greater flexibility to work with a private operator in a new and enhanced partnership that delivers improvements without some of the straitjackets in the previous arrangements. And of course we will continue to fund community transport, which plays an important role in many parts of the country, particularly rural areas. The Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who will speak later, plays an active role in making sure we do the right thing by community transport.

I will wrap up now to give others time to speak. I want to make clear what the Government do not want the Bill to do. As I said, this is not the Bill the Government originally introduced or the Bill we intend to deliver on to the statute book, subject to the consent of the House. The amendments in the other place on opening up the automatic access to franchising powers to all local authorities would reduce certainty in the bus market and reduce investment and the attractiveness of bus services being offered. It would not be good news for bus passengers and certainly not for bus manufacturers and the people who work in those factories right across the UK, from Ballymena to Stirling and Yorkshire. We will therefore bring forward an amendment to reinstate the two-step process for non-mayoral combined authorities wishing to access franchising powers.

We shall also seek to reinstate the ban on local authorities setting up new municipal bus companies. My view is that local authorities have other priorities today, and this is about partnership between the private sector and the public sector. That is the big difference between the Government and the Opposition. They do not want the private sector investment that comes in and delivers better and newer buses, providing jobs in Ballymena. They want to go back to the days of the past, but we are not going there as well.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Chris Grayling: No, I am going to conclude, I am afraid. I have given way extensively already.

The Government strongly believe that striking a balance between local authority influence and the role that private sector bus operators can play will help to ensure that both are incentivised to deliver the best services for passengers. We are not going back to the 1970s world of local authority-planned and delivered bus services. That was not a golden era, but one of indifferent services that cost the taxpayer. As far as possible, we want the commissioning and provision of bus services to be kept separate, and to ensure that we retain the strengths of the private sector.

We will therefore seek to return this Bill to what was tabled in the first place. We welcome and accept the thoughts of the other place on some amendments—on accessibility, for example—but not the broad principles of change that were written in the House of Lords.

Lilian Greenwood *rose*—

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con) *rose*—

Chris Grayling: I will give way one last time to both sides of the House, but then finish.

Lilian Greenwood: I shall take up that opportunity. I was seeking to understand the Secretary of State's approach to municipal bus operators. If we look at the UK bus awards, we find that they have been won by a municipal bus operator in four out of the last five years. I do not believe that municipals are the answer to everything, and I certainly would not expect every local authority to want to set one up. Why will the right hon. Gentleman not let local authorities decide what is best for them?

Chris Grayling: That is the point of difference between us. We do not want to go back to the situation in which every Labour council is trying to set up its own bus company. We think that will absorb public sector capital that could be more wisely used elsewhere, take up essential time that should be devoted to other services and not deliver a good deal for passengers.

Richard Fuller: I do not want my right hon. Friend to look backwards; I want him to look forwards in this Bill, particularly with respect to the provisions on accessibility, which are most welcome. Could he ask his excellent ministerial colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who will be winding up the debate later—I know that my right hon. Friend is wrapping up his contribution now—to

respond on the issue of the sense of timing for when the regulations will require operators to provide the bus services? If that could be clarified to a certain extent today, it would be very helpful.

Chris Grayling: The simple answer is that once the Bill is passed, we shall seek to move ahead as quickly as possible. It cannot be done overnight. We cannot simply wave a wand and bring in new systems immediately. As the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman rightly said, shortly.

The Bill seeks to do one thing; our goal is to do one thing; my Department's work is all about one thing—to improve services for passengers. The Bill offers a balanced set of tools for local authorities and operators to use to make bus services even better than they are today. The Bill as originally drafted—I stress that proviso—provides an opportunity to make a real difference to passengers in all parts of the country. Through franchising and enhanced partnerships, this Bill provides councils with new ways to co-operate with bus operators to improve journeys for passengers. Open data provisions will allow passengers to plan their journeys better, while on-board information will help all passengers to get where they need to be and will reinforce the message of accessibility that is so important to all Members. Together, all these measures will put passengers at the heart of improvements to bus services. That is the simple and only goal of this Bill, which I commend to the House.

1.43 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I begin by placing on the record my relief that the Bus Services Bill is finally having its day in the House of Commons. We have been waiting for this piece of legislation for some time—and you know what happens, Mr Deputy Speaker, you wait an age for a Bill and then another one comes along in a minute, namely the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill.

I would like to thank all those involved in the passage of this Bill so far—the noble Lords on both the Government and Opposition Benches, members of staff and Clerks of the House, as well as my Labour colleagues, of course, both Front and Back Benchers, who have campaigned relentlessly for better bus services and have paved the way for the Government's change in policy and this Bill.

The original Bus Services Bill has been expertly scrutinised and amended, leaving us with a much improved piece of legislation. Labour supports the Bus Services Bill, and we welcome the changes made in the Lords, which we hope to retain as the Bill goes forward.

Buses are an integral part of the UK's economy and social life. Sometimes, a disproportionate amount of attention is paid to our railways and to aviation, but it is buses that play by far the most important public transport role for the greatest number of people. This is clear when looking at the number of passenger journeys alone. For example, there were 1.7 billion passenger journeys on our railways last year, a figure dwarfed by the 5.2 billion passenger journeys made by bus. Whether people are travelling to work or school, visiting family or attending a hospital appointment, it is more likely that they will do so by bus than by any other form of public transport. Buses provide a vital service to people

in all areas of the country, supporting local economies, tackling congestion, combating social exclusion, and lessening environmental and climate change impacts.

This is why we want to see local authorities empowered and enabled to support thriving bus services, and to reverse the long-term decline of bus services that was brought about by the disastrous deregulation of bus services in England outside London by the Conservative Government in 1986. This Bill is an acknowledgment that the deregulation of bus services has not worked.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I apologise to my hon. Friend for being late for the debate. Members will know that I have other duties on a Wednesday. Does he agree that the Bill and its related secondary legislation and guidance should enable a simple and straightforward process for metro mayors to introduce bus franchising in their area if that is what they and their combined authorities wish to do?

Andy McDonald: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. If this is to mean anything, making this happen in reality must be a smooth and quick process rather than a long and protracted one.

The rationale behind deregulation was that turning services over to the market would give the customer the final say; companies would compete and, as a consequence, would better cater their services to passengers. In theory, it is a competitive market, but in reality most bus services are provided by five large companies that avoid competing against each other. Since deregulation, bus use in metropolitan areas has decreased by a half and in non-metropolitan areas by a fifth. Meanwhile, in London, where buses were not deregulated, bus journeys have increased by 227%, mileage has increased by 74% and London journeys now outnumber bus journeys in the rest of England, while fare increases have been lower than in the city regions.

John Pugh: In London, a lot more schoolchildren use buses. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that more could be done in the context of this Bill to encourage youth to use buses?

Andy McDonald: I would always want to see our young people encouraged to use our bus services. I was somewhat disappointed when I heard what the Secretary of State said about young people and their access to buses. He might want to reflect on that as the Bill proceeds.

Gordon Marsden: As my hon. Friend will know, the background behind the inability of local authorities to subsidise travel schemes for young people is the huge cuts to local authority funding over the whole period of this Government and the previous one. Is it not scandalous that this Government have brought nothing forward in any shape or form to permit major improvements, particularly for young people, students and apprentices, in this area?

Andy McDonald: Indeed. I could not agree more. One of the critical issues facing our young people today is getting from A to B—to get to their further education colleges or to go after job opportunities, especially when they have to work with the Department for Work and Pensions in trying to find work and are then

[*Andy McDonald*]

penalised if they do not get there. It is critical to have a properly integrated transport system across the country so that young people can benefit from it.

Andy Burnham: If I am successful, I would be looking to give young people in Greater Manchester, particularly 16 to 18-year-olds, concessionary or free bus travel. In my view, that could be a replacement for the education maintenance allowance, which was so wrongly scrapped by the Conservatives. Does my hon. Friend believe that that policy could be worth looking at as a Labour policy for the next general election, using the powers granted by this Bill?

Andy McDonald: I wholeheartedly agree with my right hon. Friend. If that initiative, which tries to redress the imbalance that has been visited on our young people, is to be put in place in areas such as Manchester, I am convinced that it will completely appeal to people and that it will be the right measure to address the deficit that he so accurately described.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Has the hon. Gentleman costed Labour's new policy of giving free concessionary travel to 16 and 17-year-olds?

Andy McDonald: Suggesting that we will not extend assistance to 16 to 18-year-olds says more about the hon. Gentleman's attitude towards young people than it does about Opposition Members.

Under the current system, bus companies determine their routes and provision of services on a commercial basis, which means that commercially unprofitable but socially valuable services are left for local authorities to support. Since 2010, more than 2,400 routes have been downgraded or withdrawn. A combination of Government cuts and commercial operators deciding provision on a commercial basis means that individuals or communities become isolated, cut off from employment, education, healthcare, and friends and family.

Mr Betts: The Secretary of State derided what was happening before deregulation when, in fact, bus services were affordable and available. My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Under the current arrangements, we often see bus companies over-competing on the main routes, but providing no services at all to the wider-spread communities. With regulation, we can use the same resources and the same number of buses to provide a better service to those currently disenfranchised communities.

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes an entirely proper point. That problem is repeated throughout this country. People on our outlying estates do not even have access to bus services, because those services are run on narrow channels. Operators exploit those narrow routes for the singular purpose of maximising commercial profit, and they do not give a hang about the socially important things such as ensuring that people are connected in their communities.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Let me disabuse the hon. Gentleman. On this variety of choice and the duplication and triplication of routes to which he refers,

he can come to Dorset, Somerset or anywhere in the south-west and he will not find such issues. That is a metropolitan problem from which we would love to suffer.

Andy McDonald: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the fact that there are vast swathes of towns and cities that are not served by a comprehensive bus network. They are left isolated for considerable lengths of time. Some inner-urban areas have no services whatsoever on a Sunday. That is the reality of the bus services in this country at the moment.

I am delighted that we have an opportunity to put buses front and centre of the national conversation about transport. This Bill is to be welcomed, as is the historic U-turn of the Conservative party towards re-regulation of our bus services, which is something that Labour has consistently fought for.

Although this Bill appears to be an acknowledgment by the Government of the failure of the deregulation of buses, the Bill as originally drafted did not go as far as we would have wished in remedying the underlying problems in the current model. In its current form, the Bill gives local authorities a number of options to improve bus services, allowing authorities to work in partnership with private operators, to plan and run their own network of bus services, or, if they wish, to keep things as they are. The recognition that local authorities can best judge what services they require and should be allowed to select the model that best meets their particular needs is welcome, but, if changes made in the other place are reversed, the freedom to deliver the best services will be taken away.

Powers to re-regulate local bus services should be available to all areas that want them, not just to combined authorities with an elected mayor. Not all areas want a combined authority, and the Government do not intend that every area of the country should be covered by a combined authority. That does not mean that the Government should prevent those non-combined authority areas from improving bus services solely on the basis that they are not combined authorities.

Chi Onwurah: The point that my hon. Friend makes is particularly appreciated in Newcastle and Tyne and Wear where we do not yet have a combined authority and where we do not seek to have a mayor, but where we have long sought to have better control of our bus services. Our bus services are critical in Newcastle, as they are how we get to work. I have received so many complaints and concerns about the bus services. Will he urge the Secretary of State to ensure that Newcastle and Tyne and Wear can finally control their own services?

Andy McDonald: I have no hesitation whatsoever in urging the Secretary of State to do exactly that. Newcastle has a proud history of focusing on trying to deliver the best possible services for its people. To be prevented and excluded simply because it does not fit the devolution model currently on offer is basically to deny localism to huge swathes of our country, which cannot be the intention of any sensible Government.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Has the hon. Gentleman made an assessment of which local authorities would want to take up these opportunities?

In 2000, the Labour Government introduced a contract scheme, which they described as similar to franchising, yet not a single authority has used it. Where is the evidence that more authorities want these powers?

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is referring to the quality partnership schemes that Labour brought in. Interestingly, what he says makes my point. It is up to local authorities to make the decision for themselves. It is not a question of people on the Labour Benches telling local authorities what they should or should not do; local authorities should have those options made available to them. From the way this Bill might be amended, it looks very much as if that choice will be denied to them.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): Having agreed to insert free bus passes for 16 and 17-year-olds in our manifesto in the run-up to the next general election, will my hon. Friend also agree to insert some words saying that we will allow local authorities, if appropriate, to set up their own municipal bus companies? It is purely a matter of ideology, which is why we had deregulation of buses in the first place. The Government are refusing to allow, from a localism point of view, local authorities that wish to establish their own municipal bus companies to do so. Why should they not be allowed to do so?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point. It is absolutely right that local authorities should have that freedom. To restrict them in this way, as the Government purport to do, is basically to say, “You can have devolution in England, but you will have it only on the terms that we decide are available to you.” In other words, authorities can do what they want as long as the Government agree with what they are doing—[*Interruption.*] Yes, any colour as long as it is black.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): As one of the few MPs who made their living for several years as a bus driver, I do welcome this Bill. My hon. Friend is extolling the virtues of localism, but may I caution him that localism is all well and good as long as there is the money to go with it? At the moment, we see a huge imbalance in England between the money spent on London for public transport and the money spent elsewhere. He pointed out that the reason why public transport works better in London is partly due to the fact that there is non-deregulation, but it is also due to the fact that funding is far better. Will Labour commit itself to adequate funding for this localism of bus services?

Andy McDonald: I think that I am being invited to write a manifesto at the Dispatch Box. I am quite happy to do so, Mr Deputy Speaker, if you could just give me a few minutes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the gross imbalance in spending in this country. In the north-east of England, we spend £229 per head of the population on transport, compared with £1,900 per head in London, so there is an imbalance. Undoubtedly, that must be corrected if we are to rebalance our economy in the UK.

It is interesting that this denial of opportunities to start up a new municipal company flies in the face of some of the more successful companies in the country.

Why on earth would people not want to have a look at that as an option? There is no suggestion for a single second that there will be a mad rush of local authorities wanting to do this. They will want to weigh up and do what is best for their localities. Why on earth a Conservative Government would want to deprive them of making that choice is beyond me—or perhaps it is not.

James Heapey: I warmly welcome the shadow Minister’s announcement that he supports the view of many rural Conservative MPs that transport infrastructure spending should be redistributed to the regions, away from London. Too much has been spent there for too long, while too little has been spent in rural areas in particular. Does the Mayor of London agree with him?

Andy McDonald: I am sure the Mayor of London well and truly acknowledges that other parts of the country outside London need to have the benefit of investment, but this does not have to be an either/or. It is a question of priorities and making sure that we do not ignore vast swathes of the country.

We won on an amendment on Report in the other place to extend powers to re-regulate bus services to all areas. I hope that the Government’s stated commitment to devolution and improving bus services is not restricted to those areas that have struck deals for combined authorities with elected mayors. Labour was successful in removing clause 21, which would ban local authorities from forming their own bus companies and replicating the success of existing municipal companies. As the Minister is surely aware, municipal bus companies often outperform their rivals. Nottingham City Transport, for example, achieved a 97% overall satisfaction score in the most recent Transport Focus survey, while none of the big five bus operators broke 90%.

Removing the incentive to profit from operations can allow a greater focus on the social and economic purpose of bus services, meaning that buses can better cater for the social or business needs of a particular geography. Labour did not introduce a clause mandating municipal operators, but simply removed a clause prohibiting them, because we believe that there is not a one-size-fits-all model for running bus services. Indeed, there are a number of solutions for different areas, and it follows that, given the success of existing municipal bus companies, localities may judge that the municipal model is best suited for their area and may wish to attempt to replicate that success. If the Secretary of State is committed to devolution and believes that devolved authorities should be allowed to choose the best model to meet their needs, I hope that the Government will accept that the option of municipal operation should be preserved and that clause 21 should not be reintroduced.

We have an opportunity with this Bill to make significant improvements to bus services and, as a consequence, the social and economic life of much of our country, but Labour wishes these opportunities to be available across England, not just in some areas, and to be available to the fullest extent possible. We are happy to support this Bill, but ask that the Secretary of State listens to the forthcoming arguments—on both sides of the House, no doubt—and commits to transforming bus services in England for the better.

2.3 pm

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I warmly welcome this opportunity to debate bus services in the Chamber; we too seldom have an opportunity to reflect on the importance of the bus network for millions of people and to acknowledge the crucial role bus services play in our public transport system.

As has been acknowledged already from both Front Benches, buses provide a crucially important lifeline for millions of people, including people who choose not to drive a car and those who cannot afford to drive a car. We should also recognise the importance of buses for the elderly, many of whom feel that they no longer want to deal with the risk of driving a car or can no longer afford to do so. For all sorts of reasons, therefore, we in this House need to do all we can to support our bus networks around the country. I pay tribute to all the people involved in delivering bus services and helping us get to where we need to be.

I am enthusiastic about much of this Bill, but I do have worries about clause 4 and the changes made to the Bill in the other place. I warmly support the provisions in clauses 7 and 8 to facilitate the delivery of smarter ticketing technologies, which, as has already been acknowledged, can do so much to make bus travel an easier and more convenient and attractive option.

I also welcome clauses 1 to 3 and 9 to 15 on partnerships. Partnership-working between local authorities and private sector bus operators can be a highly effective way to improve bus services for passengers. There is a long list of successful examples from around the country, including places such as Sheffield and Bristol. The extension of the statutory partnership structure beyond the provision of infrastructure to include general bus improvement measures makes sense, and is an important part of the Bill. It is also a welcome step forward to enable statutory partnerships more easily to cover larger areas and have a more joined-up approach between different operators.

It is also helpful to make the Competition and Markets Authority a statutory consultee. Its current status as a powerful but somewhat unpredictable presence outside the partnership process can be a barrier to ambitious measures that both the operator and the local authority might sincerely believe are the right way forward. Giving it a more formal role internal to the process can help generate the certainty needed to support investment in measures to improve bus services for passengers.

As I have said, I am worried about the effect of clause 4 and the proposals to grant local authorities the right to specify bus services. We have heard a lot about the comparison between London and the rest of England, and it is true that in London bus routes, timetables and fares are specified by Transport for London and then tendered out to the private sector bus companies for delivery under contract, but London has unique circumstances.

There is a range of factors in London that contribute to comparatively high levels of bus usage, which are simply not present in most of the rest of the country: the scale and density of the population; relatively low rates of car ownership compared with other areas; millions of visitors; very high costs for parking in central London; a pretty aggressive approach by successive Mayors to bus priority measures; and a congestion charge that generates very significant sums to support

the bus network. So while I do not see any need to change the regulatory system that operates in London, I do not accept that expanding that system to other parts of England would deliver the same high levels of ridership in places where the circumstances are very different. Indeed, the regulated bus network in England before privatisation in '86 was simply not delivering great quality services for the customer, nor a thriving a bus industry, and it would be a mistake to look back on it with too much nostalgia.

Lilian Greenwood: Is the right hon. Lady aware of the experience on the island of Jersey? It franchised its bus services to a social enterprise just two years ago, and has achieved savings of £800,000 a year, introduced new routes, and increased passenger numbers by a third. What does she think that shows about the opportunity for franchising to perhaps work in other places?

Mrs Villiers: I have not looked at the Jersey example, but my anxiety is that rolling back the clock, essentially, and renationalising and re-regulating the bus network could ultimately mean that we lose the investment we have received from the private sector into bus services over the last decades. My key worry here is that the effect of the provisions introduced by clause 4 would be to enable local authorities, who perhaps 30 years ago sold their bus operations at a commercial price, now effectively to confiscate those self-same businesses.

The inevitable impact of this clause is that companies large and small, who might have spent many years and a great deal of money, energy, effort and innovation building up their business, might be barred from operating in the event that they lose the franchise contest. They could see their operations in a particular town or city disappear overnight, leaving them with buses, staff, depots and equipment that they cannot use.

I am particularly worried about the impact on smaller bus operators, who provide important services in many parts of the country. Those with a successful business serving a relatively small area and small range of routes might find it very difficult to tender for a big local authority contract. They might also find the tender process for running services to be complex and expensive, and require costly professional advice. If the process is anything like rail franchising, complexity can be truly daunting.

Andy Burnham: I think that people would struggle to agree with the London-centric point that the right hon. Lady was making a moment ago, when she suggested that London was somehow completely different from the rest of the country. My constituents would not accept that. Nor would they accept the point about the poor companies that she is talking about. She is making an argument for them rather than for the travelling public. Does she not accept that, for the past 30 years, bus companies have made considerable, and in some cases excessive, profits at the same time as receiving a public subsidy?

Mrs Villiers: My goal is to improve services for passengers, and I believe that private sector investment in our bus networks has had a positive impact on passengers. I do not believe that reversing that would produce better outcomes for passengers. One has only to look back at the pre-1986 position to see that the

ridership on buses before that date had plummeted. It is not the case that there was a golden era for bus services before 1986.

The trouble is that if we create a system in which we discourage private sector investment in the bus network, we will create uncertainty in the bus industry. Discouraging such investment will have a negative impact on passengers. That is what I am worried about.

Steve Rotheram: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Villiers: No, I have already given way.

We need to bear it in mind that, in competing for bus contracts, local operators might be up against large transport groups owned by overseas Governments with deep pockets. I am particularly concerned that the amendment that was approved in the other place will mean that bus operators could even find themselves having to contest for contracts alongside a company owned by the franchising authority that is making the decision to award the contract, giving rise to an obvious and unacceptable conflict of interest. I fear that clause 4 would inevitably result in a number of bus companies going out of business, which would be bad for passengers. I am also concerned that local authorities that are keen to take over the provision of bus services will find that taking on revenue risk could be a very costly exercise that would deplete the funding available to support those crucial non-commercial routes that do not generate enough passengers to cover their costs.

No local authority has introduced a quality contract to re-regulate bus services, despite their having been on the statute book since the early years of this century. I acknowledge that there are different reasons for that, but one of them is that taking over bus operations is inevitably a very expensive project for local authorities. To those who think that passing greater financial responsibility for investing in the bus network from the private sector to local councils is a great idea, I would point out that it involves investment in buses and bus services having to compete with pressing priorities such as social care, libraries, waste collection and all the rest, and that that investment—and bus passengers—are likely to suffer as a result.

Ever since 1986, there has been a vigorous and lively debate about the effect of deregulating bus services outside London. It cannot be denied that many millions of pounds of investment have been made by private sector bus operators in the years since privatisation. That brings me to a key problem with the franchising proposals—namely, the uncertainty that they will cause. If bus operators are unsure about whether their businesses could end up being taken off the road, they will be reluctant to invest in new buses or to improve passenger facilities such as ticketing systems.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I have listened with some frustration to what the right hon. Lady is saying. I fail to grasp why something that works in London and no doubt delivers very well for the people she represents cannot be done in other parts of the country. The insecurity that she talks about could have the reverse effect in large parts of the north-east, where the insecurity at the moment rests with the travelling public, who do not know whether there will be a bus to get them to hospital on a regular basis.

Mrs Villiers: There seems to be an assumption that if the London model of regulation were to be applied everywhere else, it would suddenly deliver London standards of bus services, but a causal link between the two has not been established. A whole range of factors in London contributes to the high levels of ridership and the success of the bus network. Simply reproducing that regulatory system elsewhere would not deliver the same end result, not least because Londoners pay several million pounds in congestion charges every year that are recycled into bus services. That larger level of subsidy makes a difference to the quality of the services.

Andy Burnham: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Villiers: No, I will not give way.

In my previous role as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I was contacted by Wrightbus of Ballymena. The company was concerned about the chilling effect that even the proposals leading to the Bill were having on orders for new buses from operators in England. Wrightbus is a hugely successful company that exports buses to many places around the world, as far afield as China. It delivers the highest quality engineering and provides training and opportunities for hundreds of young people. It is a great asset to Northern Ireland and to the UK as a whole. Its concerns demonstrate that the re-regulation of bus services outside London is not a step to be undertaken lightly. It is not a cost-free option. If we get this wrong, it will be the passenger who suffers. I therefore appeal to the Minister to table amendments that would remove clause 4. At the very least, it is important to amend the Bill to reverse the changes made in the other place, which extend franchising powers beyond mayoral combined authorities and which would allow all local authorities to set up their own bus companies.

Rob Marris: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Villiers: No, I am just concluding my speech.

Reverting to the Bill's original drafting would not deal with all the issues that I have highlighted today, but it would certainly mitigate the problems caused and the uncertainty that is likely to damage the interests of passengers by undermining the viability of bus operations and investment in those services. I therefore very much welcome the intention expressed by the Secretary of State to amend clause 4 as it stands, and I give the Government my support in their endeavour. As the Bill progresses, I hope that they will consider going a step further and remove clause 4 altogether.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I now have to announce the result of a Division deferred from a previous day. On the motion relating to unaccompanied children in Greece and Italy, the Ayes were 254 and the Noes were 1, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

2.17 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I rise to say a few words on clause 17, which is the only UK-wide provision in the Bill. I am going to start by doing something that I have not done before, which is to commend the Government and the other place for

[Alan Brown]

agreeing to amendments that brought in clause 17 and the provisions on accessibility. This is a victory for common sense as well as for equality. It makes no sense that train operators have had to provide audio-visual information for years, yet bus companies are under no such obligation. By default it is clear that more people use buses and that people with visionary or sensory impairment are likely to require access to buses far more frequently than to trains.

As part of the Talking Buses campaign, I wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and also used my first question to the Prime Minister to raise awareness of the campaign, so I am well aware that at that point the Government were not for moving on this matter. The Transport Minister's response stated:

"Such systems are expensive to install, potentially creating a disproportionate financial burden to bus companies".

He also stated:

"We propose that franchising schemes could require the installation of equipment to provide accessible information on buses where the local authority feel this is appropriate".

We cannot have the Government putting out the message that these provisions would be too expensive for them, only to ask local authorities to deal with them instead.

Rob Marris: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some of the concerns about the cost of these proposed measures are entirely misplaced? When I drove a bus, it was a requirement of my job that I announced every stop as it was upcoming. Most bus drivers have a voice and can announce these things as part of an audio-visual information package for people with disabilities without spending any more money at all.

Alan Brown: I thank the hon. Gentleman for passing on his experience. That makes sense. In fact, the Department for Transport's own figures suggest that the provision of audio-visual information would cost less than £6 million a year, which in terms of its overall expenditure is absolutely nothing.

The Government have previously suggested that phone apps might be the way forward. While apps have benefits, they cannot be the only solution. I was contacted by a company that gave me a phone to trial, so I handed it over to a constituent with a visual impairment. They told me that the app was fine as far as it went, but it could not be relied upon 100%. The app's functionality also depends on the type of phone being used, so the Government cannot use that sort of technology as a way around the problem. We need audio-visual technology on buses.

Huw Merriman: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating the Government on the change? When the Royal National Institute of Blind People gave its thoughts to the Transport Committee, the situation was that such technology would only be for new buses. This measure goes further, so will the hon. Gentleman give some credit where it is due?

Alan Brown: I think I have the usual problem here of people not understanding my Scottish accent, because I said in my opening remarks that I commend the Government and the House of Lords for bringing this

measure in. I do commend the Government; I was just saying some "buts" as usual to put the message out that they must go forward and fully implement the proposal. That is why I was making some minor criticisms.

As part of the campaign that I was involved in, I also participated in a Guide Dogs for the Blind Association blindfold walk through Kilmarnock—my constituency's main town. The drivers were excellent, but my experience reinforced the need for new technology. When I went on the bus, there was absolutely no way of telling where I was on the journey or where I could get off. Buses clearly do not call at every bus stop, so if there is no information, people have to rely on help from drivers or other passengers.

Lilian Greenwood: I did a similar thing to the hon. Gentleman's blindfold walk and know how important audio-visual announcements are to people with visual impairments. However, such announcements help everybody who uses the bus. One thing that puts people off using buses is not being quite sure where the stops will be and where to get off, which is why they like trams and rail systems. Audio-visual technology is important for increasing everybody's bus use.

Alan Brown: I absolutely agree. It gives everybody the confidence to go on the buses, particularly the elderly and tourists and other people who are not familiar with different cities and towns. There are benefits for all passengers.

Returning to people with a visual impairment, a Guide Dogs report states that seven out of 10 passengers on buses that do not have audio-visual information have missed their stop because they did not know where to get off or were not assisted in getting off. I cannot imagine how distressing that must be. People who feel uncomfortable in using public transport would be reluctant to go back on a bus after an experience like that. I was pleased to hear that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) has also participated in a blindfold walk. If any pressure comes up during the consultation about costs, I urge the Government to resist it. If anyone has any doubts, they should do what I and other Members have done and go on a blindfold walk to see what it is like.

In conclusion, I commend the Government again—as long as they follow through in the consultation and implement the proposal within an appropriate timescale. I also commend Guide Dogs, and the 30 organisations that supported it, for running a successful campaign, the many constituents who have contacted me, and the 30,000 people who signed the petition.

2.23 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): I rise to support this enabling Bill, which has the potential to reinvigorate bus services across the UK and in Greater Manchester. Bus use has changed over the past 30 years. Since 1985, usage has fallen by half in metropolitan areas and by 30% in Greater Manchester. Meanwhile in London, where the franchising of routes was introduced, the number of bus journeys has increased by well over 200%. For almost a generation, service provision has been based on commercial profit-making routes, with local authorities being able to subsidise loss-making but socially critical routes. However, such services are

increasingly under threat. In Cheadle, the X57—a vital service for my constituents that runs from the centre of Manchester to the small rural village of Woodford—has been all but lost. Various reasons have been cited, including falling passenger numbers on a service that is bedevilled by congestion along its route, which causes problems for the timetable.

When people move from buses to cars, congestion increases and services ultimately suffer. It is therefore imperative that we take the opportunity afforded by the Bill to reinvigorate our bus services. The Bill will enable local authorities—particularly Greater Manchester, with its devolved powers—to address current service shortfalls, to tackle congestion on our roads, and to provide a vital link for people to access work and town centre facilities. All that will further support our local economies.

Work is ongoing throughout the Greater Manchester area to encourage greater public transport usage. While I look forward to an extended Metrolink in the long term, I welcome the recent opening of the £165 million Second City Crossing, which is part of the Government's £1.5 billion expansion plan for bus, cycle, rail and tram. In the short-term, however, introducing a smarter, cheaper, and more extensive bus service could have real benefits for constituents such as mine.

Mike Kane: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point about the Second City Crossing. We talk about buses and improved public transport across the conurbation, but is it not time for orbital tram routes, which would particularly help constituencies such as ours?

Mary Robinson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that what we really need is an integrated transport system that works for passengers, invigorates the area, and enables people to get to work and to enjoy their towns and cities.

Chris Green: While orbital routes for the tram network are a good idea, does my hon. Friend agree that they are not always possible? For Greater Manchester's future, we must ensure that good bus routes go where orbital routes cannot.

Mary Robinson: It is important to look for ways to improve all services, even those in the most difficult of areas, and buses play a significant part in that.

As a Greater Manchester MP, I look at the Bill in the context of the ongoing devolution of powers to the area and the commitment to economic growth fuelled by the northern powerhouse. I do not underestimate the importance of an effective public transport network that supports jobs and underpins our local communities. Bus services are a critical part of our transport network, accounting for almost 80% of public transport journeys across Greater Manchester. More frequent and better-quality services are essential for Greater Manchester's growth and would help local residents to contribute to and benefit from future economic prosperity.

Franchising presents an opportunity to introduce simple and integrated smart ticketing across Greater Manchester. It could also alleviate some of the problems in the current system of multiple providers. Some 22 different bus operators provide services across Greater Manchester. Each has its own fares and branding, which gives rise to inconsistency. Compare that with the single, unified brand that operates successfully across

London. A change to the current system will allow seamless travel through joint-ticketing and a more stable service. It could also end injustices such as passengers having to pay a 10% premium for a ticket that can be used across different operators.

Furthermore, the Bill is an opportunity to improve disability access and, importantly, disability training, so that drivers know the importance of where to pull into at bus stops and how to provide the best service for people with disabilities. The Bill will encourage a joined-up approach between local authorities, and it is important that disability access issues are properly considered, whether through audio-visual announcements or just by giving people with disabilities the time and space to access services.

Rob Marris: Franchising—I would say that there are four ways to provide a service without franchising in the area—can also cover emission standards, which is particularly important in metropolitan areas.

Mary Robinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that important point, which I will discuss later.

People want passenger-friendly bus services, which is about not only how information is delivered, but having good-quality information available in the first place. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who is no longer in the Chamber, about the importance of open data. Open data can allow passengers more easily to compare offers from various providers, thereby increasing their confidence in the service they can expect and when they can expect it. At present, bus operators have no obligation to provide information about fares, except at the point of boarding, or how routes are performing. Live information via information screens at waiting stops and smartphone apps is key to empowering passengers, encouraging the use of services, and allowing operators to understand local needs better so that services can be improved.

Addressing air quality is a key aspect of the Bill. Poor air quality contributes to an estimated 1,000 early mortalities a year across Greater Manchester. The increased use of public transport will clearly help to address the problem, so I welcome its being part of the Greater Manchester 2040 strategy. Air quality is particularly important in Cheadle, where the local pinch point at the Gatley-Kingsway junction causes a great deal of congestion and misery for local road users and commuters. More people using buses, and combined authorities having the ability to set minimum standards for bus fleets across the region, have the potential to reduce dangerous emissions.

Andy Burnham: I strongly agree with the hon. Lady. Members on both sides of the House have been far too complacent about the growing public health crisis that is due to air quality. The Government have issued a list of six places that they will designate as clean air zones, but Greater Manchester is currently not one of them. Will she support my call for Ministers to include Greater Manchester on the list of places that can introduce clean air zones?

Mary Robinson: It is important that the next Mayor of Greater Manchester makes a point of improving our air quality and decreasing congestion on our roads. I look forward to that happening.

[Mary Robinson]

The A34 is the bane of many of my constituents' journeys to and from work. I have spoken about the A34 and the Gatley junction on a number of occasions in this House, and our most congested road would significantly benefit from a reduction in single-occupant car journeys and an increase in people making journeys by bus.

It is vital that the Bill works for my constituents by changing attitudes towards public transport, and improving services through increased reliability and allowing the introduction of a more seamless smart ticketing system. For Greater Manchester, it is important that no obstacles are placed in the way of our enacting the Bill ahead of the mayoral election in May so that the Conservative candidate, Sean Anstee, may continue the improvements already instigated by this Conservative Government.

The Bill is a revolutionary step for Greater Manchester, its population and its further growth. Regionally, we need a better, more integrated bus service to encourage a more user-friendly public transport system, and I am pleased to support the Bill.

2.33 pm

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Transport Committee was pleased to have the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill after its consideration in the other place. Indeed, that was the fifth occasion in this Parliament and the previous one that the Committee had considered the state of our bus services, which indicates the level of dissatisfaction with the problems of the current system and the need for change.

Nobody should doubt the importance of buses to our local communities. About five times as many public transport journeys are made by bus than by train, yet little attention is given to buses. Overall, across Great Britain, buses account for 62% of passenger journeys, but the figure reaches over 80% in Manchester, Merseyside and the west midlands. We are therefore talking about a lot of people. I have always found it totally incomprehensible that there is so little national interest in bus services when so many people across the country are affected by them.

Good local bus networks open up new education opportunities for young people, provide routes to work—64% of jobseekers cannot drive or have no access to a vehicle—and ensure that people have proper access to healthcare and social facilities. The converse is also true. If bus services are inadequate or, indeed, do not exist at all, many people lose out on opportunities to develop their abilities or even to get a job, and the economy loses out, too. Interesting new analysis that was recently published by the University of Leeds suggests that a 10% improvement in local bus service connectivity is associated with a 3.6% reduction in social deprivation. Simply put, we cannot afford to neglect our bus networks.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the difficulties with buses can be the huge cost? My home is less than a mile and a half from the centre of the city, yet a one-way ticket is £2.40. That is absolutely ridiculous, and the situation is replicated across the country.

Mrs Ellman: I agree with my hon. Friend that the cost of bus services often deters people from using them, which indicates that the promise of deregulation has not materialised. We were told that competition would bring down costs and fares, but that simply has not happened.

In England, outside London, we have seen a long-term decline in bus passenger numbers since the deregulation of the bus services market in 1986. Since then, operators have been able to run bus services on the routes of their choosing, with the frequency and fares that they feel appropriate. The result is that we now have a two-tier system outside London. Commercial operators, especially the big five companies that dominate the market, run profitable routes and, as the previous Transport Committee found, a lack of competition means that they are failing to provide an adequate service in many areas. Routes in those other areas have often been funded by local authorities, which have often stepped into the breach if socially important services are not commercially viable.

Local authority budgets have been cut in recent years, which has taken its toll on the provision of local bus services. Indeed, since 2010, funding for supported bus services in England and Wales has been reduced by 25%. Our inquiry heard that, in practice, whole villages and towns have been cut off from their neighbours, but this is not always about villages and towns because estates or whole areas of a city or town can be cut off. That prevents people living in those areas from having reasonable access to jobs and training, or being able to get on with their life.

One problem with the current system, as hon. Members have said, is a lack of integration and proper information. Passengers are offered a confusing variety of tickets covering different operators. Different fares are set and various technologies are used, and timetables are not always properly accessible to people who want to use buses. Accessibility is an important aspect of making bus services attractive. People will use buses if the services are there, if they feel that those services are reliable and if they have proper information about what is available, but too often that simply does not happen. The fact that timetables are not integrated with those for other modes of transport is another problem.

Integrating different modes of public transport is important for reducing congestion and addressing the important issue of air quality. We need more integration of our public transport services—that is what most people want—but the current system does not facilitate that. There are alternative models to the two-tier system of deregulation, and London is the most prominent one. Patronage across the capital has doubled since 1986 and, on average, fares there have been lower than in other city regions. The system that is operated in London might not be suitable for all parts of the country, and certainly not all local authorities would want to take it up, but the situation there shows that when appropriate powers are given to local authorities to work with the private sector, which provides the actual buses, the system can work.

Some attempts to reform the system that began operating in 1986 have brought about improvements, albeit limited ones. Our inquiry was given examples of innovative partnerships operating around the country. For example, the west midlands bus alliance has benefited passengers through integrated timetabling and joint ticketing, and

FirstGroup told us about a successful partnership in Bristol. I am sure that there are many other examples of partnerships on offer under the current system that have made things better and been able to address some of the problems.

However, those achievements have been few and have come too slowly, and some parts of the current framework are clearly not fit for purpose. Members have mentioned quality contract schemes. They were introduced to give local authorities the opportunity to implement a system similar to franchising if they wanted to do so, but no such scheme has ever been implemented. As has been indicated, it might be that no authority wanted to do so, but I do not think that that is the case. The system that was set up—not by this Government but by a previous one—was so complicated, complex and convoluted that in practice it was difficult to implement, so authorities simply did not attempt it.

I am glad that the Bill has had such widespread general support. It is the latest in a series of attempts to address the problems created by bus deregulation—I believe it is the third such Bill to be presented to Parliament since that time. The Transport Committee looked at the Bill in general and examined its details, including the changes made by the other place. We support the Bill and most of what is in it. We support the general principle of local authorities deciding the structure of bus services that is most appropriate for their communities. That structure might be a deregulated market left as it is, or it might be about partnerships, franchising or setting up a municipal operation. Our report on the Bill states clearly that we would encourage local authorities to look at each of the possibilities sequentially to see which is the most appropriate to address problems in their area. The question we should be asking now is: how will the Bill improve the situation? How will this Bill put in place something different from what has gone before? How will it make things better? Let me say at the outset that this Bill is a much more comprehensive approach to improving bus services than either of the previous Bills because it looks at the system as a whole and the improvements it suggests are much more substantial and comprehensive than before.

The Committee heard powerful testimony about the difficulties faced by people with visual impairments when using the bus, and we commend the Government's commitment to introduce regulations on improving audio-visual provisions. In particular, we heard evidence from Jacqueline Juden, a guide dog user, who described graphically the problems experienced by visually impaired people when using buses. The latest information shows that only 19% of buses provide reliable next-stop audio-visual information, with most of those being in London. I was appalled to read evidence from Guide Dogs saying that its survey found that 32% of visually impaired people using buses had missed a stop because they were too worried to inquire about where they were. It provided the equally horrendous and surprising statistic that 28% of drivers had refused to tell these people that information. Hon. Members have talked about problems when people do not have enough access to information and data. We wholeheartedly welcome the Bill's provisions to make those much more available, as that is very important.

Let me turn to the structural changes proposed in the Bill, as amended in the other place and as the Secretary of State intends to take it through this House. Will

those changes make a substantial difference? The provisions as amended—even before that—will make a welcome, positive change. The Bill offers stronger powers for local authorities to work with private operators and for new forms of partnership—advanced quality contracts, enhanced partnerships and franchising. We were very concerned about the Department's failure to publish regulations and guidance when we considered the Bill, as that impeded scrutiny. It was very wrong that that was the situation, but since that time changes have been made, and guidance and some regulations have been published. However, it appears from that guidance that even authorities with a directly elected mayor, which are eligible for franchising—the Secretary of State confirmed that again this afternoon, as the Government do not propose to change that proposition—would have to make what the regulations call a “compelling case” for franchising to the Minister.

May I ask for clarification about the position? The Committee did not have that information when we considered the Bill, and we were concerned that we did not know what the regulations and guidance would be. I must ask the Minister what that provision means. Does it in any way cut across the commitment, which was repeated today, that areas with directly elected mayors would be able to opt for a franchising system if they want to do that?

We are still unclear about whether transport authorities without a directly elected mayor will be able to have franchising if they feel that that is suitable for their area. I sense some ambivalence in the Secretary of State's comments. It is clear that he does not want franchising powers to be held in areas outside those with directly elected mayors, although I understand that a separate agreement has been made in relation to Cornwall. However, the guidance is still in place, so what exactly does it mean? What kind of application could be made by local transport authorities outside areas with directly elected mayors? Would the process be complicated, meaning in effect that these areas would not get authorisation? What is going on, and will this be very confusing?

Our inquiry also heard about the deep frustration that communities feel when bus services are cancelled without proper notice being given. We therefore very much welcome the provision in the Bill that will allow the designation of bus routes as community assets. That would mean that the cancellation of a route could be delayed while alternatives were considered, which we think is a very good idea. We also looked at the question of whether municipal operators should be set up, and we felt that, in general, local transport authorities should be able to have the system they think appropriate for their areas. We certainly recognised that there could be conflicts of interest, but we felt there were ways in which those could be addressed. We did not think it was right—we felt it was disproportionate—to say that no new municipal operators could be set up.

Lilian Greenwood: I wonder whether my hon. Friend can offer me some advice. Local authorities that currently have a municipal operator will already tender for a supported service. In my local authority, those supported services are provided not by the municipal operator, but by our community transport organisation. Does that not demonstrate that it is possible to have a municipal operator but still operate a competitive tendering process?

Mrs Ellman: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. She represents an area in which a successful municipal operator has been functioning very effectively for a long time, and gives us a clear example of how possible conflicts of interest can be addressed. Even at this late stage, I urge Ministers to look again at that issue.

Traffic management has not yet been mentioned. Buses are important not only for mobility, but in addressing environmental issues, and making transport around our cities and towns easier. Running buses cannot be dissociated from effective traffic management. While there are some relevant provisions in the Bill, I call on Ministers to consider activating the provisions in part 6 of the Traffic Management Act 2004 that would give local authorities powers to act on moving traffic offences. The Act is in statute, but the relevant section has not been activated. Local authorities repeatedly ask for it to be activated as it would be important in helping bus services.

Mrs Villiers: Does the hon. Lady agree about the importance of bus priority measures to make bus travel more reliable and therefore more attractive to passengers? Many local authorities are not prepared to make the quite courageous decisions required to deliver priority measures.

Mrs Ellman: The right hon. Lady makes an important point. Bus priority measures are indeed important; they are part of the range of measures available to local authorities when they are looking at how buses can be facilitated in their area and how to work with other traffic to make the best and most efficient use of road space.

The case for the Bill is clear, and the Select Committee welcomes it. We are pleased that it has come forward and very much welcome its comprehensive nature. Many of our communities suffer inadequate bus services. The existing regulatory framework is not fit for purpose, and previous efforts to restore it have not been comprehensive enough and have not been successful. The Bill makes important strides towards supporting bus networks throughout England, but more must be done to ensure that local communities and transport authorities have the information and powers that they need to provide effective bus services. This time, we must get it right. It is clear that we cannot afford another squandered opportunity for reform. I support the Bill, and it is supported by the Transport Committee.

2.53 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the main aims of the Bill, which are to increase passenger numbers and give local authorities and operators new tools to improve services. With that in mind, I wish to make a brief contribution on rural bus services, which are of huge interest to my constituents, particularly those in the more rural and isolated parts, because I am keen to hear from the Minister how the Bill can help them. Without a shadow of a doubt, the biggest turnouts at the public meetings I have held have been at those at which bus services are being discussed. At a recent event in Kingsbury, where a route was being cut—I will return to that later—such was the strength of feeling that we had to shut people out of the room because capacity was quickly reached.

Obviously, many people rely on public transport. At a time when we are encouraging more people to use it, it is important that we do not forget the areas that need services, so that people have the opportunity to get good jobs and to shop and socialise, and so that they can choose where they are educated. Sadly, that is not currently happening in North Warwickshire and Bedworth. I hear regularly from constituents that there are not enough buses, that they do not go at the right times, and that they do not go where people need them to go. I have to admit that there is a stark contrast between my time spent in London, when I think of using nothing other than public transport because of how excellently it works, and my time spent back in the constituency, where it is just not viable to use it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about the difference between cities, which are so well provided for, and rural areas such as North Warwickshire and, indeed, west Oxfordshire. I suspect his constituents are in the same position as many of mine. Does he agree that for our constituents—such as the elderly in rural villages who need to get to clinics, the children who need to get to school, or the young people who need get to employment opportunities—the provision of regular, effective and far-reaching rural bus services is a real concern?

Craig Tracey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I shall discuss the elderly a little more later, because we need not only to ensure they can get to clinics, but to address issues such as isolation and loneliness, which have a big impact on health services.

The contrast between public transport in London and in my constituency is demonstrated by the fact that if I wanted to get a bus from my home in Shuttington to my constituency office in Atherstone, which is around 7 miles and takes around 15 minutes by car, it would take me an hour and a half to get there by bus. Similarly, if I wanted to get into the nearest town, Tamworth, which is 3 miles away, the bus journey would take around one hour and 40 minutes. That is not a good service for anyone wanting to get to a 9-to-5 job or to their doctor, or to use other local amenities.

I am sure the Minister is aware that HS2, which also falls under his remit, is a huge concern for the residents of North Warwickshire—arguably the most affected area outside London. At a time when much is being made of the speed with which people can access other areas of the country, my constituents currently feel let down by the speed of access to their local towns and cities. The promise of the supposed employment and benefits that HS2 could bring to the area are negated by the fact that many of my constituents simply will not be able to access them. For a resident living in Kingsbury, a community with a population of more than 7,000 that is heavily affected by HS2, it currently takes two hours and 10 minutes on public transport to get the 15 miles into Birmingham city centre, with only one bus getting there before 9 am.

We recently saw the loss of a vital lifeline link, when the 116 bus route was withdrawn with very little notice, leaving people from areas such as Kingsbury and Curdworth unable to get to work, again. The operator complied with the guidelines, but they were not robust enough to enable sufficient notice or consultation to allow people the opportunity to engage or make alternative arrangements,

even though for many that would not have been possible in any event because it was their only method of transport. I appreciate that there is a Catch-22 situation, whereby although there needs to be a degree of commercial viability for companies, if they do not run the services when people want them or get people there in a reasonable time, they are simply not going to be used.

I recently ran an event on the impacts of loneliness and isolation, which have far-reaching consequences for our blue-light services and the NHS. It is clear that access to great public transport could have a huge effect on rural communities and afford people, particularly the elderly, who often need our support most, the ability to enjoy the opportunities that less remote areas enjoy as a matter of course. The benefits to the overall public purse could be very significant, not to mention the health benefits that a more active lifestyle would offer.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is making a really important point about how buses can help with social exclusion. Has he considered the potential to create in rural areas what are called total transport networks, whereby social services buses, non-emergency patient transport, and school and college transport are pulled together to provide the sort of services he would like to see for this constituents?

Craig Tracey: The hon. Lady makes a good point. That is something I have been looking at as part of my work on isolation. We need to take the opportunity offered by the Bill to look not only at solutions from the past but at the innovative opportunities out there.

We need to consider how rural bus services are run, and the passage of the Bill seems like an opportune time to do so. As I have said, I welcome the measures set out in the Bill, but would like the Minister to look at how we can ensure that our rural communities are not cut off and left behind. With an ageing population and the likelihood that people will become more isolated if more is not done soon, as well as the pressures that increased building will put on our already struggling infrastructure in North Warwickshire and Bedworth, better service provision is an absolute must. I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on how the Bill can make that happen.

2.59 pm

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): It is worth going through a little history to put the Bill into perspective. Although I support this Bill, there is one real sense in which I, as Labour MP, think it is not necessary. The fact is that since the Transport Act 1985 was implemented in 1986, virtually every Labour Member has seen it as a catastrophic failure for people who use buses. It saddens me that a Labour Government did not bring forward a better Act than the Bill before us now. However, the Government have brought this Bill before us, and it is worth supporting.

Given what the Secretary of State said about reversing the Lords amendments, it is worth remembering why we have this Bill at all. It came about because the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), had discussions with the chief executive of Manchester City Council, Sir Howard Bernstein, who retires this month and to whom we should all pay tribute for progressing this item, which will undoubtedly

improve buses. The then Chancellor recognised what many of us had been saying for some time—that this country would be much better off economically if we made our major cities work, rather than depriving them of resources and of allowing them to run their transport system in favour of the economy and people who live in the area. Sir Howard Bernstein and Sir Richard Leese persuaded the then Chancellor, and we now have this Bill before us.

It was always an ideological position of the Conservative party, as we heard from the right hon. Member for Chipping Norton, that it wanted a complete free-market approach to buses. However, the Government conceded that they would allow reregulation if combined local authorities agreed to have an elected mayor. That negotiation was entered into and agreed. One has to bear that in mind when the Government say that they will reverse the Lords amendments. I agree with that in principle, but I would not like to lose the Bill, given that a negotiation happened and an agreement was put in place between local authorities and the Government that will improve life for many people I represent and for many in mayoral combined authority areas.

I will go through two major issues. First, the right hon. Member for Chipping Norton gave the argument for the exceptionalism of London or, to put it another way, “It’s okay for us in London. You lot can get on with it.” [HON. MEMBERS: “Chipping Barnet.”] I am sorry; if the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) were in her place, I would apologise to her. She put forward three arguments as to why London should have something that the rest of us cannot. One was that it would bring uncertainty to the bus companies. Well, there would probably be a bit of uncertainty for the bus companies, as they will have to compete in a different way to run services, but my prime interest and concern is for the passengers who, for the past 31 years under the deregulation Act, have only had six weeks’ notice—in practice, sometimes less—of bus services being withdrawn. Part of the Bill takes some of that uncertainty away from passengers, so that argument does not stand up, particularly if our priority is the passengers.

To be completely straightforward, I did not understand the right hon. Lady’s second point, which was about the renationalisation of the buses. The Bill is not about renationalising the buses. It is primarily about reregulation in metropolitan areas. Although I accept the deal, and allowing local authorities to set up municipal bus companies was not part of that deal, I do not think it would do any harm for local authorities that saw the need for it to have the right to set up municipal bus companies, particularly if the private sector moves out, as it has threatened to do on a number of occasions if the Bill goes through.

The right hon. Lady’s third point was about the finance that goes into London from the congestion charge. The really important thing is that there was a period between 1986 and 2000, when Ken Livingstone won the London mayoralty, when there was effectively no subsidy. There was certainly no congestion charge for there to have been subsidy. There was no loss of bus passengers in Greater London over that period, whereas the number of bus passengers plummeted in the west midlands, Merseyside, Tyne and Wear, and Bristol. The figures fell by two thirds in South Yorkshire and by half

[Graham Stringer]

in Manchester, but without the subsidy from the congestion charge, the passenger figures in London remained the same. The arguments of the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet against this Bill do not stack up.

It is worth taking a deeper look at how the deregulation has worked, why it does not work and the flaw in the arguments in support of it, for those who still support deregulation. When the legislation was introduced—incidentally, I have sadly been around long enough to have campaigned against the introduction of the 1985 Act—the argument was that competition would improve the bus services because bus services were run by municipal authorities that had monopolies and were not providing the best possible service. I do not believe, as the Opposition have been accused of believing, that that was a completely utopian, golden age. It was not; there were flaws. Many bus routes in South Yorkshire, which my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) talked about, and in Greater Manchester and Merseyside, were still running on the schedules and timetables of the old tram system. They did not respond quickly enough to the changes in population after slum clearance. There were faults, but there were night services, people could get across the conurbations to see their parents on Saturdays and Sundays because there were bus services, and people could get to work early in the morning or home late at night after shifts. All that has disappeared. So, no, it was not a golden age, but it was a much better service than is being provided by the private sector.

It is important to understand why the competition that was supposed to deliver has not worked, and it has not worked for two reasons. Where there was severe competition, as there was in south Manchester, Preston, Edinburgh and other places, bus companies went head to head and really had a go at trying to run the other bus company off the road. Those places got not a better service, but terrible congestion. City centres were blocked up. The system did not work where there was severe competition, but that was very rare. The Competition Commission did a study in 2011, finding that there was virtually no on-the-road competition. Supplementary evidence shows that there was very little competition because companies in the London system—as much as the bus companies' accounts can be understood—were getting a much lower rate of return on their capital than companies elsewhere, although it still enabled them to invest in new buses.

John Pugh: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is also a myth about deregulation meaning the introduction of the private sector? There were many splendid private sector operators in Liverpool prior to deregulation, such as Crosville and Ribble, which existed alongside the municipal sector.

Graham Stringer: The hon. Gentleman is quite right about Merseyside. In Manchester, Mayne Coaches ran a service in the private sector, but it was regulated; it could not just—as happens under the deregulated system—decide to run a bus service one day and take it off six weeks later, or vice versa. So the issue is not privatisation but the lack of regulation.

The point I was getting to is that there is supplementary evidence that competition did not work. The rate of

return in London was much lower, and FirstGroup moved out of the London market because it could make a much higher return in South Yorkshire and Greater Manchester.

Rob Marris: My hon. Friend may be aware that, of the major metropolitan urban areas outside London, the west midlands had the least competition, with over 85% of services run by Travel West Midlands and then by National Express. The ridership dropped less in the urban west midlands than in any other metropolitan areas, but, literally, at a price, with some of the highest fares and some of the highest returns on capital. So the competition was not there, and we had the high prices, but at least we had the continued ridership.

Graham Stringer: Indeed. It was often the change that led to the loss of ridership. When companies such as FirstGroup and Stagecoach operated their services, they were certainly, whether by tacit agreement or not—I doubt whether there was a written agreement—operating semi-monopolies, which enabled them to charge much higher fares. It is not only that the ridership has gone down, but fares have gone up by about 43%.

The question I was coming to in terms of supplementary evidence is this: in terms of the way the legislation has worked so far, does anybody think that we, as the taxpayer, have had our return from Brian Souter and his sister, who have become billionaires out of this—I do not mind people being creative, being entrepreneurs and making money—pocketing money by gaming the system, running semi-monopolies and putting buses out, when every single bus that goes out of the depot has, on average, a 50% public subsidy? Certainly, Brian Souter and his sister have made money out of gaming the way the subsidy works. The system has not worked; it has not been competitive. Moving to a system where there is competition, not on the road, but by tender by private bus companies, will be better for the travelling public. I agree with competition by and large, because monopolies tend towards inefficiency, but the competition is better off the road, not on it.

I have one question about reliability, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) asked about. We are often told that congestion makes the buses unreliable, and it does. However, when the Transport Committee took evidence, we found that, in the majority of cases where buses did not turn up, that was not because of congestion, but because of mechanical failures in the buses, which had not been properly maintained, or because drivers had not turned up. That is an important point to bear in mind.

Finally, I would like to ask the Minister, who is in his place, the same question my hon. Friend asked: is saying that mayoral combined authorities have to have a compelling case before they re-regulate the buses trying to bring back the very high hurdle—the very high benchmark—that was in the Transport Act 2000, which effectively prevented those authorities that wanted to re-regulate the buses from doing so? Is it there to undermine what is essentially a good Bill? I hope the Minister will answer that in summing up.

3.14 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): The Bill presents a unique opportunity to improve bus services, tackle

congestion, support local economies and boost regional growth in my constituency and in Greater Manchester more widely.

The benefits of franchising mean that Greater Manchester will have the ability to decide the routes, frequencies, timetables and quality standards for buses, as well as a Mayor to hold to account should the service falter—all things that London has and takes for granted. That will particularly benefit people living in areas—especially rural areas—where current bus services are unreliable. Providing these franchising powers only to local authorities with directly elected mayors will ensure that there is a decision maker to hold to account, although other authorities without mayors will not necessarily be excluded and will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The Conservative devolution agenda has the potential to be hugely beneficial to those areas included, especially because of the ability to apply joined-up thinking to planning and other areas of governance. Unfortunately, I am not convinced at the moment that the leadership in Greater Manchester is taking the opportunities presented. The Greater Manchester spatial framework has recently been published, and it seems to have been done in complete ignorance of the needs of public transport and of people right across Greater Manchester. It seems designed to optimise urban sprawl and the consumption of our green spaces so that councils can gain the maximum council tax receipts, but it shows little to no evidence of how best to use public transport infrastructure. Bus companies cannot economically operate frequent services from early morning till late at night if their passengers are spread thinly over large areas. We just have to look at where public transport works best, which is in areas of high population density, to know that. The authors of the GMSF need to take the opportunity of the Bus Services Bill to reflect on the needs of public transport and to take serious account of the contributions to the GMSF consultation. Essentially, the current proposals need to be shredded and the whole process started again.

Good public transport infrastructure has many benefits in relation not just to housing and planning but to improving jobs and employment, including supporting young people to get into work. When I recently chaired the all-party group on youth employment, many young people compared the opportunities and transport links in London and the north of England. Poor public transport in the north is a barrier to their getting into work. With an ageing population, many of whom reach a time in their lives when they are no longer able to drive, it is more important than ever to ensure that vital services are connected to good public transport and, because of their comprehensive nature, especially to buses.

I met the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association in my constituency, and I note that the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) took the blind walk, where you are blindfolded and follow the guide dog. That is a disorientating experience for anyone, although, after a few minutes, you get some idea of what you are doing and you get that trust and confidence in the guide dog. I am really pleased that we have now made progress on audio-visual provision, and hearing about it certainly had an impact on me, as it does on anyone else who has spoken with the association. The association briefed me on the importance of visual aids

for not just blind people but those with partial sight loss. This is about giving people far more independence than they have at the moment. Sight loss is a significant barrier in daily life, in daily experiences, and in getting and retaining a job.

I am pleased that the Bill allows enhanced partnership schemes between local authorities and bus operators, to require all buses in a local area to provide audio and visual next-stop information. Authorities using the new bus franchising powers will also be able to place similar requirements on affected operators. It is particularly welcome that the Government have, in clause 17, amended the Bill to enable the Secretary of State to require service operators to make such information about audio-visual aids available to passengers. However, I want the new Mayor of Greater Manchester to use these powers to ensure that all users have an improved service—not just people with difficulties with sight but those who may not use the bus services regularly. I will be lobbying the new Mayor to make sure that all buses in Greater Manchester use AV—no matter who the Mayor might be, whether Sean Anstee or one of the many other candidates.

The provisions on joint ticketing make it much easier to introduce multi-operator and multi-modal smartcards and e-ticketing, making bus travel easier and more convenient—the starting point for wider application across the whole of the public transport network. Colleagues may be interested to know that the benefits of integrated multi-modal smart ticketing was the subject of the Science and Technology Committee's evidence check web forum on smart cities. From its introduction—from the very beginning—it is necessary to collect and interpret travel data so that further improvements can be made to Greater Manchester's public transport system. Again, I intend to raise this with the new Mayor of Greater Manchester and Transport for Greater Manchester.

The Bill's requirements for open data on fares and real-time running means that passengers will be able to access details of timetables, fares and routes in a much simpler format, putting an end to the frustration of not knowing when the next service will turn up. This has the potential to be further developed into passenger information apps or websites giving door-to-door real-time travel information and live updates on the status of bus routes, as Transport for London currently does through one of the largest automatic vehicle location systems in existence. AVL allows real-time passenger information, service control, and performance management. I would like to see this and smart ticketing used in Greater Manchester in future, following bus franchising.

However, I do have some concerns about the Bill. The Government must ensure that small and medium-sized bus operators are able to compete in a franchised environment. It is encouraging that the Bill includes a requirement to ensure that franchising authorities consider in their procurement strategy how to facilitate smaller operators. I hope that as well as considering this in their strategy, local authorities will ensure that there is a wide range of service providers—often innovators coming in with new ideas for new routes, who ought not to be excluded from franchising.

Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that that is already allowed under clause 4 on franchising. Franchising does not provide a monopoly. Clause 4 provides four different ways in which bus operators can

[Rob Marris]

provide a bus service within an area but outside the franchise regime, including additionality—that is, the innovative new routes that he mentioned.

Chris Green: It is also incumbent on the new mayors and the new systems that we have in place locally not just to allow that to happen but to encourage it to happen.

The Conservative party has often led the way on public transport. In Greater Manchester, we need only look back to our reintroduction of the tram network in the early '90s after an absence of decades, and only this week we have seen the completion of the latest expansion of Greater Manchester's Metrolink. We need a better integrated and thought through service on buses, as we have on our trams. These improvements to Greater Manchester's public transport network have not always, unfortunately, been matched with great ideas from Labour, which wanted to impose a congestion charge on people travelling in Greater Manchester—a burden that would have disproportionately affected people in the Bolton, Wigan, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport Tameside and Trafford boroughs.

Graham Stringer: And Manchester.

Chris Green: Absolutely—and parts of Manchester outside the two rings. I am pleased to say that Labour bowed to pressure to have a referendum on the damaging congestion charge proposals, and the people of Greater Manchester in all 10 boroughs rejected that idea.

Currently across Greater Manchester, bus services are not fulfilling their potential in a desired integrated transport system. This Bill provides the tools to achieve that, and we must ensure that it does so. We have to think about buses large and small—not just the larger and double-decker buses but the increasingly used smaller buses—in getting this increased connectivity. Buses must be linked together with all the other forms of transport—with trams and rail, and with car drivers by having more park-and-rides. I will do all I can as a Member of Parliament to ensure that the new Mayor and administration take advantage of every opportunity given by this Government.

3.25 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green). It is noticeable how many Greater Manchester MPs are in the Chamber today. That is an indication of how important this Bill is to us.

It is funny how sometimes conversations stick in one's mind. I have a very vivid memory of a conversation in, I think, 1997. I was sitting in Café Renoir in Fallowfield on Wilmslow Road—

Rob Marris: As you do.

Jeff Smith: As you do. This being south Manchester, Eric Cantona was playing chess at a nearby table. I was sitting with my girlfriend watching empty bus after empty bus go past the window along Wilmslow Road. I was a recently elected councillor, and enthusiastic, and I began to hold forth to my girlfriend about how we really needed regulated buses like they had in London because deregulation was not working. [Interruption.]

The relationship did not last, people will not be surprised to hear. Twenty years later, Café Renoir is no longer there, sadly; Eric Cantona is now, bizarrely, a movie actor; my girlfriend, I am glad to say, is happily married to someone else, with four fine children; and we still do not have bus franchising in Greater Manchester.

I am very proud of the achievements of the Blair-Brown Government. We should never forget, particularly people in my party, how we rebuilt public services in cities and towns across the UK after 18 years of neglect. I am very proud of that record. However, we did not get everything quite right, and that includes public transport management.

In Greater Manchester, we have been asking for London-style bus franchising powers for many years. That is why I am very pleased today to welcome this Bill, and most especially the bus franchising powers, because, as we have heard, deregulation has not worked for Greater Manchester. Since deregulation, bus use has fallen from 355 million passenger journeys a year to about 210 million passenger journeys a year. The system is confusing for passengers. We have 22 different bus operators running about 440 general bus services, and each of those operators has its own branding. The quality standards of the buses are inconsistent. The variety of fares and the pricing structure is confusing. We have 140 types of bus tickets across the Greater Manchester region, and passengers have to pay a premium for a ticket to use across different operators.

It does not work in serving our communities, either. In my constituency—at the end of my road—we have what is often claimed to be the busiest bus route in western Europe. I have never been able to verify whether that is the case, but what is not in doubt is that it is a busy and profitable arterial route through to the university and the city centre. Because of that, bus companies are competing for passengers and, as we have already heard, that competition is not always a good thing. Bus companies are running dozens of buses every hour—sometimes full, sometimes empty, but it is always chaotic and always congested.

At the same time in my constituency we have had cuts to services such as the 44 bus, which served Didsbury, and the 84, which served Chorlton. That leaves communities isolated. The Broad Oak estate in Didsbury and the Arrowfield estate in Chorlton are no longer served, cutting those communities off from access to their local hospitals and to local services. That is no way to run a public service. I am pleased that proper bus franchising will give us the opportunity to design a system that serves our communities properly.

I mentioned confused pricing, and I am also looking forward to our being able to simplify ticketing and introduce an Oyster-style system. Since I have come to this place, I have realised that one of the great things about London is the Oyster system. A similar system would be fantastic for Greater Manchester because it would integrate our buses with our other great transport, such as our fantastic Metrolink system.

We have been asking for these measures for some time and we are ready to implement them. We welcome the Government's clear commitment to introduce them. I agree with the House of Lords and my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Transport that these powers should not only be available to mayoral authorities; they should be available to others as well. However, if the Government are going to reverse the Lords amendments,

which would be unfortunate, I urge them not to delay giving powers to the mayoral authorities and not to water down those powers.

We need the powers proposed in the Bill and we need to get on with improving the transport system in Greater Manchester, because we have a willingness to prove the model. We can make it work. We have the capacity and willingness to deliver. We can make public services better for the people of Greater Manchester if we are given the opportunity.

Transport for Greater Manchester is concerned about the recently published guidance on how the system will work, which appears to be pretty opaque and confusing. On Transport for Greater Manchester's behalf, may I repeat the calls from my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) and for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer)? Once the consultation on the guidance is complete, we need greater transparency and clarity, particularly on the question of the compelling powers that my hon. Friends mentioned—I will not repeat their points.

Finally, I welcome the opportunity to make our bus fleets more environmentally friendly. We know that 40,000 people die in this country prematurely every year as a result of poor air quality. It is a silent killer and vehicle emissions undoubtedly contribute a great deal to that problem. Air quality on bus routes is often a problem, so if we can set better minimum standards for buses, we can help to tackle those dangerous emissions and prevent those early deaths.

We have a growing population in Greater Manchester and we need a transport system that can cater for that growth without leaving our communities too reliant on private vehicles, both to support the economic growth that we are successfully generating and to safeguard the environment. This is a welcome Bill and an important step in putting right some of the problems we have had for the past 30 years. I look forward to working with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) when he is elected as the Labour Mayor to design a system that works for all the people of Greater Manchester.

3.33 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith). I feel I should apologise for not talking more about Manchester. Fabulous place though it is, I think that it has been well-represented in the Chamber today so, instead, I will talk briefly about the importance of buses to rural communities, which has been mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey), who is no longer in his place, and for Witney (Robert Courts), among others.

Just last week I met the Frome and villages bus users group, chaired by the indefatigable Peter Travis. Like many such groups, it faces the challenges of rural areas—thinly distributed populations, some routes with little use at certain times that are busy at other times, and buses that are empty for much of the day—but the bus is a vital amenity for many people for work, school, or health care visits and to combat rural isolation.

Buses may not appear to be the most glamorous form of transport—they are perhaps more functional than glamorous—but they make a tangible difference to the

quality of life in rural and other areas every day. One constituent, whom I know very well, lives on the outskirts of Frome and relies on the bus to see her husband in the Royal United hospital in Bath. In her case—there are endless examples of this—without the bus service, it would be quite impossible for her to function properly. Despite the relative importance of one or two other Bills going through Parliament at the moment, I must say that the Bus Services Bill has every right to stand up against them as a keenly anticipated piece of legislation.

I joined colleagues last year in asking for the £250 million bus service operators grant to be protected, and I was pleased that that commitment was made. Some 42% of bus operators' income comes from public funds, and although those funds are extremely welcome, the rural west country in particular still faces enormous and continuing challenges. Ministers both in this House and in another place have emphasised the latent economic potential that can be unlocked by better bus services. The key point is that, on top of the issues of rural isolation and the need for people to travel for school or healthcare, there are also economic benefits for a whole host of reasons in specific areas.

As I see it, three key areas are particularly vital for rural bus services. The first is co-ordination between operators, passengers and local authorities. The new powers in relation to franchising and partnerships are very welcome, but it is important to note that places where there is no trend of declining bus usage are often areas where there is much more and much closer co-ordination in such relationships. The Government are absolutely right to reflect that reality in their approach to the Bill, which represents a real advance in pushing forward and in pushing for a more coherent strategy. It seems, however, that many of the franchising powers are available only to mayoral combined authorities. That is a real worry for Somerset, in large parts of which the desire for a directly elected mayor has been conspicuous by its absence. I will come back to this point later.

Secondly, clear communication is very much at the heart of the Bill. The democratising of information will allow people to make informed choices about their travel and to make travel choices using real-time information. We are giving rural communities the same access to information, so that they are armed with the same tools as passengers in London. That can only be positive.

Robert Courts: In the course of making many important points, my hon. Friend has touched on something of relevance to my area of west Oxfordshire, where there is an absence of rural bus services. As I have mentioned, that causes many difficulties for people in hard-to-reach areas, but in many places the local communities are stepping in. For example, the Our Bus Bartons bus company, in the council ward that I still have the honour of representing, and the Villager Community Bus have volunteers who step in to provide some services. However, an absence of information in many cases makes it difficult for them to know whether it is practicable to set up such a service. Such freedom of information, as it were—my hon. Friend mentioned that it is referenced in the Bill—will make that very much easier. Does he agree?

David Warburton: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, and he must be reading my mind, because that leads on very neatly to my third point, which is about increasing choices in the chain of provision—passenger choice and supplier choice.

I am conscious that the franchising measure will ensure, as the Government have made clear, that “only authorities with the ability, powers and funding necessary to make a success of franchising...will be granted access to franchising powers.”

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said, I think it is absolutely vital to ensure that this positive framework is available to all who wish to access it. I am therefore keen to hear what the Minister can say to reassure areas that may decide not to adopt that particular model of devolution. What will happen to them and what might, therefore, happen to us? That is even more crucial, given the potential for cross-pollinating and subsidising less profitable routes from more profitable routes, which would help the less-used services in rural areas that we have all been trying so hard to save.

Those mechanisms and the fresh focus on enabling bus services are long overdue. From a rural standpoint, the Bill should go some distance towards allowing communities to maintain and build on the services that they need.

3.40 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of the Bill. As several hon. Members have said, it is all too rare to have a whole afternoon in the Chamber devoted to discussing buses, even though they account for many more journeys on public transport than our railways. Buses rarely get the attention they deserve in Parliament or, indeed, in the media, yet for many of our constituents, they are vital, linking them to jobs, services, amenities and, just as important, family, friends and a social life.

There are few places in the country where buses are more important than Nottingham. Our city has the highest bus use per person of any city outside London, and patronage is still rising. That did not happen by accident; it is the result of sustained political commitment and leadership over decades. I am incredibly proud of our city council’s work, often in partnership with local bus operators, to encourage and increase walking, cycling and public transport use. I will say more about the lessons that can be learned from Nottingham’s experience shortly.

I admit that it came as a surprise when the Government announced that they would provide the option for combined authority areas to be responsible for running their local bus services, because Ministers had long opposed such powers as unnecessary. The change of heart is welcome. Giving local authorities more powers to plan and manage local bus services will bring real benefits to local communities. We have heard from Government and Opposition Members about their aspirations for that.

As many Members have noted, it is more than 30 years since the Transport Act 1985 deregulated bus services in England outside London. On Second Reading, the then Secretary of State for Transport said that the purpose of the Bill was

“to halt the decline that has afflicted the bus industry for more than 20 years.”

He argued that competition would deliver the improvements that passengers wanted, including lower fares. Competition was to be the key to improvements and to increasing patronage. He said that the Government would not sit idly by while the industry was sinking, leaving more people isolated. Instead, they offered

“a full-scale rescue plan for the bus industry.”—[*Official Report*, 12 February 1985; Vol. 73, c. 192 and 199.]

If only the outcome had been as grand as his claims.

Competition did not deliver the improvements that the then Ministers promised. Across the country, buses continue to receive very high levels of public support, with 41% of the industry’s costs met by subsidy. As the Competition Commission found, genuine competition between bus companies is rare beyond occasional and disruptive “bus wars”. In too many areas, the market does not provide comprehensive networks, forcing councils to fund additional services where they can still afford to do so.

Thanks to strong campaigning, London was protected from the 1985 Act, and could therefore build a planned, integrated network, with competitive tendering for routes. That, combined with other factors, some of which are unique to the capital, meant that bus use increased dramatically—by some 227%—since 1985-86, in contrast to the decline in patronage nationally. In 1985, one in five British bus journeys took place in London. Today, the figure is one in two. That is great for Londoners, but not for passengers in towns, cities and villages where services have been cut.

That promise of lower fares has not materialised either. The average bus fare rose by 45% in real terms between 1995 and 2016, with significant regional variation. While fares in London rose by 36% over that period, in other metropolitan areas, they rose by 60%. Since 2010, the subsidised socially necessary services provided by local authorities have borne the brunt of the huge real-terms reduction in Government funding to local authorities. As the Campaign for Better Transport has consistently revealed, 46% of councils reduced their spending on such services in 2013-14, and a total of more than 2,400 services have been cut or withdrawn, particularly affecting rural and isolated communities. The simple fact is that the market and on-road competition have not delivered.

The Bill presents an opportunity for local transport authorities to select from a wider and more usable range of powers to improve bus services as part of planned and integrated transport networks, including the power to franchise services. The ability of the local authority to invite tenders to run bus services has been available in theory for more than a decade, but the quality contracts process has proved too cumbersome and complex to use, although I pay tribute to Labour councillors in the north-east who were brave enough to try.

It is vital that the new powers are workable and practical to implement. The process and any guidance underpinning it must be unambiguous, clear and transparent. Most importantly, the full range of powers should be available to all authorities, even if they choose not to use them. Like many Labour Members, I am disappointed to hear that the Government intend to reverse changes made in the other place to reinstate the restriction of the measure to mayoral combined authorities. If the powers to provide better bus services are good

enough for Bolton, Birmingham and Boscastle, why are they not good enough for Boston, Bournemouth and Beeston, and other towns and cities beginning with other letters of the alphabet?

That is not to say that I believe that franchising is the only way to improve services, or that it is a panacea. In places such as Greater Manchester, there are already well developed plans to utilise the new powers—I look forward to seeing them in action. Other areas are considering the range of new options, but the ability to deploy franchising will undoubtedly focus minds in any partnership scheme negotiations.

Not only cities need all the options. Hon. Members have seen how Transport for London has used its powers, but as I mentioned, Jersey is an interesting and successful example of bus franchising. There are examples from across Europe where tendering for services is the norm. The ability to pool funding and cross-subsidise less profitable but socially necessary routes by linking them to more profitable ones could be of great value in rural areas.

I have no hesitation in claiming that my local area has the best public transport system in the UK, and without doubt the best buses. I recognise that hon. and right hon. Members often make grand claims for their constituencies, but in this case I can provide reliable evidence in the form of the Transport Focus bus passenger satisfaction survey. I will not dwell on it today, but it is no coincidence that our tram system is also outstanding. The survey shows that 94% of Nottinghamshire passengers are satisfied, very satisfied or fairly satisfied with their bus journey. That is the highest in the country. I suggest that, if the survey were limited to Nottingham city, the figure could be even higher.

There are three key reasons for Nottingham's public transport success: consistent political leadership, our outstanding municipal bus company and the presence of an excellent private sector operator. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) suggested in his speech that buses were not glamorous. I invite him to come to Nottingham to travel on a Trentbarton bus, with its leather seats, wood laminate floors, free wi-fi and USB charging sockets. They innovatively show how immensely glamorous buses can be. One difficulty we face in persuading people to travel on buses is that their memory is of their last school bus, which was probably old and rattly, and not a very pleasant experience. The new buses in my city are a million miles away from that experience.

Over several decades, Nottingham City Council has demonstrated a clear vision for transport in the city and a willingness to support that vision with investment in measures that make public transport an attractive and realistic option. Bus lanes and bus priority measures, good bus stops, good shelters, real-time displays and clean, environmentally friendly vehicles have all played a part. While the vast majority of bus services are run on a commercial basis, the city also has a range of tendered services providing links to the city's hospitals, university campuses, major workplaces, local district centres and the city's park-and-ride sites.

The workplace parking levy has enabled Nottingham to continue to invest in this network, which is now served by Europe's largest electric bus fleet and operated by partners, Nottingham Community Transport. The benefits of the new buses are clear. They cut carbon

emissions, improve air quality, reduce traffic noise, result in cost savings and, by getting more people riding, ease congestion.

Rob Marris: Does my hon. Friend agree that we ought to investigate much more thoroughly the possibility of reintroducing trolleybuses around the country, which would be commensurate with the provisions in the Bill in terms of emissions?

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for that suggestion. It is certainly an interesting one. I am not sure that any local transport authorities in the UK are currently looking at trolleybuses, although I have seen them operating effectively on the continent, including in Lille, where they are part of the transport network.

One issue on which Nottingham City Council showed great foresight and some bravery was the decision to retain its municipal bus company, of which I think there are now only eight left in England. I can confidently say that Nottingham City Transport, the municipal bus company, is the best bus company in the UK, as it has won the UK Bus Awards' coveted "Bus Operator of the Year" award in three of the last five years and topped the 2015 bus passenger satisfaction survey with 97% satisfaction. It has consistently invested in high-quality, cleaner, greener, new buses that are accessible for wheelchair users and parents with buggies, have audio-visual announcements, are equipped with wi-fi and are driven by well-trained staff.

We are fortunate in Nottingham that NCT is not the only excellent local operator. Trentbarton, a local private sector operator, has also invested in a high-quality fleet, shown a genuine commitment to serving passengers, been innovative in growing patronage and has similarly high satisfaction scores.

Nottingham's public transport system is an example of what can be achieved through good partnership working between the local authority and local operators, but it is not perfect. The use of the Oyster card revolutionised travel in London, particularly by enabling passengers to move seamlessly between different modes and operators, but it proved difficult to introduce a similar successful multi-operator smartcard in Nottingham. Passengers still face a confusing range of fare options, and there are two different multi-operator/multi-modal smartcards, which give rise to different fares and cannot be used on all buses and trams in the city.

Partnerships can deliver real improvements, but they also have limits, and even the enhanced partnerships envisaged in the Bill rely on operators' agreement, which can be difficult to achieve. Local transport authorities cannot always ensure that the best interests of passengers are served without access to the full range of options in their toolkit, and I find it hard to understand the Government's justification for denying the vast majority of local transport authorities the opportunity to use franchising powers. I was equally disappointed by the Secretary of State's explanation for reintroducing the ban on local authorities setting up municipal bus operators. While I do not believe it would be widely used, the Government's opposition seems to be based on purely ideological grounds. First he seemed to argue that it would undermine competition but presented no evidence to support his assertion, and then he admitted that he simply did not want to allow Labour local authorities to act in the best interests of their residents—so much for localism.

[Lilian Greenwood]

Bus services are essential: they link people to jobs, training and education opportunities; support local businesses; combat isolation, particularly among the young and the old, disabled people and those who do not have access to a car; and cut congestion. New cleaner, greener buses can also improve air quality and contribute to our climate change obligations. It will be very disappointing if the Government now seek to remove the changes made in the other place. I hope that Ministers will think again and finally give our transport authorities the full range of options they need to put passengers first and ensure that they have access to bus services wherever they live.

3.54 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). Like her, I welcome this chance to have such a detailed debate about bus services. We usually find ourselves talking about trains—we have spent a lot of time talking about one particular train line in this Chamber over the past few years—but as has been rightly pointed a number of times, most people's experience of public transport begins and ends with a bus. Many railway passengers start their journeys by taking a bus to a main transport hub from which they can access the rail network. For most people using public transport, certainly those in Torbay, the bus provides the backbone of the service.

It is worth considering briefly how things have changed since 31 years ago, when full regulation was in place. We might look back at "On the Buses", thinking that it was a great film and brilliant comedy, but the system then would be an absolutely awful model for running real services today. Services have moved on hugely. Nobody would have envisaged at that time internet access, better services, and the sort of high-quality vehicles that are now on the road. Full accessibility is also important, because not that long ago, it was almost impossible for a disabled person to plan a bus journey, but now all buses are accessible.

I am particularly pleased that the Bill contains provisions on audio-visual aids, which a number of people have lobbied me about. Some 9% of people in one ward in my constituency are aged over 85, which brings unique challenges when it comes to planning public transport. In another part of Torbay, well over 50% of the population is aged over 65. That means that people are likely to have visual problems and to have had to start using public transport because they were no longer medically able to drive a car.

The key thing is to break the idea that the bus service is the last-resort social service for those who cannot drive, and that people will use buses only if they absolutely have to do so. As we heard a few moments ago, many bus operators are making their services more attractive by putting in place comfortable seats, and offering a safe environment and on-board CCTV.

We have heard about people's experiences on the old school bus. I certainly remember getting on a school bus about 25 years ago. It would bounce along—that could happen on a normal bus service, it has to be said—with people smoking at the back of the upstairs part of the bus, even though they were not supposed to do. It

would not be very comfortable. The experience was such that by the time people reached 17, the priority would be to stop using a bus. That remains the image for a lot of people, because when they had to use the bus, it was awful. However, many people, including me when I use the buses in the bay, now get a very pleasant surprise when they find that those sorts of days are long gone.

Andy Burnham: Somebody once said in 1986:

"A man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure."

Does the hon. Gentleman know who said that, and does he agree with it?

Kevin Foster: I was on a bus last Wednesday. Yes, I do know where that quote comes from but, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, the focus is on what we are doing today. To be blunt, if bus deregulation was such a bad thing, Labour Governments had 13 years—I believe that the right hon. Gentleman was in the Cabinet—in which to change the system.

Things have moved on with public transport, and sometimes we need to be careful about instantly ascribing cause and effect. Car ownership, and particularly households owning more than one car, has increased hugely since the early 1980s. We can debate whether that is a good thing. In many parts of urban built-up areas that were designed for no vehicles, the fact that households have multiple vehicles has created a range of problems. That has inevitably had an impact on how many people use a bus in such an area, but that is not to say that we should not wish to have quality transport systems.

When we talk about bus priority measures, I am loth to look at how they could apply everywhere. They can make sense in congested urban centres, but they will not make a huge difference in parts of Torbay. We do not have a major central business district or a huge morning rush hour. Local authorities need to be able to choose what makes sense for their areas, rather than our coming up with an arbitrary idea and thinking that if something works in one area, it will automatically work in another.

I can remember dealing with operators in the west midlands. We often heard members of the public refer to the fact that buses were running empty, and we made the point that those services were being run not by the council, but by a commercial operator, which was paying the bill for them. I told them that it would be a bit bizarre for me to write to the operator demanding that it provided fewer services around my ward to deal with that problem.

Before services had to operate commercially, there was an issue with the tight regulatory structure, as it made adaptation and change difficult. For example, there would be services to factories that did not exist anymore, or those that did not reflect new and growing populations. Although it is important that we give areas—particularly mayoral combined authorities—the powers to shape services and integrated transport networks, we do not want to go back to the days when, in theory, a committee would argue for half an hour about exactly where a bus should run through a local housing estate. That is not an appropriate plan for the future.

We have heard lots of references to local services in this debate. I hope that the Bill will help councils such as the Torbay unitary authority to deal with situations

such as the one that we are having with the Local Link services. A small bus company—it is not the main provider in Torbay—has announced that it will withdraw all 16 of its services from 1 April. It did that not following consultation, but by putting the relevant notice in to the transport commissioners. The services do not operate on the main routes, but they do provide social value, particularly for the elderly population. When we analysed the services, it was interesting to find that 83% of passengers were using the concessionary bus pass scheme. That is perhaps not a huge surprise, given the demographics of Torbay, but it was quite surprising to see just how much pensioners valued the services, particularly buses 60 and 61, which serve Preston, and 62, which serves Cockington village.

I hope that the Bill will give councils the opportunity to work with operators. I know that Torbay Council is already working quite constructively with an operator—I have been asked not to name it publicly—to try to find a solution to the problems on many of the routes. We are also looking at bringing on board a not-for-profit model. The Torbay Community Development Trust is looking at how it can provide services, effectively as a social enterprise. Some of the routes will provide enough to enable it to wash its face—cover its costs—but will not provide any form of commercial return. That is why this debate is both timely and welcome, because we can see what is happening in Torquay and Paignton today, and I am able to stand here as the local MP and look at possible solutions.

Although the Government will look at individual cases when it comes to franchising powers, I hope that such powers are automatically given only to mayoral or combined authorities. This is partly about having a bulk. Some people in Torbay might think that we could run our own bus services but, in reality, we would inherently be dependent on neighbouring areas.

It is also right that we should know the name of the person who can take decisions so that we can hold them to account—they might be the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) or Councillor Anstee in Greater Manchester in the near future. People should be aware of who those people are. That situation is very different from that of the old integrated transport authorities. If we had asked people to name the chairman of the authority in their area, most would be unable to do so. There would be less direct accountability for people serving on those authorities because they were indirectly appointed by local councils. There was not the ability for someone to say, “Actually I voted for this person,” or, if they did not vote for them, to say, “This person was elected”—I suspect that I might have that experience if I lived in one or two of the areas concerned.

This is about holding someone to account for how they use their power, rather than power being handed to a local authority in a similar way to under the quality contract scheme, which was not a practical thing to use and not of an appropriate scale. Likewise, decisions will not be made in a back room by people who might have an indirect mandate, but one that is not as strong as the mandate of a directly elected mayor.

I very much welcome the Bill. Obviously there will be a fair amount of debate as it goes through Committee and its remaining stages, but I welcome the general tenor of today’s debate. This is a Bill whose time has

come. We can all debate whether it is on time and, indeed, whether more transport legislation is just round the corner—

Rob Marris: Driverless buses?

Kevin Foster: There could even be driverless buses. It would be interesting to see how they would go down with passengers, given that many people—particularly older people—value a familiar driver. Whether they could have a similar relationship with the friendly robot welcoming them on board is another matter. However, 10 or 15 years ago, the idea of driverless vehicles on our roads was unimaginable. Now they are on their way, although I am not necessarily advocating that we should have them.

This is a good Bill that focuses on local transport services, and I think that it is one that will deliver. The Government’s intentions are right, and it is absolutely right that we give the Bill its Second Reading today.

4.5 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I rise with gratitude and optimism regarding the presentation of this Bill to the House of Commons. The powers that the Bill will grant to Greater Manchester, and its effects on services in Stalybridge, Hyde, Mossley, Dukinfield and Longdendale, are sorely needed and long overdue. I am extremely grateful to the leaders of the 10 Greater Manchester councils for negotiating these powers. They include Sir Richard Leese in Manchester and Councillor Kieran Quinn in Tameside. I am also grateful to the Secretary of State for honouring the deal struck by the former Chancellor with those leaders when the Greater Manchester devolution settlement was first agreed.

As we have already heard, some Conservative MPs will find this an unusual Government Bill—it is one to which they might be instinctively ideologically opposed. I want to set out why the powers are pragmatic, why they are needed and why, if we all want better local bus services, as we all do, the House should come together and pass the Bill.

I am a great believer in better transport. When I look at London, I see a labour market that is open for employment to more than a fifth of England’s population because the city’s transport system is so good, and I want that for the north as well. I argue regularly, often with some success, for major transport projects in my own constituency. The Mottram bypass—a £170 million road scheme—has already been agreed by the Government, the trans-Pennine rail electrification is under way, and there is a possibility of a trans-Pennine tunnel and perhaps HS3.

Those big projects are important, but anyone who knows anything about transport is aware that the vast majority of local public transport journeys are made by bus and that the present system just does not work outside London. Services are infrequent and expensive, there is poor signage, and the buses take cash rather than electronic payments. There is no joint ticketing between bus companies, let alone joint integrated ticketing between buses and trams. The big bus companies are sensitive to this, but the data are stark. After deregulation, bus use outside London plummeted, whereas in London, where deregulation was not pursued, it has soared. However good the intentions of bus companies might

[Jonathan Reynolds]

be, they cannot give the public what they need under the present system. Fares cannot be standardised, because that would breach competition law. They cannot be flat within a certain zone, for example, and joint ticketing just does not exist.

In addition, there is no public accountability or public certainty. I am sure that I am not the only elected representative in this Chamber who has experienced, either as an MP or a local councillor, a crucial local bus service being withdrawn or amended. When our constituents get in touch about such changes, the truth is that there is effectively nothing we can do about it. People need to be able to depend on those services. They need to know that they will be able to get to work from the place where they live. We should ask ourselves why local tram networks are so sought after and have such an impact on house and land prices, and one of the answers is that they offer transport certainty. No one worries that a tram will be withdrawn at short notice or following a six-week notification period, but the same is not true of local buses. The lack of meaningful competition means that even profitable bus routes get chopped up and amended to make them more profitable, which makes coherent transport planning impossible.

Travelling by bus is also expensive. The last time I got a bus in the morning from my home in Stalybridge to my constituency office in Hyde, the fare was about £3.60. That is for a journey of less than three miles, so the cost per mile is more than first-class rail travel and some flights to the Canary Islands. Unless we improve bus services outside London, I can honestly see technologies such as Uber killing off local public transport rather than private car use.

As a northerner, these next words are particularly painful for me to say, but I am extremely envious of London's frankly superb bus network. It is good value, reliable and frequent. No cash is involved. Tickets are integrated across all forms of public transport. Buses are modern and accessible, with space for up to two pushchairs. For someone like me who has lots of children, there is even space for a double buggy. The system is easy to understand. In my first year as an MP, when I was new to London's public transport, I came back from the Labour party conference in Brighton late on a Sunday night. My train arrived at Victoria station and, because I am fairly tight, I did not want to get a cab back to the parliamentary flat in Lambeth, so I set off walking. As I got adjacent to a bus stop, I saw a bus coming, and I could check the signage at the stop in a split second to see where the bus was going. I knew that I could get on it, I knew that I did not need cash or a ticket, and—we underestimate this point, because it is useful for not only people with disabilities or a visual impairment—I knew when to get off the bus because it told me where I was. If a stranger tried to do the same thing after arriving late into Manchester Piccadilly station, they would have no way of easily getting such information. Who knows where they could end up? If things went particularly badly, it could be as far away as Liverpool.

I know that London has a much higher population density and that it gets revenue from the congestion charge—we rejected such a charge in Manchester in what was another poor referendum experience for most

of us—but London's system is better and we should just try to copy it. London's model clearly works and that is all I want for my constituency. A similar system is used by almost every other major European city. By allowing the new Mayor of Greater Manchester to have such powers—I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) is taking part in the debate—the Bill will be a huge step forward for our public transport system. Once we have the basis for a better-run system, there will be a significant improvement in public consent for engineering works, bus priority lanes and priority junctions because people will see a system that works for them. I also think that passenger numbers will improve. Although bus companies are wary of such powers, they stand to gain a lot from these things happening.

I warmly back the Bill. I hope that it is taken forward through all its parliamentary stages with a pragmatic spirit that will address the real shortcomings of what we have now, and that it delivers the better bus services that my constituency and all other constituencies are crying out for.

4.12 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). As ever, he is an eloquent campaigner for his constituents. I admit that I am excited about this Bill and have been excited for a long time, largely because of the size of my inbox and the number of times I have had to visit the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), about contact from constituents on bus matters or about bus regulation. I look forward to hearing from him about my hobbyhorse: cycle racks on the front of buses, rather than on the back, of which I know he is a staunch advocate.

I support the Bill, which will provide local authorities, including Bath & North East Somerset Council, with the means to improve local bus services. In a city such as Bath, where air pollution is an increasing problem, anything that makes it easier and more convenient for my constituents to travel by bus, or for people from outside Bath to travel in on a bus, should be encouraged. I am therefore pleased that the Government support local bus services and continue to invest in greener transport. I recently unveiled First Bus's eight new hybrid double-decker buses, which do not break down on some of the steepest hills going up to Bath's park and ride and up to the university. They will have a huge impact on air quality across my city and in other parts of the authority area.

The bus industry offers significant potential to improve our environment and the way we travel to and from work or relax at the weekend. Given the number of tourists who visit my constituency and those of other hon. Members, it is important to think about buses as not just a local transport issue, but an economic issue that offers opportunities to grow jobs and utilise economies of scale. Creating a financially sustainable economy of scale will help to drive down costs for passengers, which has ultimately been a great success in London. Areas such as Brighton, for example, have also been able to create economies of scale, and passenger numbers have increased and prices have been driven down as a result.

When he is the new Mayor of the west of England, the great Tim Bowles will hopefully be able to work with our local authorities to introduce a smartcard ticketing system in an economy-of-scale franchise—that is to be confirmed—which ultimately helps to deliver real benefits to passengers across the area. However, local authorities need to be able to make changes that help to address their residents' needs, as local authorities are better aware than anyone else of what will improve the local provision of those services.

The Bill ensures that local authorities will be able to set required standards of service from bus providers, including on ticketing and frequency of services, both of which are an issue in my constituency, where we have multiple bus providers with multiple ticketing options. I have listened to Members on both sides of the House, and unfortunately our system is not the best in the country. It is a good system—do not get me wrong—but it can definitely be improved. We have heard the examples of Nottingham, Greater Manchester and, particularly, London, and hopefully we will be able to share their best practice in Bath.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Will my hon. Friend concede that those places are all major conurbations? Part of the Bill's flexibility, which we all welcome, is that it also works for rural areas and even small market towns. The Westley route in my town is currently under threat due to lack of capacity.

Ben Howlett: My hon. Friend is a stalwart campaigner for rural bus services, particularly in Bury St Edmunds. I know the area quite well from when I was growing up.

My area of the west of England is a mixture of Bristol, smaller cities and towns such as Bath, Thornbury and Yate, and rural areas. We have decided that, by increasing the scale, a franchising model would work in our area, because we would be able to integrate all bus services across a larger area and increase the economies of scale. Given the financial pressures that all local authorities are under, we would be able to ensure that the efficiencies are spread over a larger area. We would probably be able to subsidise many more of the routes that are already in existence and pass the benefits down to the passenger by introducing smartcard ticketing. Enabling more people to use the service would hopefully mean that prices ultimately fall. That change could happen because of the Bill.

Smartcard ticketing would bring benefits to my constituents, who use a variety of transport, often across authority borders. My constituents would definitely be more encouraged to rely on public transport for journeys from Bath to Bristol if they needed only one ticket, or ticket type, for the bus to the station, for the train to Bristol and then for the bus from Bristol to their place of work. An integrated system would be the holistic opportunity that we have been missing for a long time.

I recognise what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport said earlier about doing this on not just a regional basis but a national basis so that we can see larger economies of scale and larger interconnectivity between different devolved areas, particularly between the west of England and the west midlands.

Smartcards and contactless payments have made a dramatic difference to way that Londoners travel, and it is about time that that benefit is spread outside the

south-east. The changes are likely to see an uplift in the use of public transport and, ultimately, an increase in the revenue that local authorities receive from it, covering any initial cost of installing the new systems.

I am pleased to see provisions in the Bill to require bus operators to provide accessible information to passengers. Many of my constituents have made representations to me in support of Guide Dogs talking buses campaign, which asks for audio-visual equipment to be installed on all buses to ensure that more people, no matter whether they have a disability, can rely on buses with confidence. For people with a visual impairment, getting on a bus is one of the most difficult things, and I know that the Minister has been working hard on this area, as has the entire Department. The Bill takes this issue into consideration, which is incredibly welcome. Without this equipment, passengers with sight loss have to ask the bus driver to tell them when to get off and they run the risk of missing a stop, which can be distressing and potentially dangerous. Hon. Members may wish to take up the opportunity to take a blindfolded walk or bus trip, and I recommend that they do so, as it is inspiring. The Bill requires bus operators to provide audio-visual information indicating the route, the next stop and the final destination. Members on both sides of this House must support that important development, which will make journeys for blind and partially sighted people easier and less stressful.

One problem we face in my constituency is controlling the amount of tourist buses that circle our city, and I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on this. Bath is a beautiful city, so it is not surprising that people want to visit it and see the sights from an open-top bus on a warm summer's day—or a rainy day, as is often the case, given the west of England's local climate. The local authority needs to be able to regulate these buses to ensure that their impact is not detrimental to local residents who rely on traditional buses. With the introduction of a new enhanced partnership scheme responsible for traffic regulation conditions, Bath & North East Somerset Council could have to renegotiate the traffic regulation conditions, which have worked well for more than 10 years, tackling environmental issues that had previously been exacerbated by buses. I know that this is an intricate regulatory issue, and I have already made my representations on it, but I cannot stress enough that city-centre residents in my constituency could face problems with multiple tourist buses going round and round in a circle and causing huge congestion and pollution, as we could end up with the law of unintended consequences coming into play. It would therefore be incredibly welcome if the Minister could confirm in his closing remarks how Bath & North East Somerset Council could go about keeping this arrangement, while also being able to benefit from some of the new powers.

Finally, I turn to the part of the Bill that will give powers to new directly elected mayors, such as the one in the West of England. The powers will allow them to take greater control of their services, as Transport for London does in London, with a budget to match. At the moment, there is discussion as to the best use of the transport budget: whether it is best to use it to provide free bus travel for young people or to introduce a smart ticketing operation across the West of England.

[Ben Howlett]

I hope that Front Benchers will deal in their winding-up speeches with the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on the costings of free bus travel for children. It is one thing to propose that for 16 and 17-year-olds in Manchester, but our West of England Labour candidate has promised to introduce free bus travel for all children. We have yet to see any costings for that, and it is a hugely expensive operation. Just in Bath & North East Somerset, the smallest of the three authorities involved, we are talking about £11 million. With a devolution deal of £30 million each year going forward, it seems that the entire budget—the entire devolved operation—could end up being subsumed into one uncoded commitment; although this may sometimes politically be beneficial, it may not be a funded commitment. We will need to be aware of that, so any costings that could be provided from either Front Bencher would be incredibly useful.

I wish to reiterate my support for the introduction of a smartcard ticketing system across the West of England area, and I hope the Minister will join me in that. Our West of England mayoral candidate has made a commitment on that. Such a system would give residents and visitors to the area the freedom to explore more with an easier, simpler ticketing system, just as we benefit from the schemes working in London. This much-needed Bill will further improve the use of buses around the country, and I look forward to supporting the Government on it later as it progresses through Parliament.

4.23 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a great honour to speak in this debate and to follow the eloquent and thoughtful contribution made by the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett), but nothing illustrates the north-south divide more than how we pronounce the word Bath. Equally, nothing illustrates it more than how envious we are of the system down here in London, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) mentioned. MPs are often accused by constituents of leading a glamorous life, but we have now spent four hours examining this important Bill. It is been a real honour to do it with my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), Labour's mayoral candidate for Greater Manchester, but that is what real politics looks like: politicians taking the time out to make sure we have good public policy that will benefit our constituents.

It is it hard to say it, but I congratulate the Minister. He was derailed by the small matter of Brexit. I know how frustrated he was that the Bill did not come before the House a few weeks ago, and how committed he is to it. We have some differences over what the regulations, loopholes and guidance will look like, and I shall push him on that later, but he has shown great commitment to the Bill.

I want a better deal for passengers, as does the Minister, I am sure. Indeed, there is no doubt that everybody in this House wants that for their constituents. An effective and efficient transport network supports jobs and underpins our local economies and communities, making travel easier for residents and connecting people with they want to go. I know that to be true from first-hand experience.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) was exactly right when he said that buses are not the social services. I recently visited a major property developer in Greater Manchester called Orbit Developments, which rents out a number of properties to businesses. It is a successful company that does astonishingly good work in providing high-value office accommodation, but staff there said that its rentable values are not the same as in London because people can get around this conurbation within the hour, whereas in Greater Manchester it can take half a day or longer.

Over the past few years there has been significant investment in transport infrastructure in my constituency of Wythenshawe and Sale East. The development of the new bus exchange at Wythenshawe town centre has brought an extra 4,000 passengers a week. At the bus and tram interchange, the tram route opened a year early, and in its first year carried 1.5 million passengers from Manchester city centre to Manchester airport. I am sure the Minister will know that having the airport in my constituency probably maintains around 100,000 jobs in the region. I am fortunate to have the most visited constituency anywhere in the north of England; 25 million people have come to Manchester airport over the past few years.

My constituency will also get High Speed 2, which is fundamental to this debate. Currently, journey times from Manchester airport to Euston are two hours and 25 minutes; that will go down to 59 minutes with the introduction of HS2. We really are beginning to think holistically about how we connect up the country.

On Friday, I will launch the £15 million enterprise link road for airport city north, in my constituency. Look at the added benefit: Amazon has just created 1,500 jobs on the airport city site, along with Virgin, which has 900 jobs, and Vodafone, which has 650 jobs. I am fortunate to represent an extraordinarily successful bit of the conurbation but, as the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) said, the key thing is how we connect up that conurbation. We need people in other parts of the conurbation to be able to get to the growth areas. There is nothing more important for that than this Bill, which is why I have waited to speak in this debate.

One part of the transport system that has always been ignored is the bus, perhaps because too many of us in this Chamber do not catch one often enough. It has been seen as a Cinderella service compared with the tram or the train, but that should not be the case. Bus services are a critical part of the transport network. Some 80% of all journeys throughout Greater Manchester are taken on the bus, yet, since deregulation, the number of passenger journeys has fallen from 355 million a year to 210 million a year. I cannot speak highly enough of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer). Not only was he a great leader of the council for 12 years, between 1984 and 1996, when he battled deregulation, but he has such expertise, showing how deregulation has really disbenefited the economy in Greater Manchester.

There has been a loss of 2.8 million commercial bus miles in the Manchester local authority area since 2006, with around 140,000 such miles lost across Trafford in the same period—those are the two local authority areas that cover my constituency. That worries me because, if the decline continues, people will lose faith in a mode

of transport that is essential to everyday life. I really do not blame the bus operators, as I have always supported private sector bus companies operating on our streets, but I do not understand why they are operating in a deregulated market. The first priority for companies in that market is to make a profit for shareholders, because they are forced to do so. That is how the market works, but something is fundamentally wrong if bus usage continues to fall. It cannot be good for operators and it is definitely not good for passengers. That brings me to the heart of the issue: the failure of a deregulated system to deliver a bus network that works in favour of the passengers.

I catch the bus all the time from my house to my constituency office, to Manchester for a night out, and to the Etihad to watch Manchester City. When doing some constituency work switching on the Christmas lights in Sale Moor village one Sunday evening, my wife and I caught the 41 First bus. The fare was £2.50 each, so it cost us £5 to get one way. Unfortunately, there was no return bus. It was a different operator, so we spent £5 coming back—£10 for a 4 or 5-mile round journey. For an extra pound or two, we should have got a taxi. That route is a particular pinch point in my constituency. First Bus runs seven 41 buses an hour, so Stagecoach has now decided to compete down that route with five 143 buses an hour. We now have 12 buses an hour going through a real pinch point in Sale Moor village. Each company is just trying to run the other off the road, which is not beneficial for passengers.

Deregulation creates a confusing picture. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) summed it up by mentioning that there are 22 different bus types and 140 different ticketing systems in the area. I talked to people from Transport for Greater Manchester, who could not tell me the best system. People need a mathematics degree to work out how best to travel around our conurbation. There is also no maximum cap. As an MP catching the bus to my constituency office and the tram to MediaCityUK, Manchester city centre or Manchester airport—one of my constituency's major employers—a constituency Friday can be a complicated day, and the costs rack up and up every time. If it is difficult for me, it must be much more difficult for my constituents. There is an integration issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington pointed out. People have to pay a premium for tickets covering two or more companies.

So what can be done to fix the issue? Thankfully, the Bill is the first thing. I thank the Secretary of State for bringing the Bill to the House. I believe that it will go some way to remedying the structural deficiencies in the bus market across Greater Manchester. As has been pointed out, the last Labour Government tried to take some measures, but the Transport Act 2000 did not go far enough, including measures that could not really be introduced because of complications. That could be the failure of this Bill, especially if we get the guidance wrong, so it is important that its provisions are passed, particularly the option for the newly elected mayor to consider bus franchising after a public consultation. The franchise system here in London, as I have pointed out, is second to none.

It is vital that there are no onerous obligations or hoops for transport authorities to go through when considering the case for franchising services. I really

would like the Minister to reassure us about that. Yes, it is right that there should be a tough assessment process and a consultation period so that the mayor can make an informed decision, but let us not make the mistakes of the 2000 Act by issuing unworkable regulations and guidance. It is vital that they are clear, transparent and unambiguous, and that they fully reflect the spirit of devolution. I acknowledge the Minister's commitment to follow through with what was agreed in the 2014 Greater Manchester agreement. Let that not be undone by regulations and guidance.

The provisions in the Bill have the potential to improve significantly transport for residents of and visitors to Greater Manchester, and the option to explore bus franchising is a potential game changer for our city region. A better co-ordinated, more stable network is essential if people are to have confidence in using buses and public transport more widely.

4.34 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane).

I broadly support the Bill, as do many Members in the House, and I acknowledge that a number of sector bodies, including the respected Urban Transport Group, also support it. However, I say "broadly" because I have concerns that it contains a fundamental deficiency, and I will come to that later in my speech.

The Bill promises what many have been pressing for since bus services were deregulated in the 1980s: the reintroduction, in particular, of local franchising powers. The model before deregulation was by no means perfect, but many, including sector bodies, believe that deregulation has been an unmitigated disaster.

London, of course, did not suffer the same fate—it did not lose its local decision-making and franchising powers. Those remain, and they have arguably supported the vast improvements seen in London under the auspices of TfL and the Mayor of London. Regrettably, areas outside London, including my home city of Bradford, saw bus services subject to intense and increased centralisation.

Local decision making on bus services is common sense. Ensuring local accountability to the travelling public is worth while and valuable. More importantly, decisions are better informed when they are made locally. Why else are we pursuing devolution deals up and down the country?

The case for reasserting local decision making over our local bus services is more compelling than at any time in recent history. That is because our local and regional public transport models are falling desperately short of their desired aims. Public transport is not delivering for our local communities, and that is for a number of reasons.

First, the use of local bus services in metropolitan areas outside London has faced steady and relentless decline. That is despite concerted and strenuous efforts on promotion and education over the years. That decline is compounded by rising private car use across the country. In the largest city regions outside London, the number of bus journeys has fallen by over 51% since 1984. That decline in bus usage, along with rising private car use, has caused widespread and persistent congestion on the roads in my constituency. However, the story of

[Judith Cummins]

Bradford is not unique. Congestion blights communities, impedes economies and causes frustration for the travelling public.

The need to improve bus services is compelling for another reason: the ongoing cuts to local government budgets. For many years, local authorities across the country have subsidised local bus services. Without those subsidies, many bus routes would be unviable, as low passenger numbers mean that they are uncommercial. As local government budgets are cut further, councils will have less and less capacity to continue to subsidise bus services. The size of these subsidies must not be underestimated. The public sector is responsible for 40% of private bus companies' income, mainly through fuel subsidies, support for the older person's pass and support for non-commercial services. Given these challenges, the need to cut congestion is beyond doubt.

The reintroduction of franchising is long overdue. Competition in most areas is limited, and as a result, excess profits are rife. Those excess profits undermine the viability of local bus services, and have done so for many years. Analysis by the Urban Transport Group reveals that profits in city regions are running at double the levels seen among bus operators in the capital. In London, bus operators make 4.1% profit on average, but the figure is 8.1% in city regions. That reduces the amount available to bus services. Dividends to shareholders have taken priority over the bus travelling public for far too long. The reintroduction of franchising across all regions is key; the operation of local bus services in London over recent decades offers strong and undeniable evidence of that.

I turn now to the fundamental deficiency in the Bill: the Government's decision to restrict franchising to those local authority areas where a devolution deal is in place. My suspicion is that the responsibility for conflating the reintroduction of franchising powers with this Government's devolution agenda lies at the door of DCLG Ministers. We must recognise that devolution deals involve complex negotiations across many local authorities and take time to finalise. Some are in place and others are imminent, but many others may take months or years. The decision to conflate local bus franchising with devolution is at best tactless and at worst cynical. All local areas, not only those that have agreed local deals, should have access to franchising powers. All local areas have a strong interest in improving local bus services for the communities they serve. Denying the benefits of this Bill to certain areas until devolution deals have been agreed is a cynical ploy. It delays the undoubted benefits of franchising until local areas relent. I urge the Minister to consider that point. Local bus services are too important to become a bargaining chip in this Government's devolution negotiations.

4.40 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I have heard lots of mention made of mayoral elections in this debate, so I should probably declare my interest in saying that I am a candidate in one of those races and will indeed seek to use the powers in this Bill should they become available to me. The comments I wish to make today are born out of 16 years as the Member of Parliament for Leigh and

the issues I have dealt with relating to bus services in my constituency, which frankly, in my view, have never been good enough in that time.

To put the debate into its proper context, I want, like my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer), to go back to the 1985 legislation. Let me read out the words of the then Transport Secretary, Nicholas Ridley, when he introduced the Second Reading of the Bill that became the Transport Act 1985:

“The Bill is about competition...We want to see competition providing an incentive to be efficient and to offer passengers a better quality of service. The customers...want greater efficiency, lower fares, smaller buses going into residential estates, greater comfort or a more polite and helpful driver. Competition is the key to these improvements. It is the key to increasing patronage.”— [Official Report, 12 February 1985; Vol. 73, c. 192.]

Having listened to the current Transport Secretary today, I can only say that he put the bravest face that he could on the situation and glossed over some of the real problems that we have seen in bus services ever since that flawed legislation was introduced. He tried to point to all the investment that the private sector had made and said that there had been service improvements, but I am afraid that that is not how the travelling public see it.

It is certainly not how I saw it when I was growing up. I was of an age where those changes directly affected me. I was 16 when the legislation came into being, and then saw it affect me in my teenage years and as I moved towards work. The Secretary of State is fond of reminding people, as he did today, that I was born down the M62 in Liverpool, but he needs to know that when I was one, my dad got a job in Manchester and we moved halfway between, so I was a regular user of the orange and white buses from Leigh bus station—the 26 and the 39—into Manchester; it used to cost us 10p. The minute the 1985 legislation was put in place, the price shot up, the services all changed, and nobody knew where they were. I could not get to work at my first job on the *Middletown Guardian* using the bus, because it was an unpaid job as a trainee reporter and I could not afford it. Those experiences live with people.

Anybody who has used the buses in Greater Manchester over the past 32 years since the changes came in would say the same. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) said, bus usage has gone down from 355 million journeys in 1986 to 210 million journeys now. The picture has been the same in South Yorkshire and other metropolitan areas that have been mentioned—a huge decline that is very much linked to the cost and quality of the services.

Graham Stringer: I am listening with interest to my right hon. Friend as he refers back to Nick Ridley's speech. Was he aware that when asked the then Secretary of State could give only one example in the whole world of a deregulated system such as the one he was going to impose on everybody in the rest of the country apart from London, and that was Kuala Lumpur?

Andy Burnham: It is interesting, is it not? I read the Second Reading debate and that point was put to the then Secretary of State many times, and, Kuala Lumpur notwithstanding, there was no other evidence to support the major changes. I seem to remember that there are plenty of rickshaws in Kuala Lumpur, but I do not know whether he was including that in his argument.

That Secretary of State and his Government inflicted an ideological experiment on the country without evidence to support it. The facts show that it has been an unmitigated disaster for the travelling public. Today, Members on both sides of the House should at least agree to call time on it and give the various parts of the country the powers they need to correct it.

I want to say something about coverage and quality of services. I know, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said in his excellent speech—I wish I could have been in that café with him while Eric Cantona played chess; it was a great image—that in parts of his constituency, particularly as it goes into the centre of town, buses are nose to tail. Particularly as they get towards Oxford Road in Manchester, people can see that the bus congestion is just ridiculous. I was with the vice-chancellor of Manchester University last week and she told me that the record number of buses that students had counted along Oxford Road was 34 continuously nose to tail. Of course, that has a terrible effect on traffic congestion in the city centre and it simply does not work.

We have saturation on the lucrative routes, as the bus companies see them, but, as we have heard today, they abandon more isolated areas that do not make a profit for them. The Higherfold estate in my constituency, which is in an isolated area, has constantly had problems with services being unilaterally withdrawn. Then there is an attempt to hold the passenger transport authority to account by saying, “Give us a subsidy or there is no service at all.” That leads to large subsidies for the bus companies that operate in such a way.

A year ago, a Mrs Healy wrote to me to say that the withdrawal of the 12 and 15 services from Leigh meant that her son could no longer get to work in Little Hulton and he had lost his job. No notice was given of the withdrawal of that service. This has a real impact on people’s lives and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East said, because many people in this Chamber do not use buses they might not understand how detrimental poor bus services can be to some people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington mentioned the Arrowfield estate. I recently went there to meet the Arrowfield and Hough End residents group, who told me about the withdrawal of the 84 service, which he mentioned and which, I think, served Withington hospital. The group said that that service had been withdrawn without any formal consultation with the community and the new service that was meant to replace it stopped at 5.30 in the evening, meaning that people could not get home from work. It is not acceptable for the public to be treated in this way.

Then, of course, there is the cost. In London between 1995 and 2016, fares rose in real terms by 36%, but in metropolitan areas, particularly Greater Manchester, fares rose by 60%. As we have heard today, the fare for a single journey can often cost more than £3. Because of the free-for-all, because operators are all running different ticketing systems and because of the chaos, we cannot have an integrated Oyster-style system, so, again, the public lose out.

During a consultation with young people in Bury a few months ago, I asked about the issues facing them, and the cost of transport came up again and again. I asked them whether they travelled on buses and whether

they could afford it—this goes back to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East—and the answer was that it was cheaper to get an Uber. If there are four of them, they can get an Uber together and it is cheaper than the bus.

Is it any wonder that the roads of Greater Manchester are becoming more and more congested as every year goes by? As the quality and the coverage of our bus service has gone down and the cost has gone up during the past 30 years, congestion has got worse and worse. That is affecting the air quality in Greater Manchester, and it means that Greater Manchester is in breach of the standards—the legal limits—for nitrogen dioxide. This simply cannot carry on, and I welcome the focus in the Bill on air quality.

I hope that the Government will go further and give Greater Manchester the powers to introduce a clean air zone. I ask the Minister: what reason can there be for the Government to exclude Greater Manchester from the list of places that they have allowed to introduce clean air zones, other than cost? Cost is not a good enough reason. It is not good enough that children are breathing in polluted air on the way to school. We look forward to his and the Government’s help in solving that problem.

If all of this were not bad enough in the experience of the travelling public, we are paying through the nose for it as well. A £100 million subsidy has been given to the bus companies annually, while at the same time they have been paying out large dividends to their shareholders. This system really does not work for the public in any meaningful way. As I say, it is time to call time on what is a failed ideological experiment.

I give credit to Sir Howard Bernstein, who has been mentioned, and Sir Richard Leese and Lord Peter Smith, as well as other leaders of Greater Manchester, who in my view were right to insist that the Bill should be part of the devolution deal that was done with Greater Manchester. I pay tribute to the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), for agreeing to that request, and indeed to the current Minister and the Secretary of State for sticking by the deal and making sure that the Bill was put before the House.

However, I want to press the Minister and the Government on a number of concerns. An issue that several colleagues have raised today is the decision to reintroduce the clause that will restrict municipal ownership of bus companies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) said, why restrict people, because we could at least have that as an option? From my point of view, as someone who might consider using the franchising powers, to have the fall-back option of a publicly owned company being able to come in and provide the service if there were no bidders on the terms sought would provide leverage, would it not? It would do so if they knew they could run a service because they had such an option up their sleeve. I say to the Minister that nobody wants anything to happen to the Bill that might disrupt its passage, but the Government should surely give people such flexibility so that they can make full use of the powers proposed in it.

Another issue I want to mention is the one raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton. He talked about the regulations that have been published very recently—within the past couple of days—relating to the Bill. They state that the powers in the Bill can be

[*Andy Burnham*]

given to a metropolitan mayoral area only if a “compelling case” is presented—not just a viable case, but a compelling one. In his winding-up speech, the Minister needs to spell out precisely what that means. Is he erecting a high hurdle to prevent metropolitan mayors from using the powers in the Bill?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones) *indicated dissent.*

Andy Burnham: The Minister shakes his head, but I want to see more reassurance than that. If he wants to intervene and say more about it now, he is more than welcome to do so. We cannot have such obstacles placed in our way that may actually limit our ability to use the welcome powers in the Bill.

I see that the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) has retaken her seat, and I do not want to finish without making some reference to her speech. Frankly, I did find it quite difficult to listen to at times. She said that it was right for London to have the powers it gained by being exempted from the original deregulation measures because London is so different. I will tell her one way in which London is different: for every £1 in transport investment that we receive in the whole of the north of England, London gets £6. That inequality has existed for many decades. Consequently, people in London have several public transport options. They can use high-quality commuter trains, the tube network, the docklands light railway, regulated buses, and the bike scheme and dedicated cycle lanes. My constituents have no such choice. They are stuck with using the bus if they do not have a car. That is the difference. It is so wrong of the right hon. Lady to say that what is acceptable for her constituents is not right for Opposition Members’ constituents, who are stuck in their cars.

Mrs Villiers: I am a great supporter of investment in infrastructure in the north of England. It is vital to rebalancing our economy. My point was that re-regulating the bus industry outside London will not solve problems with bus services, but arguably make them worse.

Andy Burnham: Instead of deleting the clause that lets us try, why does she not let us be the judge of that? My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton warned of the consequences when he was leader of Manchester City Council when deregulation was introduced. He has been proved right. If Government Members now believe in devolution, let them give us the chance to try. Then the right hon. Lady may be able to come back and say that it has not worked, but I believe that we will make it work. I am confident that we can make it work.

Mary Creagh: We just had a classic example of the Conservative party telling people in the north to know their place and be no better than they should be. In my right hon. Friend’s list of transport options in London, he neglected to mention the innovation by the recent Conservative Mayor of London, the cable car, which has been a disaster.

Andy Burnham: I agree with my hon. Friend that if the constituents of the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet and other London Members had a public transport

system like that of our constituents, there would be riots on the streets. They would not put up with it, yet we are told that we should. I am sorry, but we will not put up with it anymore; we are going to have improvements.

Jo Churchill: It is not a matter of north-south. In Suffolk, I would love a service like the one in London. The issue is therefore nothing pejorative like north-south, but the quality of service that all our constituents deserve. I hope that the Bill will start to unravel some of those inequalities.

Andy Burnham: I agree that it is not north-south. It is a problem in our political system: London-centricity. Why was London allowed to opt out in 1985 when everywhere else had to take part in the experiment without evidence to support it? Because most policy makers in the House of Lords, this place and the Government civil service live within the M25, they thought that the services were fine and that there was no problem because theirs were regulated, while everyone else was going through chaos. That explains why devolution is necessary. It means that we can fix the problem for the benefit of the travelling public.

I agree absolutely about the cable car. If there is the money here to throw at cable cars that people do not use, that makes the point about the inequality in transport investment. It is just not right.

Investment has been committed for HS2, but we are now considering two other potential major investments: HS3, or northern powerhouse rail, and Crossrail 2. In my view, HS3 is the highest transport investment priority for this country: high quality rail linking the great cities of the north. I would say that it is a higher priority than HS2, but it is absolutely a higher priority than Crossrail 2. If the Government put Crossrail 2 before HS3 in the queue for investment, they will perpetuate the gross inequality of many decades in transport investment in our country.

Mike Kane: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Does he agree that, for one Crossrail project, we could link Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and the four runways, creating 850,000 jobs and adding £97 billion to the economy?

Andy Burnham: I agree—that was the conclusion of the independent economic review. The Government should build HS2 and HS3 as one system. Why build one, go away and do the north another time? Why not build them together as a single high-speed railway and high-quality infrastructure project that will deliver those economic benefits? I say to the Government that we cannot have a northern powerhouse without that kind of investment—it is essential to delivering the economic benefits my hon. Friend described.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): While we are on the subject of HS2 and HS3, and while the Minister is in his place, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that HS3 goes ahead at the same time to ensure that we get the station locations right in each city centre? That argument is going on in South Yorkshire as well.

Andy Burnham: I agree, because there are benefits from linking HS2 and HS3. I would like a parkway station in my constituency—Leigh would be the place where the preferred HS3 route crosses HS2. The benefits

in terms of taking traffic off the M6 and the East Lancs are enormous. That is why they should be planned as a single scheme. I drive a lot around Greater Manchester and the north of England. Congestion is getting worse. Anybody travelling on the M62 today between Manchester and west Yorkshire, or between Manchester and Liverpool, or over to Sheffield, which is even worse, will know that the congestion is not sustainable. We are trying to attract people to invest in the northern powerhouse, but congestion could be the factor that deters them. The Government need to give us certainty about northern powerhouse rail so that we can begin to reassure people that the north will move, and that it will be the powerhouse that the Government have spoken about.

Graham Stringer: My right hon. Friend makes profound good sense about linking HS2 and HS3. Does he agree that the critical decision in getting both HS2 phase 2 and HS3 is the schedule in Parliament for the hybrid Bill? If the hybrid Bill for Crossrail 2 gets in front of that, we will not finish HS2 in most of our political lifetimes, and we will certainly will not integrate it with HS3.

Andy Burnham: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The Government need to be honest about their intentions. It would be a gross unfairness if they put Crossrail 2 ahead of HS3 or northern powerhouse rail, or even HS2, in the legislative or Treasury queue. I cannot see how that could possibly be allowed to happen. If they commit now to HS3, the investment potential that would be unlocked immediately would be enormous. I hope the Government listen carefully to that argument—I see the Minister nod. I am speaking not only for businesses in Greater Manchester, but for businesses across the north of England, which see the poor quality of transport as the biggest threat to our future economic prosperity.

If elected in two months' time, I intend to use the powers provided by the Bill to bring fares down in Greater Manchester, particularly for young people, as I have said. I intend to use the powers in the Bill to improve the quality and coverage of services, and to ensure that those isolated areas and more deprived parts of Greater Manchester have a reliable and regular service. I want to improve the travelling environment for all the public, but particularly for disabled people and visually impaired people. I want to do all of those things.

For the last 30 years, the public in Greater Manchester have had to put up with buses run in the private interest rather than the public interest. It is time to take our buses back and put people before profits.

5.3 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow such excellent speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), whom I was proud to serve as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Labour Government. I hope that he will be elected as Mayor of Manchester in May.

When I was shadow Transport Secretary, I found that there was a great deal of media attention if I said something about the railways but that very few people were interested in buses, yet in cities such as Wakefield, twice as many people travel by bus as travel by train. I

believe that everybody should have the right to get on a cheap, clean bus, no matter where they live, their age or if they have a disability. I am therefore pleased that buses are finally getting the attention they deserve and that Labour is supporting the Bill.

This is also a day for reflection on the Transport Act 1985, which has dominated the bus travelling lives of everyone in the House. It privatised and deregulated Britain's bus services outside London, since when the number of bus journeys outside the capital has fallen by more than a third. I remember growing up in Coventry. The bus was my lifeline to school and in and out of work when I was a Saturday girl at British Home Stores—I do not think that I made any pension contributions, but I will be checking my wage slips when I get home. There was a time in the heyday of the early '80s when children in Coventry travelled across the west midlands for 2p. That taught young people where the buses went, the routes, and the places they could go—we could go to the ice rink in Solihull; we did not have one in Coventry. That opened up all sorts of opportunities. If we do not get people travelling on buses when they are young, we will not persuade them to do so when they grow older.

Bus patronage in Yorkshire has halved since deregulation in 1985. The cut to services across Wakefield has left people on estates and in small towns and villages isolated. As colleagues have said about their own areas, it is cheaper in my city to get a taxi than to put yourself and three children on a bus—people in London forget that children outside London do not get free bus travel. The situation affects parental choices about where their children can go to school, because they have to think about whether they can afford the bus fares as well as school dinners and uniforms.

In London, which is the city whose Labour Mayor introduced the congestion charge, and which fought and won the battle against deregulation, bus passenger numbers have doubled. There we have it—numbers have halved in Yorkshire and doubled in London. When the Secretary of State talks about the number of bus journeys, we have to ask ourselves what it would have been without deregulation. The economy has grown, but in real terms bus patronage outside London has fallen.

There has been much waxing lyrical about investment from the private sector bus companies, but we forget—I have not heard this mentioned—that 41% of bus funding comes from the taxpayer. That has fallen from a figure of 46% when we left office in 2010. We, as democratically elected Members, and our local authority colleagues, as democratically elected local representatives, have a right to say how the money is spent and to see that buses are run as public services in the public interest, not as private services in the private interest.

At the last election, Labour promised more powers to regulate Britain's bus services, and as the Bill goes some way to doing that, we support the Government's U-turn. The fact that there are more bus journeys in London today than in the rest of country put together is an indictment of the past 30 years of bus policy under this and previous Conservative Governments, as well as the previous Labour Government. In the rest of the country, bus services are infrequent, run as monopolies and expensive. In London, as I said in my intervention on the Secretary of State, open data are widely available,

[Mary Creagh]

providing accurate and real-time information about buses. I use the Bus Checker app. It works in certain cities outside London, but not all of them. In most other parts of the country, bus travel information is held by bus companies and is not publicly available.

On funding concerns, there is no mention of money in the Bill. Buses are really important to the most vulnerable sections of our society—people on low incomes, the unemployed, the young, the disabled and the elderly. Blind people have a right to hear their stop called out; they should not have to rely on the kindness of other passengers. I have been on buses in London when, in a bit of a dream, perhaps thinking about some weighty matter before the House, I have found the audio-visual cues quite useful to rouse me from my reverie. Thanks to Labour's free bus pass, one third of all bus journeys are taken by older and disabled people. While our planes, trains and roads are seen as economically important, buses are seen as a Cinderella service. Local transport authorities need more powers, but franchising, advanced quality partnerships and ticketing changes are only one part of the solution. The other essential tool that councils need—money—is missing from this Bill.

In 2010, the spending review slashed the bus service operators grant by 20%, and the 2015 local government settlement announced funding cuts to local government of 24% in real terms over this Parliament. It is a disgrace that a Government who have pledged to close the north-south gap have been found in a report published a couple of weeks ago by the Institute for Public Policy Research to be investing 10 times more funding per person for transport projects in London than in Yorkshire. Research by the Campaign for Better Transport shows that Government cuts have forced councils to slash bus subsidies by £78 million since 2010. What has that meant in the real world? Nearly half of councils have withdrawn bus services. The pressure on councils in all areas of the country to divert money away from bus services is huge.

Although I welcome the fact that the Bill finally gives authorities powers to create integrated transport and ticketing systems, the Government must extend these powers everywhere. They must be extended to Wakefield and Leeds in West Yorkshire, not just to areas with metro Mayors such as Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Middlesbrough and Bristol. Some of the best bus services in Britain are provided by municipal bus companies that are still owned at arm's length by their councils, as we heard in the excellent speech made by my successor as shadow Transport Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

Cities such as Nottingham and Reading boast some of the best passenger satisfaction ratings in the country, but I am concerned that clause 21 of the original Bill would remove the rights of councils to set up municipal bus companies. Councils have a general power to promote economic and social development in their area, so I cannot understand why, if a council is giving planning permission for a new out-of-town shopping centre or a workplace such as a new build factory, it should be unable to provide the bus services that will be necessary to get people to and from those places. That should fall under the general economic powers of councils.

I hope that the Government will not seek to reintroduce clause 21, which is ideologically driven. We need a heavy dose of pragmatism and a lot less so-called competition-driven ideology when it comes to buses. In London's regulated system, the big five bus companies have managed to make a profit, and a regulated system operates across Europe. There is no reason why companies cannot operate and make money in the rest of the country, including my city of Wakefield. I hope the Secretary of State and the Minister will commit to improving bus services for all areas, not just cities with directly elected mayors.

My second major point is the environmental obligations that we need to put on bus operators to invest in ultra-low emission vehicles, such as those being rolled out in London by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan. We have an air pollution crisis in this country, and we know that buses can help to tackle pollution by being greener and by cutting congestion.

The Royal College of Physicians estimates that air pollution causes 40,000 early deaths in the UK each year. Some 38 of the Government's 43 air quality management areas, including Wakefield, have illegally high levels of nitrogen oxides—pollutants that cause respiratory diseases. It is very difficult to tackle this. Wakefield is at the intersection of the M1 and the M62 motorways, but there is also significant congestion in the city centre at rush hour, which is adding to our problems. These pollutants have been linked to heart disease and low birth weight in babies, so our constituents are affected before they are even born.

The Environmental Audit Committee, which I chair, published its report "Sustainability in the Department for Transport" last September. I hope that the Minister has read it; perhaps I will test him on some of its findings when he makes his winding-up remarks. We found that progress on tackling air pollution was too slow. Critically, the Government are set to miss the Committee on Climate Change's target for 9% of cars to be ultra-low emission by 2020. During our inquiry, we asked the Minister whether the 9% figure was reflected in his single departmental plan. We went to and fro over the issue. Eventually, in a letter from the civil servant responsible for this matter, we found out that the target was no longer 9%, but between 3% and 7%, with a mid-point of 5%. However, even that target is looking pretty unachievable because only 1.5% of England's vehicles are currently ultra-low emission. We will not hit the 5% target, and we might be lucky to hit 3% over the next three years.

We need to be on the most cost-effective path to tackle transport emissions, and that means that we should be looking at a 9% target. We have no confidence that the UK will achieve a 60% market share for ultra-low emission vehicles by 2030. There is absolutely no strategy or policy in this area beyond 2020—[*Interruption.*] I can see the Ministers talking. I will be happy to take an intervention from them if they can put me right.

Last year, the High Court found that the Government's plan to tackle air pollution was illegal. This Government have repeatedly delayed, postponed and pushed back the publication of their emissions reduction plan. This Bill is an opportunity to reverse that lack of ambition and incentivise the manufacture and uptake of zero-emission buses. Transport for London told my Committee that when the Government cut the 6p per kilometre

payments for hybrid buses through the bus service operators grant, the costs of making its entire double-decker fleet zero-emission suddenly ran out of control. My Committee heard that the amount of funding available through the local sustainable transport fund and the clean bus technology fund is too small and not of the scale necessary to tackle this issue across our country.

The big bus operators in London are investing in green buses—as we have heard, London gets more bus grant—but its old buses are cascaded down to cities such as mine. Diesel pollution problems are transported out of London to cities that have exactly the same problems, but less money to sort them out. That is fundamentally unfair.

Labour Lords amended the Bill to require all new buses commissioned under partnership and franchising schemes to meet low-emission requirements. I urge the Government to keep that amendment. I will be grateful to the Minister if he addresses that point directly in his closing remarks.

Everybody should have access to a decent bus service. When I was shadow Environment Secretary, I got an email about a young man in Chichester. His parents told me that he had a place to study at Chichester college, but the council had just cut the bus service. They said, “We don’t have a car. What is he supposed to do?” I was really heartbroken. I thought to myself that that was the end for this young man. He was 16 years old and the thing that he wanted to do—to go to college so that he could get on in life—was being denied to him.

Physical mobility through the use of buses is key to social mobility in our lives. If a person cannot move out of their village, they will always stay where they are. We want people to get out of their villages so that they can access towns and cities, and the educational, leisure and shopping opportunities that exist in our neighbourhoods. That is really important for local shops, particularly in this internet age. The Government’s deregulation of buses has been disastrous for cities such as Wakefield. The Bill gives us an opportunity to tackle air pollution and congestion, but without a cross-departmental strategy involving the Treasury and the Department for Communities and Local Government, its impact will be limited.

The Department for Transport’s own figures predict that, by 2040, numbers of bus journeys will have fallen faster than numbers of journeys using any other form of transport. We have to stop that decline. We have to tackle air pollution and carbon emissions. The Bus Services Bill is the first attempt to improve bus services in our country and to give people the opportunities that they deserve. I do hope that Ministers will listen to my Committee’s concerns about air pollution and ensure that we do not miss that opportunity.

5.19 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I should like to thank Madam Deputy Speaker for allowing me to pop out for 15 minutes to lobby for more funds for my schools. Let us hope it was worth while. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and to get an angle on the environmental impacts of the Bill. It is also a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), and I wish him well with his forthcoming election campaign. I note that other candidates are available.

I do not wish to prolong the Manchester versus London debate, but it was noteworthy that we heard comparisons between London and Manchester during the Transport Committee evidence session on the Bill. I remember one of the partners from KPMG saying that there should not be a tendency to think that what works in London will work well in Manchester, and that there were differences between the two cities, not least the reduced subsidy in London and the lack of congestion charging in Manchester, which I believe Manchester will have to deal with. It was also pointed out that Manchester had a smaller market in that respect. That was an interesting debate, although I do not wish to encourage it to take place again here.

I want to talk about the three forms of organisation that deliver bus services to the country: partnerships, franchising and municipals. In so doing, I also want to welcome the Bill. I hope that it will shake up the system and deliver more innovation and more entrants into the bus market. It struck me and other members of the Committee that the big five bus operators deal with 70% of the market, and that when we asked them to give us examples of where they were competing with each other, as they had told us they did a great deal, they struggled to give any. Anything that shakes them through the system will be no bad thing.

I want to talk first about partnerships. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) spoke highly of the Nottingham municipal, and I certainly would not wish to take away the awards that that company has won, but I would like to put in a plug for the Brighton & Hove bus company, which provides the service near me. I spent two happy hours in its depot talking to the team. It is a partnership and a private operator, and it has delivered 5% passenger growth year on year since 2003. It has been remarkably successful, working in partnership with its local authority. It already has a ticketing system in which it reimburses a competitor in the region; it already has that shared system. When I talked to members of the team about the benefits of audio-visual provision, they seemed a bit surprised because they already have it on their entire fleet. Their fleet is also incredibly green. I should like to advance that company as a good example of a partnership operator working incredibly well. I therefore welcome the extension of local transport authority powers beyond infrastructure and towards allowing authorities to market bus services and provide information and ticketing concepts. I believe that that will be a good move.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman is making a fair point. In my constituency, a smaller operator has been in operation since deregulation. Jim Stones Coaches is renowned for providing an excellent service to the community; it is a very community-focused company. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the big players have often not shown the same levels of responsiveness to their local community and the same levels of innovation, and that they now need to take a long, hard look at themselves and really start to deliver for the public?

Huw Merriman: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Perhaps for too long we have had the same players serving the same routes, and I think that the system needs shaking up. I believe that the Bill will do just that.

[*Huw Merriman*]

I was slightly concerned by attempts in the other place to make the powers that could be brought in through advanced quality partnerships a prescriptive matter. If we make it prescriptive, there is a danger that we will take the innovation out of local transport authorities. Indeed, if no further funds are going to those authorities, telling them how they should operate seems to be contrary to the kind of innovation that we are trying to put in place. Equally, while I welcome the consultation that will be required by local authorities for advanced quality partnerships, there is a danger that this requirement could place too heavy a burden on the authorities, resulting in nothing at all occurring. That certainly applies to consultation of a bus operator's employees, which made no sense to me from a local authority perspective.

I also welcome the introduction of enhanced partnerships, which are a bit of a halfway house between advanced quality partnerships and franchising. They cover a wider geographic service area but have powers over timetabling and frequency and can set improvement objectives and analyse performance. The drawback in the Bill as it stands is that the introduction of an enhanced partnership requires a sufficient number of bus operators in the scheme not to object. Such a veto may mean that enhanced partnerships are unlikely to occur at all. Perhaps we need more checks and balances for bus operators, rather than giving them the power of veto. If I have misunderstood that, I would welcome a clarification.

Moving on to franchising, I was struck that the powers are limited to mayoral combined authorities, but it was noted somewhere in the policy documentation that they were deemed to be sufficiently democratically accountable. That may be a concern for my constituents in East Sussex, who are going to the polls in May and would hope that the council is democratically accountable. However, I take the point that our current system of county councils and district councils does not have the same clarity of power making and accountability as a mayoral combined authority.

Kevin Foster: Torbay has a unitary authority and responsibility for transport partly lies with Devon County Council and partly with Plymouth City Council. Does my hon. Friend agree that combined authorities normally bring together a main urban area with its rural surroundings in a democratically accountable body?

Huw Merriman: I agree. There is some power in the argument for more unitary authorities and for legislative incentives to encourage authorities to get together to form a unitary authority. In a way, the Bill may provide that incentive, because I note that Cornwall Council has automatic franchising powers should it wish to use them, but it does not have a directly elected mayor because it is a unitary authority. That may be an incentive for other local authorities to combine. In what is a bit of a sword of Damocles argument, Cornwall is not actually going to go down the franchising route, but we heard evidence from Cornwall Council and the feeling was that just having that power perhaps got the council a better deal through a partnership and that it is happy to persevere for the time being.

While the Bill would allow the Secretary of State to grant franchising powers to authorities that are not mayoral combined authorities, I note that four factors must be met before that can occur. Cornwall might say that it could meet them, but I can understand the concern that the power will go no further than authorities that have an elected mayor. The Lords sought to widen franchising to all authorities that want it, but I note that no quality contract schemes have been put in place since 2000. Some areas has attempted to do so but have struggled—Tyne and Wear is a recent example—but the very fact that none has made it leads me to suggest that we are in danger of asking for wider franchising powers for authorities that would not want to take them up. Franchising can also be high risk for local transport authorities due to negotiating powers and back-office requirements. I certainly hope that we do not end up with the bigger players taking advantage of better lawyers and accountants to give them better terms, with town halls suffering as a result.

Turning to municipals, I note that proposed new section 123O under clause 4 states that LTAs can be an operator of last resort when a service provider ceases to deliver a service for the remainder of its contract. In that sense, the direction of travel is to allow LTAs to step in, yet the Bill prohibits municipals at the same time. Part of me feels that, when we consider devolution and localism, a closer look at what municipals can do would be welcome. That said, I am conscious that local authorities should be enablers, rather than providers, and that municipals should perhaps be more of a last resort.

Andy Burnham: Can the hon. Gentleman see that, as a fall-back option, it would help a combined authority that is going through the process of franchising? Having an operator of last resort would focus the minds of those bidding for a tender, would it not? It would strengthen the negotiating hand of the public sector over the private sector. For that reason alone, does he see the benefit of that option? Without necessarily wanting to use it, the existence of the option would improve the negotiating position of the public sector.

Huw Merriman: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Indeed, as the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellum), will recall, my preference was for a hierarchy that starts with all authorities being required to go down the partnership route. If that route does not succeed, authorities would then move to bringing in franchising. If that does not succeed, municipals would be there as a last resort.

I have spoken about how Cornwall is delivering a good partnership and how its sword of Damocles is therefore not required. Having made that point, it would be difficult for me to contradict the right hon. Gentleman, even though I am sure his suggestion will not always find favour with Conservative Members. I am alive to the fact that, in the other place, Lord Ahmad talked about keeping the eight remaining municipal providers and wanting to see them continue to thrive. He said that it is perhaps an area for discussion and further debate, which is what we have just had.

Finally, I will address some of the Bill's other provisions and some of the amendments made in the other place. As the Select Committee report mentions, new powers for partnerships to control moving traffic offences, as

currently exist in London, are well worth considering. I also take the point about compulsory concessionary travel schemes for 16 to 19-year-olds. I am not sure where Opposition Front Benchers got to with their policy but, in all fairness, given that we require young people to stay at school or in some form of training to the age of 18 and that over-65s are able to get a free concessionary bus pass without means-testing, such a policy would support our young people, if funding were available. The Select Committee heard yesterday that young people facing crippling insurance costs are unable to drive and are therefore unable to get around.

I also warmly welcome the move to get open data into the system. Open data are vital for getting new entrants into the market, opening it beyond the big five. There has been talk of turning bus routes into assets of community value, in the same way that pubs can be. If open data are in place, with any bus company having the ability to apply for a route, perhaps there is no need to keep the notice period open for six months because the information will already be there. I also welcome the improved ticketing schemes. Having audio-visual media on all buses is hugely welcome and is a good example of how the Government have taken a lobbying proposal one stage further to deliver an enhanced deal.

Overall, I absolutely welcome the Bill, which will shake up the industry. I hope some of my suggestions will also be thrown into the mix. I wish the Bill well in its passage.

5.33 pm

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): Second Reading provides a welcome opportunity to discuss the pressing need for changes to bus services in England. Not long after I was first elected in 2010, I met a group of local campaigners who were lobbying a bus company to think again about cuts to a route that would have made it difficult for their children to get to school. Many more changes have followed since, with many further cuts to services. I have championed the campaign and cause ever since those local people first raised it with me.

Change is desperately needed in England's bus services. Deregulation has been an unmitigated disaster, particularly for people who live in constituencies such as mine where buses are the only option. It is now more than 30 years since the deregulation of the bus industry outside London, which came with the promise that competition would provide greater efficiency, lower fares and, above all, greater passenger numbers. On every one of those measures, deregulation has failed: bus services have become less competitive, less efficient, more expensive and less convenient for the people I represent. Instead of allowing operators the freedom to provide the services that customers want, deregulation has given operators the freedom to do whatever they think is necessary to maximise their profits. Instead of driving competition, as we were promised, it has allowed operators to carve up regions such as the north-east and run local networks as their own private monopolies—that is a strange form of competition indeed.

Across Wearside, deregulation has also enabled operators to cut or needlessly change routes deemed not profitable enough—it is not that they are not profitable, just that they are not making enough money—leaving whole areas without a service. Despite that, operators continue

to receive significant taxpayer subsidy, with little to no accountability. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that bus patronage has declined everywhere but London over the past 30 years. The knock-on effect is one of ever-declining services and rising subsidies in a growing number of local communities. That has certainly been the experience in my constituency and many others across the north-east. I therefore welcome the Government's recognition that we need to change the way buses are run in this country, but this Bill falls far short, and I fail to understand the Secretary of State's rationale for rejecting the amendments made in the other place on the powers that could be given to local authorities.

As the only part of mainland Britain to be spared the disasters of deregulation in the 1980s, in London taxpayer subsidies are used to maintain and improve services in the public interest. Instead of having a network of cosy monopolies, as we have in the north-east, bus operators in London must enter a competitive tendering system that is kept under continuous review by Transport for London, which controls fares and plans the network. Companies that fail to provide a good service are replaced by others that can do a better job—that is as it should be. Thanks to that system of competitive franchising, Londoners today have access to an extensive bus network that can take them all across the capital. Although I of course recognise that as the capital city London provides different and unique opportunities to operators, there are lessons we can and should take for how we run our buses across the rest of the country, too. Bus services in London are fully integrated with the rest of the capital's public transport network, and Oyster smart ticketing and contactless payments are a standard requirement. Thanks to the Mayor of London's new hopper fare, Londoners can travel on a second bus for free within one hour of touching in on the first. I look on with envy at the kind of modest change we can make that would make a real difference to the people I represent—if only we were given the powers to make it possible.

The issue of value for money for the taxpayer is important, because buses in London achieve far better returns than buses in any other part of the country, with decreasing levels of subsidy and less subsidy than there is in many metropolitan areas. Let us compare that with the situation in which we find ourselves in the north-east, where we have zero integration of routes and fares; limited use of smart ticketing and new technology; confusing and extortionate pricing structures; ever-changing and inconvenient timetables; routes chopped and changed all the time; older people unable to get to hospital; and young people unable to get to college. I could go on and on with that list. That is why I supported efforts by Nexus and the North East Combined Authority to use existing legislation to re-regulate bus services through the introduction of a quality contract scheme in Tyne and Wear. Many Members have rightly talked about the experience we had in Tyne and Wear. It was a source of real disappointment that we were not able to make that change and that that scheme was rejected. That was a mistake, but none the less it was the decision that was taken. As others have said, that legislation was, unfortunately, flawed in some respects and it was overly complicated, but of course we do not yet know whether Ministers could set that right and allow the north-east the power to introduce that kind of scheme in future. I think we made the case during that process. The issues

[Bridget Phillipson]

raised by the quality contract scheme board were not ones that denied the fact that the north-east faced big challenges and needed to address the bus market, and I hope that Ministers will now look carefully at the case the north-east can make for taking those powers back.

I welcome the fact that this Bill is a limited acknowledgment by the Government of what many of us have been arguing for years: that the current system of bus service provision in England is not fit for purpose. For reasons that are unclear to me, the Government intend to press ahead in overturning the amendments that would allow change in places such as the north-east. I appreciate that we have heard much about a two-step process and the need for a compelling case to be made, but I think the north-east can make that case. I would, however, appreciate greater clarity from the Minister as to where that bar will be set. Will it be set at such a level as to prevent that from happening, or can we be assured that there will be a genuine process to allow areas such as the north-east to demonstrate the potential benefits to the local economy and travelling public from taking on the franchising model again? I hope the Minister can say more about that when he responds, and I look forward to the opportunity to discuss the matter with him further when the Bill is in Committee.

The north-east has a strong case that franchising makes sense for the region and will benefit passengers. If the Government are really serious about creating a competitive market for local bus services throughout England and stimulating growth in areas such as the north-east, they have nothing to fear from granting franchising powers to areas such as mine. If the north-east is to fulfil its economic potential and to realise the potential of the great talent, businesses and people we have, we need a Government who will give us the powers to make that happen so that we can support businesses, jobs and growth. Transport is central to that. Transport connections in the north-east are poor and hold back our local economy and our businesses. The Bill provides us with a rare opportunity to reform a broken bus market and put the interests of passengers ahead of profits. I urge Ministers to consider the north-east's strong case and give us the powers we need to grow our economy.

5.40 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson); I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that we dressed identically today by accident—it was not so that we could fill in as each other's body doubles. I intend to speak briefly to lay out my concerns, and to touch on an amendment that my colleagues and I hope to table at a later stage, which I hope the Minister will take into account in his response.

In Sheffield, as in many metropolitan areas, deregulation was supposed to herald competition, but instead, as we have heard, that competition resulted in false monopolies and provoked a disaster in bus services throughout the country. We have heard lots of Members reminisce about the difference in performance before deregulation; I am afraid I cannot join in as deregulation happened two years before I was born. Nevertheless, I hope to be able to benefit from the improvements that the Bill heralds.

The past 30 years have seen a decline in passenger numbers, a decline in routes that has affected some of the most hard-to-reach areas, and a rise in prices. In metropolitan areas, including Sheffield, prices have risen by 75% since 2005, which is unaffordable and unacceptable. Bus changes introduced in South Yorkshire last year have seriously blighted the lives of some of my most vulnerable constituents, cutting off an entire estate in Arbourthorne, an area with particularly low car-ownership levels; reducing services to areas with exceptionally high numbers of older people; scrapping entirely the route to the Northern general hospital; and cutting off the Chancet Wood and Abbey Brook areas from nearby Woodseats, where the nearest shops, dentists, doctors and other services are.

When the changes were made, the public consultation was woeful. It was conducted practically in secret over a few weeks in the summer, and the considerable evidence presented to demonstrate demand and needs has been all but dismissed by First and Stagecoach. Sheffield City Council has unfairly taken the blame: the changes cannot be separated from the unprecedented cuts to local authority funding, because the amount of money available for supported services has been shrinking.

Franchising is clearly desirable to ensure that all areas are adequately covered. That is preferable to the current situation, in which certain routes—that is, those from densely populated residential districts to central hubs and back—are well served at peak times, while rural and sparsely populated areas are left out. In short, my constituents have been ill served by deregulation. For Sheffield, where well over a third of the population does not own a car, that really matters.

The demand should be there, but it is being stifled by a strategy that could be said to be managed decline, with the creaming off of the profitable routes and abandonment of the rest. We have heard time and again that in London, which avoided deregulation, patronage has doubled, mileage has increased, and fares have risen at a lower rate than in the city regions. The Lords amendments to overturn the nonsensical, ideological decision to bar metropolitan authorities from forming new municipal bus companies were very welcome. I repeat the calls made by many Members today for the Government to keep those changes.

Sheffield's fractured bus service needs a workable, region-wide and comprehensive approach, not more dogma, which was wrong in the '80s and is wrong now. I very much welcome the proposals in the Bill, but would like to see them rolled out to everywhere in the UK, not just those places that will benefit from metropolitan mayors.

I wholeheartedly support the provisions to increase transparency by making use of open data. The Bill includes powers to make regulations on the release and format of open data on routes, timetables, punctuality and fares. The other place scrutinised this in detail, and its Members were concerned about the burden it could impose on transport companies. However, wherever open data has been introduced, it has been demonstrated to reduce the burden on authorities and, crucially, to empower passengers and passenger groups to hold bus companies to account—something that has been sorely lacking in recent times.

Open data as infrastructure was conspicuous by its absence in the Government's digital strategy today. The

format of that open data is crucial. I urge the Minister to look at Ofcom's work on broadband speeds to find a perfect example of how complex data can be distilled and presented in a way that enables passengers to hold operators to account. That can only work if the format is easily understandable and presentable. I would welcome a clear indication from the Minister on that.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport released its digital strategy today. Regrettably, it is a document that is short on ambition for our digital infrastructure, leaving 400,000 small and medium-sized businesses without superfast broadband, and vast swathes of our rural communities ill connected. However, the ambition of ensuring access to digital infrastructure for all can be served in unusual ways, including through the provisions of the Bill, so I intend to table an amendment that I hope will improve passenger experiences and the public's access to free wi-fi. The benefits of public internet access are abundantly clear. Today, we access mobile data on a scale not seen before. Since 4G came into public use, mobile data traffic has increased by 600% to well over 70 million gigabytes. We are using data on the go to access our emails, to stream TV and radio, and to conduct video conferences. By the end of the month, many have to top up their data and spend yet more money on what should be considered a fourth utility.

Today's digital strategy states:

"The UK's digital infrastructure must be able to support this rapid increase in traffic, providing coverage with sufficient capacity to ensure data can flow at the volume, speed and reliability required to meet the demands of modern life."

But those words are simply meaningless if we do not deliver proper access everywhere.

I urge the Minister to include in franchising agreements as they come up for renewal a commitment by the operators to deliver free wi-fi on buses. It is already in place on trains, and there is no reason that commuters within cities should not share the same benefits as those between cities. I hope the Minister will seriously consider that as the Bill, which will deliver vastly improved services to passengers across the country, passes through the House.

5.47 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): At last, at last—finally, the Bus Services Bill has arrived. We rejoice at its arrival and want to ensure that it does not disappoint. It is a bit like the experience that I expect many of us have had as bus passengers. We wait for a long time at the bus stop, finally spying a bus on the distant horizon, only for our hearts to sink as it approaches and we see the destination sign, because, after all that waiting, the Bus Services Bill is marked, "Franchising for mayors and combined authorities only." For most of the country, it will be a long wait for better buses if the Government get their way and carry out their threat to reverse the improvements made to the Bill before it arrived here. We will revisit this argument in Committee, but I urge the Minister to consider leaving the Bill in its improved state so that everyone gains.

We have heard excellent contributions from both sides of the House. It is rare that we discuss buses, but we have done the subject justice today. As it happens, we have heard from a glittering array of former shadow Secretaries of State for Transport, with some very fine contributions. I am deeply conscious that almost everyone

who has spoken is more experienced in the House than I am, so I listened to their wise counsel and have learned a lot.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman), who chairs the Transport Committee, rightly pointed out that it was disappointing that the Bill was not published alongside the vital guidance and secondary legislation. I should say in passing that I pay tribute to the officials who have worked very hard on the Bill. Obviously, an 18-month wait gives more scope for more work, so we have some sympathy, but the lengthy draft guidance did come rather late, which has made it harder for everyone to scrutinise it sufficiently closely.

My hon. Friend and her Committee also noted that the language used in the draft guidance is rather vague in a number of areas. We have heard the phrase "compelling case" mentioned a number of times today, but it is too vague. There should be no room for ambiguity or subjectivity in such important guidance, which is supposed to outline how the powers in the Bill will be put into practice. I hope the Minister, in his response, can give some clarification on those points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) gave us an important historical account of how the Bill came about. He rightly reminded us that, although there was no golden age, things were very different 30 or 40 years ago, and people could actually get around. He was also the first to rightly query the barrier the Government are setting in terms of those offered franchising.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), in a very witty—almost Cantona-esque—contribution, queried the opportunities the Bill provides to improve the environmental friendliness of buses, and he made a good offer to the Government on behalf of Greater Manchester, expressing its willingness to prove that the model can actually work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), in a powerful and passionate contribution, which absolutely showcased her detailed knowledge of the subject, sang the praises of her city. She persuaded us, as if we needed any persuading, that buses can be glamorous. She also explained how success had been achieved in her city through well-trained staff, good leadership and partnerships that work. She pointed out that that is slightly at odds with what some of us would see as the Secretary of State's approach, which seems to be more concerned with not co-operating with Labour authorities than with putting passengers' best interests first.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and a number of others pointed out the very high cost of bus travel at the moment. He did find it within himself to praise the London system, which must have been hard. He also pointed out that many other European cities operate such a system and that it can be very successful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), with his customary gusto, reminded us that his city is much visited and that Manchester airport is in his constituency, as if anyone needed reminding. He, too, explained the very high costs faced in constituencies and warned that the guidance must not make this process unworkable. My hon. Friend the Member for

[Daniel Zeichner]

Bradford South (Judith Cummins) rightly pointed out that bus passengers must not be used as a bargaining chip in devolution discussions.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) reminded us of where all this came from: the ideological experiment that, in his words, has been inflicted on the public, and he is absolutely right to call time on it. He also raised important air quality issues, calling for a clean air zone. He, too, urged the Government to provide clarity on the term “compelling case”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) rightly reminded us of the cost for families, which has been a recurring theme in the debate. People in London would do well to remember that the relatively low cost of services enjoyed here is quite unlike the costs elsewhere, particularly for families. The examples that have been given of it being cheaper to get a cab are very telling. My hon. Friend, too, spoke strongly about the environmental issues. She also said that the funding issues have not been addressed by the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) stressed that it is the London model that is competitive at the moment, not the model elsewhere. She rightly praised colleagues in the north-east for their worthy and doughty attempts to get a quality contract. She also rightly concluded that, given that all that work has been done, the logic would be to continue and conclude it.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) made important points about open data. I note her comments about free wi-fi, and we will be pursuing that.

We are in the perhaps unusual but happy position of rather agreeing with the Government on much of this Bill, which was, in our view, much improved by the changes made during its passage through the other place. It now offers a step back from the problems created 30 years ago, offering an extension of the system that has worked well in London since then. However, for anyone concerned that competition is being taken out of the system, let us be very clear that it is not: it is being moved from on the road to off the road. The London system is highly competitive, ironically, unlike many other areas that have lapsed into near-monopoly status, with powerful operators able to see off competition from new entrants. We support the changes because they are a step forward and provide the opportunity of improving services for passengers, but we also know the risks of competition, and so we will be demanding strong safeguards, particularly in protecting workers from suffering a race to the bottom.

The Bill offers new forms of partnership, which we also support, because, put simply, one cannot run a bus service without the road space to do so, and we know how controversial that can be in many places. It is therefore vital that there is a constructive relationship between those who run the services and those who plan and maintain the road network and supporting infrastructure. We also know that in different places different kinds of relationships have grown up. We want to respect those differences and acknowledge where they are successful, so a range of different types of partnership makes sense. However, it is not clear that the Department has always had a good grasp of what is happening on the ground—a point rather admitted in

recent answers to written questions—and better analysis would provide more confidence, because there is a danger of a plethora of poorly understood arrangements emerging. The one model that makes the most obvious sense—allowing elected local authorities to take a holistic approach and run the services themselves—is of course being deliberately ruled out by the Government. We believe they are wrong to do that.

We are pleased that the Bill now includes provisions on audio-visual announcements, environmental protection and passenger representation, but there are still certain aspects that we hope to amend, and I look forward to visiting those issues in Committee. We do not, for example, believe that the employment protection provisions are strong enough, and we would like to see something concrete on bus safety reporting and disability awareness training for bus drivers, not just reassurances from Ministers that those issues will be dealt with at a later date.

We welcome the data provisions in the Bill. Opening up data should lead to greater transparency and opportunities for innovation around transport apps, as we have heard from a number of hon. Members. It is particularly welcome for fares, the data on which are currently siloed, incomplete, and inconclusive. It is astonishing that in the 21st century any provider of a service should think so little of their passengers that they do not even tell them the price before the start of the journey. Just stepping back and thinking about this for a moment tells us all we need to know about the privatised bus market. It is a 30-year experiment that failed: 30 years in which operators could have pursued innovation and delivered the promises made by the Conservatives when they tore the national system apart, but in reality 30 years when services have declined, fares have risen, and passengers have been taken for granted rather than cherished. Passengers deserve much better, including better information. They deserve to know more, and we will press for more information on issues such as the publication of data on bus accidents.

We already have a roads investment strategy, a rail investment strategy, and, although we are still waiting for it, a cycling and walking investment strategy, so is it too much to ask that we see a proper, national conversation about, and a long-term plan for, bus investment? The Government say that the bus industry is a private industry and thus does not require an investment strategy, but, as we have heard, there is significant public funding going into it—about 40% of the revenue comes from the public purse. We need to have a proper think about how best to utilise that money to ensure that while bus operators have strong businesses, they also provide the best value for money for all bus passengers.

While we hear what the Secretary of State has said about this, I hope that he reconsiders his ambition to revisit several of the amendments made to this Bill in the other place. We have already removed an ideological clause banning local authorities from forming their own bus companies, because that not only seems antithetical to a Bill that has been repeatedly described as an enabling Bill intended to allow local authorities to pick a system of governance best suited to their local needs, but feels bolted on. Indeed, it was not mentioned at all in the original bus reform workshop documents. As others have pointed out, why on earth limit a model that works so well? Some of the best operators in the country, as we have heard, are municipals. That being

the case, let us have more of them—let us have more success. That is the Labour way, and that is the route we will be pursuing in future.

Local authorities all over the country need and deserve greater control over their bus services, whether in rural areas, conurbations, or in between. It is positive that the Government have agreed as a condition of their city deals to give combined mayoral authorities London-style powers over their bus networks, and they must honour that promise, but what about the rest?

I fear that this patchwork approach will lead to inconsistency and leave many areas with no route to improvement at all. The partnership options in the Bill look promising, but in many areas bus operators with a monopoly of the local market might not be minded to enter a partnership agreement.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and I have a great deal of sympathy with his points. I remind him that the Bill was a result of requests from Labour local government in Greater Manchester—I would say that it is a Labour Bill for that reason—and was part of the devolution deal that was demanded. Although we may have frustrations with the Government's intentions to reverse some amendments, will my hon. Friend give me an assurance that no one on the Labour Benches will seek to prevent any of the legislation getting on to the statute books so that the powers can be used by metro mayors as soon as possible?

Daniel Zeichner: I quite understand my right hon. Friend's point and I can assure him that we support the Bill, but we just want to make it better, and better for everybody. We think that local authorities need a full range of options on the table.

Bus reform is back on the agenda—better late than never—and there is clearly cross-party support for this measure. We all want to get the best deal for bus passengers, wherever they live. Anything less would do a disservice to all those people relying on bus services every day. As has been pointed out, more public transport journeys are taken by bus every day than by any other mode of public transport. Buses deserve more attention, bus passengers deserve more attention, and I hope that the passage of this Bill will start to correct the damage done more than 30 years ago and lay the foundations for the modern transport systems our country needs and deserves.

6.1 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is with great pleasure that I close this Second Reading debate. We have had a very good debate about a very good Bill, and it has been fantastic to hear such enthusiasm for buses on both sides of the Chamber. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their keen participation and engagement. It is clear that we all want buses to thrive because of their impact on our local communities.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out, the aim of the Bill is to increase bus passenger numbers and to improve services by creating new options and opportunities. It also delivers on our devolution deals so that local authorities and bus operators can work together on a bus strategy that works locally. That is how local authorities can work to cut congestion,

support businesses and improve air quality, and it is how operators can increase their patronage. The Bill will build on good practice to make sure that we have an industry that is open and accessible to all.

Many Members—particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton West (Chris Green) and for Bath (Ben Howlett), and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown)—welcomed the introduction of a requirement to provide on-board information throughout Great Britain, which will mean that all passengers, particularly disabled passengers, will be able to board a bus with confidence. Many colleagues have said how everybody benefits from that—I completely agree.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Although, of course, we support this initiative, will the Minister confirm that small rural operators that are struggling to keep costs down and vital lifeline services alive might be exempted from the initial provision of the audio-visual services?

Andrew Jones: We will work through the phasing of the introduction of the requirement, but we do not want to hold back from it. There is a slight cost implication for operators, but we think that that will be more than offset by the extra patronage they will secure if people are more able to use the buses. This is a business-generating approach, but we will treat the issues for the smaller operators with great sensitivity. We have taken a very deliberate approach, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun will appreciate that it focuses on the information to be provided, not on any particular technology. We hope to consult on how to take this forward later in the year.

Many colleagues have welcomed the provisions on open data, and the Bill will ensure that passengers know how much their fares will cost and at what time to catch their bus. That important aspect of the Bill will benefit passengers right across England, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), among others, rightly recognised. Personally, I think that it is one of the most exciting parts of the Bill.

By introducing new advanced ticketing schemes, the Bill ensures that new and existing developments in technology can be accommodated. That will enable multi-operator ticketing schemes to be introduced so that passengers can purchase tickets that will be accepted by different operators across scheme areas, and across different transport modes, such as rail or tram. Many colleagues have highlighted how complex catching buses can be—if multiple tickets need to be bought, for example—and we hope that the ticketing provisions will get rid of that problem.

One of the key proposals in the Bill is the new enhanced partnership. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) recognised, some partnerships are already working very effectively right across our country. That is true—we all know that—but more can be done. Providing the opportunity for improved co-operation between local authorities and bus operators will mean a more integrated transport network for urban and rural communities. Passengers, local communities, local businesses and the environment will benefit from improvements in bus services—from

[*Andrew Jones*]

improvements in emission standards through to clearer ticketing options—while operators will be left with their commercial freedoms.

There has been a lot of discussion about bus franchising today. It is clear that there is a variety of views in the House, but I think that there is clear agreement that the existing powers under the quality contract scheme have not worked effectively. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State set out, our intention is that the Bill will give mayoral combined authorities the automatic choice to use new powers to franchise bus services in their areas. I assure the hon. Members for Liverpool, Riverside, for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) that areas with directly elected Mayors can decide for themselves whether to take up the franchising powers in the Bill. There is no need for further reference to the Secretary of State.

Jonathan Reynolds: As the Minister acknowledges, there is consensus in the House about making sure, as the Bill proceeds, that the powers are workable and effective. One important point is how pension liabilities will be affected if the franchise changes from one operator to another. Will the Minister, either on Report or in writing to interested Members, provide clarification about that?

Andrew Jones: I would be very happy to provide clarification. Throughout the development of the policies, we have been looking to protect workers who transfer in that way. We have put that right at the heart of our discussions in policy development, and I am happy to share that information with the hon. Gentleman and any other interested colleague.

Several hon. Members asked about this, so let me confirm once more that the decision about whether a case to proceed with franchising is compelling is entirely for the Mayor. We should perhaps thank the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for sharing the news that he is a mayoral candidate—I do not think anybody knew that until today.

Hon. Members have talked about the guidance for consultations. Some guidance for mayoral combined authorities on establishing a case for franchising has been published, but let me be clear that it is still the Mayor who will take the decision. Our guidance merely aims to assist mayoral combined authorities in establishing a well-evidenced case—that is an important point.

Several colleagues asked what such a case might comprise, so let me add a little detail. We have a number of criteria that we would expect authorities that may be able to apply for franchising powers to demonstrate: that the authority has a clear plan to make bus services better for passengers; that the authority covers an area that is sufficiently wide to make franchising work in practice; that the authority has the powers to make franchising a success, which might mean control over parking or planning policy; that the authority has sufficiently strong governance arrangements in place; and that the authority has the resources and funding to deliver franchising successfully. Those are some of the criteria we will consider when looking, case by case, at which authorities will be able to apply for and secure franchising.

Mrs Ellman: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that Ministers will look on such applications in a positive light, rather than looking at the case made with a view to rejecting it?

Andrew Jones: I can confirm that. Our approach will be one of glass half full rather than glass half empty. We are not trying to get in the way of authorities or others that wish to improve their bus services. The whole point of the Bill is to provide a suite of enabling powers so that authorities can do what is right for their area to put more passengers on buses and provide better networks. We will certainly view all conversations positively.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made clear, benefits for passengers will need to be at the heart of any authority's application for franchising powers. Governance, geography and evidence will be critical if authorities are to apply successfully for franchising status. I do not agree with colleagues, including the hon. Members for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who believe that bus franchising powers should be available to all authorities throughout England automatically.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) recognised the very real risks to investment by bus operators that will be created if franchising powers are made automatically available to all local authorities, and the chilling effect that that might have on operators and bus manufacturers such as Wrightbus. I am aware of the quality of that business's products. My right hon. Friend made her point clearly, drawing on her experience. I agree with the concerns highlighted, which is one reason why we will seek to reverse the changes made in the other place.

I assure my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West recognised, the Bill requires franchising authorities to consider how, in conducting their procurement process for franchising contracts, they will facilitate the involvement of small and medium-sized operators. We—and, I hope, every directly elected Mayor—want to ensure that such operators thrive if franchising is implemented. We have made that clear in the Bill.

I have been interested to hear the range of views about municipal bus companies. I agree with the hon. Member for Nottingham South and others who highlighted that those that have survived deliver great services to their passengers. I believe that there are seven municipal bus companies in England, and I saw one for myself yesterday on a visit to Reading. However, on the whole, private sector bus operators have delivered our local bus services for the past 30 years. We want to ensure that we strike the right balance, with commercial operators continuing to innovate and deliver good services for passengers.

The Bill provides local authorities with substantially more opportunities to influence the provision of local bus services in their area, whether through partnerships or franchising, and we are therefore still of the view that commissioning and the provision of services should be kept separate.

Many colleagues asked about rural services. Through franchising and partnership, the Bill will work for every area of the country—urban and rural. I assure my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig

Tracey), who is a great champion of rural bus services, that the Bill's partnership powers allow local authorities to work with operators to improve the co-ordination of services, for example to link bus and rail services more closely. A good example of that is under way in Cornwall, which is already working in partnership with operators to ensure that rural areas have bus links to key shopping or employment centres at the right times of day. That is a positive development, which already uses the powers in the Bill. The local operator has invested in its fleet and increased its profitability and patronage in the area.

Several authorities are also planning bus services alongside community transport services and other types of transport, such as home-to-school or patient transport, so that rural connectivity is maximised. That is the sort of innovation that we need across the country and that we are encouraging through our Total Transport pilot scheme, to which the hon. Member for Nottingham South referred. The Government are a strong supporter of community transport.

My hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) was right to highlight clause 19. When routes are withdrawn, such as the 116 that my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire mentioned, we want local authorities to have the information they need to decide whether and how to provide replacement services. That is exactly what clause 19 aims to achieve.

I do not agree with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside that bus routes should be designated as assets of community value. As the Government explained in our response to the Select Committee report, that would force operators to continue to operate a service for six months, potentially at huge cost, which could act as a disincentive for operators improving or maintaining services, especially in rural areas.

I should like to challenge the myth, which has been perpetrated in the debate by some colleagues, that bus services were flourishing before deregulation in the 1980s and that the decrease in bus passengers started at deregulation. I have gone back and looked at the data. In the 30 years between 1955 and 1985—30 years prior to deregulation—the number of passenger journeys on local bus services in Great Britain fell on average by 2% a year. Since deregulation, the fall has gradually reduced, at an average of just 0.2% a year. The number of passenger journeys fell from 15.5 billion in 1955 to 5.5 billion in 1985. One thing has been clear in the debate: all hon. Members want that trend reversed and for passenger numbers to increase.

Many colleagues mentioned buses and air quality. I have absolutely no doubt that buses can be a critical ingredient to improving an area's air quality. As parts of a partnership or franchising area, authorities will be able to specify the emission standards of vehicles. In fact, the Government introduced amendments in the other place to make that clearer. We have supported and will continue to support bus companies with grants to encourage the take-up of low-emission vehicles. Low-emission buses are critical to putting in place good integrated transport systems with low emissions.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside mentioned the Traffic Management Act 2004. I agree that congestion is a problem that has an adverse impact on local bus services. However, the Government and I remain to be

convinced about the case for giving all authorities the powers to install a raft of new cameras on yellow box junctions or elsewhere. In the past few days, I received a letter from a councillor who said that doing that would be a great idea because it would help with council revenue collection, which was exactly what we did not want to hear.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath asked about tourist buses. As far as I am aware, any arrangements that are already in place can continue unchanged, but I will check that and write to him to confirm it.

We have covered many issues, but I am sure that my speech from the Dispatch Box and hon. Members' comments have touched on only some of the issues that we will cover in Committee, which I look forward to. The Bill enables improvements where they are needed. It has also been clear from the speeches made by colleagues on both sides of the House that they have been thinking about how the new powers in the Bill will be used to improve services in their areas, which is great and exactly what we want.

The bus industry has made huge strides in making the experience of bus travel more attractive. Many buses have free wi-fi, as well as CCTV and USB charging points. The vast majority of buses are now accessible.

Last year, more than 4.65 billion bus passenger journeys were taken in this country, which was three times as many journeys as on the entire rail network. Buses are as relevant now as they have ever been. I see them playing a very important part in all our transport futures. All good public transport systems will have buses at their heart. There is no shortage of energy, effort and investment in the sector to support a growing bus industry. The purpose of the Bill is to continue that great work to the benefit of bus passengers, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

BUS SERVICES BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Bus Services Bill [Lords]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 21 March 2017.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

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

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

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

Question agreed to.

BUS SERVICES BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Bus Services Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (7 MARCH)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 7 March, the following shall apply to proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to the Chair of the UK Statistics Authority and on the motion in the name of Mr David Lidington relating to Standing Orders (Public Business)—

(1) proceedings on each motion may be entered upon at any hour and may continue, though opposed, for one hour;

(2) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of each motion not later than one hour after the commencement of proceedings on that motion;

(3) such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; and

(4) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Michael Ellis.*)

USE OF WELSH LANGUAGE IN PARLIAMENTARY PROCEEDINGS

Resolved,

That this House—

(1) notes the Fourth Report of the Procedure Committee, HC 816, on Use of the Welsh language in the Welsh Grand Committee at Westminster, which builds on more than twenty years of use of the Welsh language in parliamentary proceedings in Wales and at Westminster;

(2) resolves that:—

(a) whilst English is and should remain the language of this House, the use of Welsh be permitted in parliamentary proceedings of Select Committees and of the Welsh Grand Committee held in Wales and at Westminster;

(b) reasonable notice, as determined by the Chair of the relevant committee, shall be given in advance of any proposed use of the Welsh language so as to allow the necessary arrangements to be made;

(c) the Chair shall have power to insist that points of order are made in English; and

(d) the Official Report shall record contributions made in the Welsh language together with their English translation; and

(3) accordingly rescinds the Resolution of 5 June 1996 (Language of Parliamentary Proceedings).—(*Michael Ellis.*)

PETITION**Walk-in Services at the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre, Leicester**

6.20 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I wish to present a petition signed by 1,587 local residents of Leicester East. It was collected by Councillors Luis Fonseca, Jean Khote, Abdul Osman and Sue Hunter, as well as many others. I declare an interest as the centre was named after my late mother, Merlyn Vaz, who was a local councillor in Leicester and widely regarded as a pensioners' champion. The Merlyn Vaz health and social care centre is not closing, but a proposal exists to close the walk-in facilities that operate from it. I am afraid that if these proposals are enacted, it will turn our walk-in centre into a drive-by centre. The walk-in centre was opened in 2009. Since then, 156,089 patients have walked through its doors, including 22,179 in 2015-16. Our hospitals are already overstretched, and the closure of our much-needed walk-in centre will only push them to the brink of collapse.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Leicester East,

Declares that Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group plans to remove the existing Walk-in element of the service from Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre which would have a detrimental effect on the local community and other members of the public who use the "out of hours" facility, especially on the elderly and vulnerable people who do not have easy access to transport but are able to walk to the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Leicester City Clinical Commissioning Group to reconsider their decision to remove the existing Walk-in element of the service from the Merlyn Vaz Health and Social Care Centre.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002021]

Equality and Human Rights Commission

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

6.23 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I wish to raise the issue of the funding of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. I thank the Minister for agreeing that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) can also address the House. He has valuable experience not only in the trade union arena but in this arena, having served on the board of a predecessor body.

It is pertinent that we discuss this issue today. Not only is it Ash Wednesday and the day when we celebrate the patron saint of the great nation of Wales, but as my good friend Ryan McMullan, a former colleague on Glasgow City Council, told me, it is also Disabled Access Day. Perhaps we can touch on those issues later.

I have been pursuing a debate on this urgent issue, but I am profoundly disappointed at the actions that have created the need for one. As a result of cuts to the funding of the commission, workplace relations have suffered and individual employees have been unfairly treated. This morning I visited the picket line of PCS and Unite members in London who are on their sixth day of industrial action.

That a Government-sponsored, Government-funded body with a remit set by this Parliament with the specific mandate to

“challenge discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and to protect and promote human rights”

should on 9 February 2017 callously sack 10 PCS and Unite members by email while they were on strike and give them less than one day’s notice to clear their desks is unheard of in the public sector.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I am attending tonight’s debate after I was made aware of this very serious situation. Is the hon. Gentleman really telling the House that the body established by the Government to look after, safeguard and monitor the rights of the citizens of this country is acting in such a scandalous way? If it is, does he not think that this is a clear road map of where this Government are taking the trade union movement and its rights in this country?

Chris Stephens: Yes, I do have concerns about how the Government are conducting industrial relations across the board and about their attacks on the trade union movement, as we saw during the passage of the Trade Union Bill.

The treatment of the workers concerned is not only harsh, but I would argue potentially discriminatory and contrary to everything the organisation is tasked by this House with delivering. By imposing pay in lieu of notice and terminating the employees’ contracts, those employees can no longer actively search for redeployment within their existing organisation or within the civil service where they would get priority access to vacancies.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree that this will also be expensive for the public

purse? For six months, we will be paying these people to stay at home while, as I understand it, the EHRC will be plugging staffing gaps with expensive consultants.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Lady serves with me on the European Scrutiny Committee, and she is quite correct in her analysis.

Continuous service has been broken, so if the employee were to secure a job in the civil service, the break would have a directly negative impact on their pension and any future severance pay. I note that two directors were also served notice, but pay in lieu of notice was not imposed and they remain on the payroll. To date, the commission has not offered any of those at risk of compulsory redundancy alternative employment, which is a statutory requirement. I hope that the Minister will confirm today whether he will intervene on this matter and ensure that all those employees, now numbering 12, will be reinstated.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The organisation was set up in the first place through pressure from the trade union and labour movement on human rights and workers’ rights. We have seen two good examples of where the Government are going with Brexit. We have had the Trade Union Bill, which had to be modified through pressure from the Opposition. What do we now expect when the Government come back with their Brexit package and we pull out of Europe? What is going to happen to workers’ rights then, bearing in mind that the Government have done away with legal aid in certain instances?

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman is correct that concessions were given to the Opposition, but I think the Government are backtracking on them, as we saw in a Delegated Legislation Committee, with trade unions now being forced to have additional conferences to meet requirements in the new legislation.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I, too, congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Will he confirm that another thing on which the Government are backtracking is the funding for this organisation? During a year in which hate crime has doubled in this country, we have seen the funding and staffing of the commission cut by 25%. Does he agree that it is extraordinary that the body that is supposed to be the watchdog on behalf of the Government in respect of disabled people’s rights—it is one of this country’s most important watchdogs—is sacking disabled workers at a day’s notice?

Chris Stephens: I agree wholeheartedly, and I shall come back to these points in detail later. If the hon. Gentleman would like to intervene again then, I would be more than happy to give way.

I invite Members to look closely at who was chosen for compulsory redundancy and who was then sacked by email, as highlighted in early-day motion 944. Of the 10 sacked members, seven are black or minority ethnic, four are Muslim and six are disabled. I hope that no one will challenge the arithmetic on that, as it is possible to have overlapping identities.

As I understand the situation, one of the dismissed staff members was an Army veteran whose motorised wheelchair was taken away the day after he received his

[Chris Stephens]

redundancy notice. Three of the sacked members held elected roles on their union's branch executive committee and one was a trade union negotiator who was leading talks to protect employees from compulsory redundancy.

This issue raises concerns about blacklisting and trade union victimisation throughout the ongoing restructuring process. It is also not difficult to conclude that certain types of employees have been targeted and potentially discriminated against. Not only is that utterly wrong in and of itself, but astonishing that it should come from the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Kate Green *rose*—

Owen Smith *rose*—

Chris Stephens: There seems to be a choice. I give way to my fellow member of the European Scrutiny Committee.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is making a really powerful case. Will he comment on the impact that this is likely to have on other employers' behaviour when they see the body charged with upholding the highest of standards getting away with this kind of conduct?

Chris Stephens: That is an excellent point. When the commission is seen to be conducting itself in this way, it sends out a very dangerous message to rogue employers.

Owen Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman also comment on the impact of these sackings on the Government's stated aim of halving the disability employment gap in this country, given that five of the sacked people are disabled?

Chris Stephens: It shows that the Government say one thing in public and do another thing in private. That is the only message that we can take from this.

This is in the realms of "you really couldn't make it up." The Government cannot absolve themselves of any responsibility for this surreal situation. Increasingly, ministerial responses on this issue are becoming a little tetchy, and along the lines of, "This isn't really anything to do with us." As I have said before, something that is Government sponsored and Government funded is publicly accountable. That is what we are doing today—giving parliamentary scrutiny to an organisation that is not acting in the spirit of its own ethos and stated aims.

The strike was called because people were at risk of compulsory redundancy, even though more than 30 commission vacancies remain unfilled. A restructuring process has been driven by severe budget pressures: a 25% cut over the next four years comes on top of a 70% cut in real terms since 2010. That was confirmed by House of Commons Library research, which was commissioned by the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). The Equality and Human Rights Commission has been described as facing collapse.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, with 25% cuts, there is a risk that human rights legislation will, in all honesty, exist only on paper and that, in fact, human rights will effectively be hollowed out? Will he be pressing the Government to give evidence on that?

Chris Stephens: I agree with the hon. Lady. It comes back to the point of whether legislation can be enforced. Looking at this in context, we can see a rise in hate crimes and a dramatic reduction in the number of people taking cases to employment tribunals. There has also been a 71% drop in the number of cases challenging sex discrimination, a 58% drop in race discrimination cases, and a 54% drop in disability discrimination cases. Surely that all adds up to a mismatch between workload and resource. When the commission is only employing three caseworkers to provide advice and representation to the victims of discrimination and human rights abuses in England, Scotland and Wales, it calls into question the ability of the organisation to tackle discrimination and enforce the law.

Although the stated strategic aims and objectives of the commission are sound—I particularly agree with the aim of improving capability through investing in its people—there is a huge question mark over organisational capacity, particularly in the light of confirmation of the funding picture for the future. On 24 February, the Government Equalities Office confirmed funding for the remainder of the spending review period until 2019-20. It confirmed that the cuts are to continue and that year-on-year funding is to decline from £20.4 million in 2016-17 to £17.4 million in 2019-20. As the need for support for individuals experiencing discrimination in all its poisonous forms grows, this Government have cut deeper into an already challenged organisation.

I was curious to test the Government's support for ensuring a sustainable future for the commission, so I tabled a written question last December as to how and whether the Government are publicising the existence of the organisation. The ministerial response was:

"My Department promotes the EHRC's functions where appropriate in the normal course of its own activities but since 2010 has not spent anything on advertising its services."

A more suspicious person than myself might suspect the Government of seeking to suppress demand for the commission's services, making the case for further funding cuts. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will now advertise the commission's services publicly?

In response to the publicity and scrutiny given as a result of poor handling of its workforce and trade union relationships, it is interesting to note that the commission in its briefing note to Members has stated:

"It would enhance the Commission's independence if we were able to table reports directly in Parliament",

and that

"we consider that Parliament should be afforded a greater role in setting the Commission's budget, as is the case for other independent bodies such as the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and the Electoral Commission."

I welcome the news that the organisation is open to being held to account for its use of public money by a parliamentary Committee and am interested to hear what the Minister thinks of that proposal. This could provide a way forward, and if the Government were also to take responsibility for resolving the hasty and unorthodox manner in which hard-working, dedicated public servants have been treated, a more positive outcome for the organisation and the individuals concerned could be achieved.

It will be disappointing if the "arm's length" rationale is deployed again today. It is often used by another organisation I am very familiar with, Glasgow City

Council, where all too often the administration's councillors claim that poor industrial relations and resolving disputes are somehow outwith their control. Budget decisions and damaged employee relations as a result of poor consultation, communication and negotiation are ultimately the responsibility of elected members, whether local or national. Claiming that these issues are decided on and acted by forces that cannot be held to account, or directed by those of us who are elected by the people, is an exceptionally weak argument.

Fundamentally, what is at stake here is whether equalities and human rights issues are at the heart of the Government's ethos or not. Actions at the moment are at variance with stated aims and objectives, and many more people in this country stand to be affected if the commission's capacity to deliver is being run down, whether by accident or design. I look forward to the Minister's response.

6.37 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on securing this debate. Like him, for me, combating discrimination and inequality has been a lifelong cause, in my case dating back to my boyhood, when I discovered, to my shock, from my Irish father that when he first arrived in this country seeking lodging houses in Kilburn and Cricklewood, iniquitous signs were put up saying, "No dogs, no Irish."

For me, this is a cause that I fought in the world of work, taking on bad employers who were discriminating against people, but also challenging practices within the trade union movement. I remember being involved in a battle back in the 1980s against one particular branch of refuse collectors in London who would not allow any black refuse collectors to be employed. We said, "You're not on," we took it on, and we changed it.

Likewise, there was the battle within our own ranks to change the image and agenda of the trade union movement on equalities for women. I used to be described in the old T&G as an "honorary sister." Like the hon. Gentleman, this is a cause that I am passionate about.

In parallel to the big changes that have been won over the last 30 years, there has been the transformation of the image and agenda of politics, and, indeed, the make-up of this place. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) regularly reminds me, when she was first elected to this House its membership was 97% men.

I actively worked with all the predecessor bodies: the Equal Opportunities Commission, challenging those employers denying people equal pay; the Commission for Racial Equality, challenging those employers who were discriminating in employment; and the old Disability Rights Commission, challenging employers who treated disabled workers shamefully, and those who—this happened often—refused to employ disabled workers despite requirements on them, and who failed to adapt workplaces so that disabled workers could fulfil their potential.

Then the Equality and Human Rights Commission was established. I could give numerous examples of its work, but I will give just one. When I was deputy general secretary of the union, we had a big focus on the red and white meat industry, which had 40,000 employees. The main customers were the supermarkets, which were abusing their market power

to drive down costs along the supply chain. In factory after factory, that led to a two-tier labour market. There were more and more agency workers—overwhelmingly migrant workers—on poorer conditions of employment, and the number of full-time, directly employed workers on better conditions of employment was falling. That often led to toxic conditions and damaged the social cohesion in workplace after workplace and community after community.

I persuaded the then chair of the commission, Trevor Phillips, to launch an inquiry into that discriminatory pattern in the meat industry. It produced a powerful report, and I will never forget being at the summit that was then convened by the EHRC, at which the commission told the supermarkets that if they did not change their procurement practices and end the shameful discrimination in their supply chain, it would take enforcement proceedings against them. The supermarkets are not all that they should be—that is for absolute certain—but some welcome changes were made. They could not wash their hands of responsibility for what they had created.

My experience of the predecessor bodies and the commission has been that they did not always get it right, did not always do everything I would have liked them to do, and did not always bind others in quite the way I would have liked, but they were powerful, effective champions of equality with a dedicated staff fighting that most noble cause of tackling discrimination.

The position that we have now reached is nothing short of scandalous, just when hate is on the march. It is on the march against black, Asian and ethnic minority people, against the disabled and against women. The signs of what is happening in our country are profoundly disturbing. We have never needed a strong Equality and Human Rights Commission more, but it is now being reduced to a rump of its once great self. It is quite extraordinary that its budget has been reduced from £70 million in 2007 to £17 million now. Likewise, the number of staff is also being reduced to a rump, rendering the commission increasingly ineffective. The staff are being treated shamefully. I know some of the staff in the Birmingham office, including my good friend Zahid Nawaz. He has done outstanding work for the predecessor bodies and the commission for 17 years, but he and others were treated shamefully when they were sacked in circumstances that I would not expect from a bad employer, let alone the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

The commission has acted badly and shamefully, and it must think again. It should suspend the dismissal notices issued to the individuals concerned. It should also do something that it has as yet failed to do, which is talk to all the stakeholders with whom it operates about the kind of commission they want for the future. I know, having spoken to some of them, that there is an overwhelming sense of deep concern about what is happening. Fairness and the cause of tackling discrimination demand nothing less.

I turn now to the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), who is a reasonable man. I am not sure that I would say that about every Minister. The Government cannot wash their hands of responsibility for what is happening to the Equality and Human Rights Commission because the enormous cuts that are being made are at the heart of all this. As the hon.

[Jack Dromey]

Member for Glasgow South West said, the Government cannot talk about their commitment to the principle of equality while at the same time cutting the EHRC, making it more difficult for people to go to employment tribunals and robbing citizens of their ability to have their rights enforced and of the protection of the EHRC, which is needed now more than ever. The commission has a responsibility and it must act, but above all, the Government have the key responsibility and they too should act.

6.44 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I begin with an apology on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), who is unable to respond to this debate due to other business. However, I am here and happy to respond on her behalf. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this important debate. It is timely as it allows me the opportunity to confirm the budget agreed with the EHRC for the remainder of this spending review period, something which has been of interest to many hon. Members.

Before I move on to provide greater detail, I want to take a moment to remind ourselves of the wider context of Government fiscal controls. At the beginning of the last Parliament, as hon. Members will remember, the Government inherited the largest deficit in the post-war period. The EHRC's position needs to be seen against that background and against the significant spending reductions that apply to central Government, including making over £20 billion of savings by 2019-20. I can confirm that the EHRC's settlement for this spending review period amounts to a total budget of £20.4 million for 2016-17, £19.3 million for 2017-18, £18.3 million for 2018-19, and £17.4 million for 2019-20, equating to a 25% reduction across the spending review period since 2015-16. Obviously, and as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West made clear, reductions in the EHRC's budget stretch across a longer timescale than just this spending review. With its settlement now confirmed, the EHRC will have had an approximate budget reduction of 68% between 2010-11 and 2019-20.

Owen Smith *rose*—

Chris Stephens *rose*—

Joseph Johnson: If hon. Members give me some time, I will supply some context for the reduction, most of which we did not hear from the hon. Gentleman.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. In the context of a current budget deficit of around £68 billion, is he seriously telling the House that cutting the EHRC's budget by 68% down to £17 million is really necessary or relevant?

Joseph Johnson: The context that I am about to provide will help hon. Members understand in more detail why cuts of that magnitude were appropriate. If the hon. Member for Glasgow South West bears with me, I am sure that I will answer the question that he was about to ask.

First, when the EHRC was set up in 2007, it had an extraordinarily high budget to facilitate the merger of three previous bodies—the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality, and the Disability Rights Commission—into a new body. The budget was simply not right for the organisation during its infancy. In 2007, the EHRC had a budget of £70 million, which was an astonishing £20 million more than the combined budgets of the three previous commissions. The EHRC never managed to spend more than £62 million in any year. Indeed it often struggled to spend its allocation, reporting significant and repeated underspends. In June 2010 for instance, the EHRC budget was reduced in-year from £62 million to £55 million. However, the EHRC's actual expenditure in 2010-11 was £48 million, of which £16.3 million, or 35% of its budget, was spent on its corporate costs.

Secondly, those with longer memories will acknowledge that the organisation was poorly managed at the time and had poor spending controls, as a result of which its first three sets of accounts were all qualified. That inevitably called into question its financial controls and the amount of funding that it should be given.

Thirdly, Members should be aware that the EHRC's budget reductions have simply reflected changes to its range of functions. A number of significant functions have been repealed, or are no longer funded, to help it concentrate on its core remit. Most notably, the EHRC has stopped its large grants programmes, which had been mismanaged and cost several million pounds. The EHRC also lost its helpline, which cost £2.5 million a year, and its conciliation role in service provision. Those functions ceased in 2012-13 and were costed at £10.1 million or 21% of the EHRC's budget at the time.

Those changes were considered in the review of public bodies conducted by the Government in 2010, and it was decided that the EHRC should be “retained but substantially reformed”. In March 2011, the coalition Government accordingly set out plans to reform the EHRC in the consultation document “Building a Fairer Britain: Reform of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.”

The current Prime Minister, who at the time was Minister for Women and Equalities along with her Liberal Democrat coalition partner Lynne Featherstone, set out proposals

“to transform the Equality and Human Rights Commission into a valued and respected national institution.”

A comprehensive budget review was set up in 2012 to identify the minimum level of funding needed for the commission to discharge its statutory functions effectively, in accordance with the provisions of the Equality Act 2006. The review concluded that steady state funding of £17.1 million would be adequate for the commission to continue to fulfil its statutory functions.

Chris Stephens: The Minister seems to be suggesting that the £17.4 million budget for 2019-20 is only to support the commission's core statutory functions, which I understand is the direction of travel. Will he confirm that, in previous years, the commission received up to £7.8 million of funding to support its wider functions?

Joseph Johnson: The EHRC is receiving money in excess, although modestly so, of the minimum amount regarded as necessary to support its statutory functions. The hon. Gentleman is correct.

Kate Green: I understand the Minister's point about focusing the commission on its statutory and strategic functions, but how can he be confident that it has the resources to do that well when we know that many local authorities are failing to comply with the public sector equality duty and that the Government are the subject of a number of significant criticisms from UN bodies for failing to comply with our obligations under socioeconomic and other rights treaties?

Joseph Johnson: Work was undertaken in the last Parliament to assess the minimum level of adequate funding necessary to ensure that the commission is in a position to discharge its statutory functions. As I said earlier, the review concluded that steady state funding of £17.1 million would be adequate.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West mentioned staffing reductions, which I recognise is also a concern of other hon. Members. As an independent body, it is for the EHRC to determine the level and structure of its staffing, which includes defining the appropriate grading and staff numbers. The commission has had to make difficult decisions in order to deliver value for money in its use of public funds while also ensuring that it is furnished with the right complement of skills and experience. Once the commission has concluded its restructuring under the target operating model, the total number of posts will be 179.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) asked about the impact of the EHRC's restructuring on the Government's goal of halving the disability employment gap. In terms of actual redundancies, the restructuring affects six disabled staff members. More widely, the EHRC retains good links with disabled groups, is continuing its work on disability issues and is working with disabled groups specifically to improve its enforcement work on disability discrimination cases.

The Government are also working generally to combat hate crime. Other hon. Members asked about the impact of the restructuring on the commission's ability to deal with instances of hate crime. The Government are working generally with the police to provide a breakdown of data on religion-based hate crime to help them target resources and increase understanding. We recently published the hate crime action plan, in July 2016, and are now delivering locally based projects to tackle hate crime. We have announced additional funding for communities to increase reporting, with £2.4 million to protect places of worship and £900,000 to support community projects. We are engaging with groups to ensure we understand the public's experience of hate crime and make it easier for victims to come forward.

Let me turn specifically to points made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). Although the EHRC needs to have due regard to fostering good relations, it is not a criminal enforcement agency, as he knows, and it has no role in prosecuting offenders or ensuring compliance with the law in this area. Therefore there will be no impact on the Government's ability to tackle hate crime.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is saying that the commission does not have duties in terms of dealing with criminal behaviour, but he has yet to comment on how staff were treated. They were dismissed with one day's notice and told to clear their desks. Does he believe that that is appropriate?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) *rose*—

Owen Smith *rose*—

Joseph Johnson: I will take another intervention on the same point and then I will deal with one from the hon. Member for Pontypridd.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way. I just want to add to what my hon. Friend said. The Minister seemed to be alluding to a strategic review of what the commission needs to do to carry out its core work, so how does sacking people by email and sending them home comply with the strategic review? There is no way that can be a skills-based assessment.

Joseph Johnson: Turning to the points about restructuring, hon. Members will know that the EHRC has followed a multi-staged process, to mitigate the impact of job losses on all staff, including consideration of those with protected characteristics. The commission is confident that the processes undertaken to date have been fair, evidence-based and transparent. Trade unions have been extensively consulted to offer every alternative to compulsory redundancy, where possible. Despite that, they have called five strikes in recent months.

Happily, the EHRC is no longer the focus for the tabloids' wrath. Its accounts have not been qualified for five years. It has provided respected policy interventions on stop and search; the treatment of religion in the workplace; and pregnancy and maternity discrimination. It has intervened successfully to help enforce the Equality Act and human rights at the European Court of Human Rights.

Owen Smith *rose*—

Joseph Johnson: I will give way, but this has to be quick as we are running out of time.

Owen Smith: I am grateful to the Minister, who is being very generous in taking interventions and is trying to answer our questions. However, in so doing he is making our case for us, because he has just admitted that six of the people who are being sacked are disabled, which will clearly add to the disability employment gap. In conceding that we are seeing a rising tide of hate crime, despite the fact that we have this commission, he is surely making the point that the £17 million it currently has to support its work is inadequate.

Joseph Johnson: The hon. Gentleman needs to look at the EHRC's restructuring in the context of its ability to carry out its broader work to support people with disabilities and to ensure that their rights are not affected by their disabilities in terms of their ability to access opportunities in the workplace.

As the National Audit Office notes, the EHRC "has responded to its budget reductions in a number of ways", and it is increasingly working in partnership with other organisations and being more selective in the legal cases it takes on, taking on cases with the potential for the most impact and thereby enhancing its overall effectiveness. We are working with the EHRC to increase its effectiveness further. We share the view that members of the Women and Equalities Committee expressed in January: the EHRC should play to its unique strengths and powers, as provided in its legislative framework, by making more selective legal interventions and leaving the research to other bodies that can already fulfil that function.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. He must appreciate the anger felt by Opposition Members about how staff were treated—they were effectively sacked by email. Will he confirm that the commission will be given some human resources and personnel advice and expertise by Government Departments? Is he going to intervene regarding the concerns we have about those staff who have been sacked?

Joseph Johnson: We are satisfied that the EHRC has conducted its restructuring in an appropriate manner. It has consulted all the relevant partner bodies, as required.

I understand that the EHRC chair, David Isaac, shares the objective of the commission sticking to its legislative framework—

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Joseph Johnson: I was just in the process of delivering my concluding sentence. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities look forward to working constructively with the chair, David Isaac, and his board in the years to come, to the overall benefit of equalities and human rights in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.1 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN GREECE AND ITALY

That this House has considered the Government's support for the Syrian refugee crisis; commends the UK on its provision of aid to Syria and the region, the resettlement programmes and support to unaccompanied children in France; acknowledges that in 2016 over 30,000 unaccompanied children arrived by sea in Greece and Italy; notes that only 8 children were transferred from Greece and Italy under the Dublin III Regulation last year and none under the Dubs scheme; expresses disappointment that the Dubs scheme will be ending with only 350 children benefiting; calls on the Government to work with the Greek and Italian governments to support access to family reunification under the Dublin III Regulation in a timely manner; and further calls on the Government to continue to monitor local authority capacity for further transfers of children under the Dubs scheme, consulting with local authorities at least once every financial year.

The House divided: Ayes 254, Noes 1.

Division No. 172]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
 Alexander, Heidi
 Allen, Heidi
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Mr David
 Arkless, Richard
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr
 Roberta
 Blenkinsop, Tom
 Blomfield, Paul
 Boswell, Philip
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Champion, Sarah
 Cherry, Joanna
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clwyd, rh Ann

Coaker, Vernon
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coyle, Neil
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Davies, Geraint
 Day, Martyn
 Debbonaire, Thangam
 Donaldson, Stuart
 Blair
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia

Glass, Pat
 Glendon, Mary
 Goodman, Helen
 Grant, Peter
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh Mr David
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Mr Mark
 Hendry, Drew
 Hepburn, Mr Stephen
 Hermon, Lady
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Loughton, Tim
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Mann, Scott
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
 McDonald, Stuart
 C.
 McDonnell, rh John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat

McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 Olney, Sarah
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Quince, Will
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Salmond, rh Alex
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Tredinnick, David
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek

Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Warburton, David
Weir, Mike
White, Chris
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Mr Mark

Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete

Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 1 March 2017

[MR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

9.30 am

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), who is due to introduce the debate, has made communication with the authorities to inform us that he is a victim of disruption on the Northern line. At the time of his phone call, he was seeking alternative means of transport—a taxi—and I do not know whether he will appear here before 9.31 am. Unfortunately, unless he does, we will not be able to proceed with the debate and I will have to suspend the sitting, because the right to initiate a debate is individually balloted and not transferrable. If he is not present, I have no alternative but to suspend the sitting until the start of the next debate at 11 o'clock. In his absence, I do indeed—

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Chope. I can testify to the problems with the transportation system; I was stuck on the tube for 20 minutes myself. The Northern line is in a state of chaos. Given that my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) is significantly delayed, I ask hon. Members to listen to this point of order for a few moments. We are gathered in great numbers to debate a significant and timely issue, particularly as we approach the celebration of Nowruz, when there will be pleas from many for clemency for prisoners of conscience. It is important that we recognise, while we await my hon. Friend, that this is a very important time. I do not know whether any colleagues want to add to that point of order.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Further to that point of order, Mr Chope. We seek your guidance. Would it be in order for there to be another 15 points of

order, each elaborating in different ways on the importance of our holding this debate, to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) extra time to arrive, or would that be out of order?

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): It would be out of order. The Minister puts a straight question, and the answer is a straight one: it would be out of order to try to abuse the process. The rules are quite clear. If the hon. Member for Hendon, who was due to be here at the beginning of the debate at 9.30 am, is not here, I have no alternative but to suspend the sitting.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I will take one more point of order, from the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick).

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Chope. I am grateful for the opportunity to make an additional point of order. You explained your interpretation of the rules in response to the Minister, and you are obviously in sole charge. You said that it would be an abuse for other colleagues to raise points of order, but the fact that the Speaker's Office allowed a 90-minute debate indicates quite clearly that this matter is not of interest to just a single Member. Other colleagues bid for a similar subject to be debated. For the Speaker's Office to determine that this issue is exclusively an interest of the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), because he was the lucky one who was drawn in the ballot and secured time for the debate, seems to be a very narrow interpretation of the rules, in that—

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I will interrupt the hon. Gentleman, because he seems to be challenging my interpretation of the rules. If he wishes to have the rules changed, I suggest that he refers the matter to the Procedure Committee. The rules are quite clear. There have been occasions on which a Member has arrived a minute or two late and I have suspended the sitting. The rules are quite clear, and it would be wrong to try to rewrite them. If we were going to rewrite the rules, I would be tempted to allow an emergency debate on the state of the Northern line, but I will not do that. The sitting is suspended until 11 am.

9.34 am

Sitting suspended.

Suicide and Self-harm in Prison (England)

11 am

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rates of suicide and self-harm in prisons in England.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Choqe. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the record levels of suicide and self-harm in our prisons in this timely debate.

Yesterday, it was announced that prison officers planned to strike today. The reasons they cited were:

“More and more members...being assaulted every day”

and

“the increase in self-inflicted deaths and daily security breaches...as a result of staff shortfalls and budget cuts.”

The industrial action has been blocked by the Secretary of State for Justice, who won an injunction in the High Court, but the serious concerns raised by the Prison Officers Association cannot be ignored. Yesterday, a report from the Institute for Government declared that spending decisions have pushed prisons “beyond breaking point”.

Our criminal justice system rests on the idea that a person who has committed a crime should be punished if necessary and, as a last resort, by the removal of their liberty. By removing a criminal’s freedom, we seek to protect the public from the criminal’s activities for the duration of their time in prison. We also aspire to provide meaningful opportunities for rehabilitation so that on release, the prisoner can rejoin society as a law-abiding citizen.

What we do not do in the United Kingdom, and have not done since 1964, is use the removal of a criminal’s life as a punishment, yet within our modern-day prison system an all-time record number of prisoners are paying for their crimes with their lives. Official data published by the Ministry of Justice on 26 January showed that 119 prisoners died by suicide during 2016—the highest number in a calendar year since current recording practices began in 1978.

Inquest, a charity that monitors deaths in prisons, has reported that already there have been eight recorded self-inflicted deaths in 2017, with a further seven deaths awaiting classification. On average, a prisoner dies by suicide every three days, and 12 women lost their lives through suicide in 2016. The Minister might be tempted to say that the increase in deaths by suicide is a reflection of the increase in the prison population as a whole, but that argument does not stack up when we look at the figures. The number of deaths by suicide has doubled in just five years, yet the size of the prison population, currently standing at a little over 85,000, has plainly not doubled since 2010.

The Minister might be further tempted to suggest that a prisoner who takes their own life in prison might have done the same on the outside, but a self-inflicted death is 8.6 times more likely in prison than in the general population, according to the Howard League for Penal Reform.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She has made some excellent points, to which I hope to hear the reply later. Does she agree

that a suicide in a hospital would be a very serious issue and that a suicide in prison should be taken no less seriously? Urgent action is needed to reduce suicides that take place on prison premises.

Luciana Berger: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for his commitment to the issue of mental health. Deaths in prison should be treated no differently from those in any other setting. Issues such as ligature points are contended with very differently in inpatient settings and in prisons. We could point to many things that should be treated in the same way as in any other element of life outside prison.

The number of self-harm incidents has also reached a record high of 37,784, which is up nearly 7,000 on the previous year.

One group that has been uniquely failed by the prison system is transgendered prisoners. There have been four deaths by suicide of transgendered people while in prison over a mere matter of months. That is from an estimated prison population of just 85.

We know that the prevalence of mental health conditions is much higher among the prison population. Prisoners are over three times more likely to suffer from depression, 12 times more likely to suffer from a personality disorder and 16 times more likely to suffer from psychosis.

For prisoners who need to be treated in a mental health inpatient unit, departmental guidance states that transfers under the Mental Health Act 1983 should take place within 14 days. I was appalled to learn from the answer to my written parliamentary question that in 2015-16, 1,141 prisoners—three in four—waited longer than that two-week window. Such ubiquitous failure would never be tolerated in the outside world.

With regard to data on mental health in prisons, it feels like a minefield trying to get hold of figures that give a true representation of the scale of the problems. I cannot help but feel that the Minister and his Department are trying to pull the wool over our eyes. When I resubmitted my question to get the most up-to-date figures, I was told that, in the space of just a few months, the data are now

“not held in the requested format”,

despite the wording of my question being identical. I hope the Minister will tell me why the collection of the data has changed.

When I finished drafting my speech shortly before we began this morning, the Department’s answers to four of my named-day questions were long overdue. The answers would have played a key part in my contribution, but, regretfully, I cannot hold the Government to account fully for them today. Just one example is a question I asked about what proportion of people who died by suicide in prisons were not on the assessment, care in custody and teamwork pathway for people who have been identified as being at risk. In 2015, only 35 of 89 people who died by suicide were on the ACCT pathway, suggesting that too many vulnerable inmates are not being identified early enough. I asked the question again on 31 January—over a month ago—and the Minister’s Department has still not come back to me with that vital information.

Prison should offer a unique opportunity to provide mental health treatment in a secure environment, but the Government are betraying the vulnerable people our criminal justice system is supposed to protect. I met

representatives of the Prison Officers Association who told me that, despite having worked in the Prison Service for decades, they had never received any mental health training. A recent Royal College of Psychiatrists forensic faculty survey found that service cuts mean most prison psychiatrists do not feel able to deliver a basic level of care. It is clear that the mental health services in our prisons are buckling. On a recent visit to a local prison, I saw at first hand the lack of care and services available to inmates. A recent consultation by the Centre for Mental Health found that a decrease in prison staff meant inmates often missed psychiatric appointments because there was no one available to escort them, and consequently they could not get the treatment they needed.

This is the stark reality that has been created by decimating staffing levels in prisons. There are 7,000 fewer prison officers than when the coalition Government came to power in 2010. The impacts of such drastic cuts are not trivial. Our prison services are out of control. Assaults in prisons rose by a third in the 12 months to September 2016 and are the highest on record. There was a wave of prison riots in the final weeks of last year, including at Birmingham, Bedford, Swaleside and Lewes. The inconvenient truth for the Minister is that, as things stand, he cannot guarantee the security of anyone who sets foot in our prisons.

Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons has found that an increasing number of prisoners report feeling unsafe in prison. Yesterday, we heard the conclusions drawn from an unannounced inspection of HMP Featherstone. We heard that some prisoners felt so unsafe in the prison that they resorted to self-isolation, asking to be locked up for nearly 24 hours a day. In some instances, this had lasted for months.

Nationally, there has been a significant increase in the ratio of prisoners to prison staff. It is not only prisoners who do not feel safe, but hard-working staff who brave the frontline every day, aware that there might simply not be anyone there to back them up if an incident becomes unmanageable.

A couple of weeks ago, BBC's "Panorama" aired an undercover investigation that was filmed inside HMP Northumberland. I am sure anyone who watched it was, like me, appalled to see the truth about prison life laid bare: pervasive violence; widespread drug use; security systems not fit for purpose—put simply, chaos.

During this debate, it is important to remember that part of the reason this dire situation has arisen is that far too many people have been inappropriately put in prison, when they should be receiving mental health treatment in a secure inpatient unit. There is a need to address how the courts treat people with mental health problems, particularly in respect of community sentences and the inclusion of mental health treatment requirements within those.

I have been raising questions about suicide and self-harm in our prisons for many years, but I was compelled to request this debate because of one particular case, the tragic case of Dean Saunders. He was just 25 years old when he died by his own hand at Chelmsford prison in Essex last year. I had the privilege of meeting Dean's parents, Mark and Donna, to hear about this tragic case in their own words. Dean was suffering from severe mental illness and had harmed himself and his brother and father as they tried to help him during a paranoid

episode. He was charged with attempted murder and sent to prison. His family were told that there he would be safe.

The inquest jury unanimously concluded that Care UK, the private company that ran healthcare at the prison, treated "financial considerations" as a significant reason behind the decision to downgrade him from constant watch to half-hourly observations, despite several warnings that he might harm himself. It said that there were "multiple failings", including a "complacent" approach to Dean's mental health. The jury found an assessment of his mental health needs was "not adequately conducted" and concluded that the cause of death was "contributed to by neglect".

The system failed because of financial cuts in the prison budget, and Mr Saunders paid for it with his life. Despite that damning verdict, Care UK continues to provide healthcare, including mental health services, to more than 22,000 prisoners in many prisons across the UK.

I note that the Justice Secretary has met Mr Saunders' family, and I welcome that, but Mr Saunders presented a high risk of suicide—he should never have been in a prison in the first place. He needed specialist treatment in a secure mental health facility to protect him, but none was made available.

Dr Poulter: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the problems may well be that people are siloed into being under either the care of forensic psychiatry or that of the prison system? There is very little and very poor interaction between the general mental health system and what goes on in prison, particularly in terms of helping people to receive the adequate care in the community that they need when they leave prison on discharge.

Luciana Berger: There have been many reports, inquiries and recommendations that highlight the very point the hon. Gentleman made—reports dating back to 10 years ago. I hope the Minister will reflect in his response on the reports, inquiries and recommendations that have already been put forward and outline what he will do to ensure that that current separation is adequately addressed to prevent situations like this case. What are Ministers going to do to ensure that similar situations to what happened to Dean never happen again?

The shocking and shameful rise in suicide and self-harm is happening on this Government's watch and the Minister must outline his plan of action today. These are not statistics; they are real human beings—somebody's father, somebody's mother, somebody's daughter or somebody's son. The Government cannot get away with sweeping this issue under the carpet for a second longer. I note that the Joint Committee on Human Rights is also conducting an inquiry on this issue and I hope that today's debate might be a precursor to the outcomes of that inquiry.

Last month, in Justice questions, I raised Mr Saunders' case. The Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) told me that he was

"seeking the details of all those cases to see whether there is a pattern in why they are happening. I hope to come forward later in the year with suggestions for policy change relating to mental health assessments in prisons."—[*Official Report*, 24 January 2017; Vol. 620, c. 156.]

[Luciana Berger]

An assessment is not, in and of itself, enough. However, when I sought more details in a written parliamentary question, the Secretary of State's answer exposed a U-turn on any plans for such an investigation. Although another exploration of data would have been wholly inadequate, it would at least have been something. Now it seems that the Government have no plans in place to confront this crisis.

If the Minister thinks that a further review of the evidence is needed, I am here to disabuse him. If he thinks we need more consultation, I am afraid he is mistaken. Countless inquiries and reports have been conducted, which have a plethora of very practical recommendations to their name. There was the review carried out by Baroness Corston on women and, significantly, the Harris review on self-inflicted deaths of young people, which was the most comprehensive review of suicide in prison and heard directly from bereaved families. Many important recommendations on learning and accountability were put forward, which so far have been rejected.

Families tell us time and again that what they want after a tragedy like this is for no one else to go through a similar experience and for concrete changes to be made. Ultimately, we are seeing the same failings repeated time and again in this pattern of preventable deaths. There is currently a significant accountability gap. Deeds, not words, are what are needed now; a concrete plan of action is necessary, not yet another ministerial speech. I say that in memory of all those who have died by suicide in our prisons. It is unacceptable. We abolished the death penalty half a century ago for very good reason. Now we must ensure that in 2017, no prisoner pays the penalty of their life because of the failure in our prison system. I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) on securing today's debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) for his insightful interventions.

I extend my particular thanks and welcome to Mark Saunders, the father of Dean Saunders, who tragically died by his own hand in Chelmsford prison, for joining us for the debate. I reiterate the point that the Secretary of State and I made to him when we met: I very much look forward to working with him to bring in some real solutions to the challenge of suicides in our prisons.

Like the hon. Lady, I am concerned that the rates of suicide and self-harm in our prisons are too high. It is an issue that transcends political parties, despite our obviously different perspectives on the reforms needed in our prisons. My priority as prisons Minister is to provide leadership and to drive improvement across the system to bring those rates down.

As hon. Members will recognise, some of the problems in our prisons have long roots. It will take time to refocus the system on rehabilitation and reform but, as the last set of statistics for levels of suicide and self-harm

reaffirm, we must also take urgent and decisive action to make prisons places of safety for those prisoners who are at risk.

The challenge of record levels of suicide and self-harm in prisons is a complex one and there is no simple solution. We know that prisoners are a high-risk population and that many of them come into the prison system with drug or alcohol problems, isolation, social disadvantage, experience of sexual or physical abuse, or mental health problems. All those factors increase the risk of self-harm or suicide among prisoners. We acknowledge that the nature of a custodial experience can further increase those risks, but that should not serve as an excuse.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am encouraged by the Minister's comments. Is he aware of figures from De Montfort University that show that 46% of women in custody have previously attempted suicide and that women in the criminal justice system on average die 16 years younger than their counterparts? Will he acknowledge that that issue should be part of the ongoing dialogue that is needed between the mental health and the criminal justice systems?

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. I did say to the hon. Lady earlier that interventions from Opposition spokespersons are not allowed in a short Westminster Hall debate. I have re-confirmed that that is the ruling, so I am not going to allow the Minister to respond to that intervention. I apologise to the mover of the debate for the interruption.

Mr Gyimah: Any loss of life, whether male or female, is tragic. I would hope that my comments will address the issues in female as well as male prisons.

Deaths in the early days and weeks of custody are highest after reception, sentencing, transfer or recall. There are also significant numbers of deaths among lifers and other prisoners late into long sentences. We are developing a package of reforms as part of the prison safety and reform programme, and we will consult with a range of external stakeholders to seek their views on the action that will be taken to address the complex issue of suicide and self-harm in prisons.

In a written question, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree asked about the internal review. I assure her that there is an inquiry under way to look at all deaths in custody in the past year and to further our understanding of why those events are happening. She will know what the results of that inquiry are as soon as they are available.

The early days and weeks in custody are particularly critical, and we are taking steps to ensure that when somebody enters a prison they are given the support they need at that important time. We are rolling out new training courses across the estate to help our staff to identify risks and triggers of suicide and self-harm and to understand what they can do to support prisoners at risk. That involves awareness training for prison staff on supporting prisoners with mental health issues. The new package consists of six sections that can be delivered to both new and existing staff either in succession or in a modular form.

Dr Poulter: I thank the Minister for his answers. To clarify, will that training for prison officers be compulsory or voluntary, and will it be carried out according to the amount of funding available?

Mr Gyimah: We are making the training available to all prisons, and we expect prison governors to ensure that as many of their staff as possible can take it—particularly those who are operating on wings and have direct contact with prisoners. The full training package takes about 1.5 days to complete.

Luciana Berger: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gyimah: I would like to make some progress and develop these points. I will perhaps take an intervention later.

We are also making improvements to the assessment, care in custody and teamwork process—the case management process in place in our prisons to support and manage prisoners at risk—and identifying opportunities to make it more effective. That includes changes to relevant training and developing a new self-harm diagnostic tool for use by prison governors and staff, which brings together information for each prison about numbers and types of incident, and where and when in the prison they are happening.

We are also improving infrastructure and partnerships. To support governors and prison staff across the estate, we have put in place specialist roles—regional safer custody leads—in every region to provide advice to prisons and to spread good practice on identifying and supporting prisoners at risk. We are also committed to developing partnerships with others who can help us. In addition to the funding already provided to support the prisoner listener scheme, we will be providing extra funding for the Samaritans to provide targeted support for prison staff and to prisoners directly, including by piloting emotional resilience training for new prisoners, delivered by released ex-listeners.

In the immediate term, a national learning day will be held on 14 March for prison staff on suicide and self-harm. We also strive to continue to learn from others and from completed and ongoing reviews. It is critical that we respond to the independent advisory panel's ongoing review of women's self-inflicted deaths. We continue to benefit from individual reviews into deaths in custody by the prisons and probation ombudsman. As hon. Members will have seen, we have introduced the Prisons and Courts Bill, which contains measures to put the ombudsman on to a statutory footing, with powers of entry and requirements on the Secretary of State to publish responses to the ombudsman's reports. It will give those reports real teeth and will introduce an imperative in the system to follow through the recommendations and ensure that they are implemented. The Bill gives effect to long-standing commitments by successive Governments to give the ombudsman permanent status. I hope that hon. Members will welcome and support the Bill as it progresses through the House.

We will also redouble our efforts to support protective and environmental factors, which evidence tells us reduce risk. We know that strengthening family ties and peer support can support prisoners' wellbeing and make custody safer. Governors will be held to account for the family services in their prison, and from autumn 2017

the family service budgets will be devolved to governors so that they have flexibility over how they resource family services to best meet the needs of their prisoners. We are also supporting digital developments in prisons, including the roll-out of in-cell telephony, to enable prisoners to call their families more easily and at cheaper rates. We will learn from Lord Farmer's review to investigate how helping prisoners to engage with their families can support their rehabilitation and provide encouragement.

Luciana Berger *rose*—

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Lady is itching to make an intervention, so I will give way.

Luciana Berger: I thank the Minister for very kindly giving way. I can see he is about to conclude, and we still have a few minutes left in the debate. Can I bring him back to two points? First, on the training that may or may not be available to prison staff, I urge him to reflect on the fact that there are people who have served in our Prison Service for decades but have never received any mental health training. It is important that every single one of them receives such training. Secondly, is the Minister's Department looking at how to reduce risk in prisons, in the same way as we reduce the risks from ligature points in mental health settings?

Mr Gyimah: On the hon. Lady's second question, absolutely yes, we are reducing risk in prisons, in terms of the fabric in cells and so on. In addition to the training and opportunities for prison officers to become better skilled and better able to identify suicide risk and to deal with mental health issues, last week, as she will be aware, we announced a promotion for all band 3 officers—they can get promoted to band 4 and get an additional salary at band 4 if they specialise in certain roles in prison. One of them is specifically to do with safer custody. Therefore, a prison officer today can choose to specialise as a safer custody officer and get paid more to do so. Some 2,000 prison officers across the country could benefit from that increase in pay and from the training that I have outlined.

In the light of the disproportionate number of self-harm incidents among female prisoners, we are exploring ways of improving family links, including overnight visits, family days, child-centred visits, homework clubs and the delivery of relationship and parenting programmes. We are also taking account of evidence that shows that prison environments have a direct impact on prisoners' wellbeing and rehabilitation, as the hon. Lady rightly pointed out. Our plans for estate transformation include ensuring that prison sites are configured to support prisoners' access to fresh air, exercise and meaningful activity.

Fundamental to supporting that activity and improving the safety of all those living and working in our prisons will be the recruitment of the additional 2,500 frontline staff we are funding. Extra staff will enable prison officers to conduct new ways of working and transform the culture in our prisons, so that every prison officer is responsible for the supervision and support of about six prisoners. The 1:6 model is in part based on the work of Lord Toby Harris on self-inflicted deaths, which particularly focused on the youth estate. That is why we are introducing the important key worker role.

Luciana Berger: I thank the Minister for very kindly giving way again. Does he accept that those are not additional staff, but merely a replacement of the staff that have already been cut? We have lost more than 7,000 prison officers since 2010. We have only to look at the outcome of the inspection at Northumberland prison to see that there is a very significant issue of prisoners feeling so unsafe that they do not feel able to leave their cells.

Mr Gyimah: The 2,500 staff are additional to what we have, so at the end of 2018 we will have 2,500 additional officers. The baseline—the comparison with 2010—is not accurate because, although we lost 7,000 prison officers, we closed down 18 prisons. We are looking at a completely new baseline. However, the most important thing is the one-to-one support from a dedicated officer, which is at the heart of our prison reforms, ensuring that prisoners first and foremost are safe to benefit from the help they need to quit drugs, participate in education and skills programmes and acquire the skills to prepare for life after release.

The hon. Lady asked about the 75% of prisoners—she alleged—who face delays in being transferred to NHS hospitals beyond the 14-day deadline. That is obviously a serious concern, and I will work closely with Department of Health partners to look into it. Health partners are obviously important in supporting prisoners and meeting their physical and mental health needs. In 2015, just to put the statistic out there, there were 1,010 transfer admissions to secure hospitals from prison, but I admit that a lot more needs to be done.

I read the inquest report into the incredibly tragic death of Dean Saunders. Like the hon. Lady, I agree that we are a long way short of where we should be in terms of preventing such self-inflicted deaths. The points I have enumerated today show what we are doing now, and we will come forward with even more detail and further reforms to ensure that we bring down the number of these deaths as much as we possibly can. I look forward to working with the hon. Lady—I will be willing to discuss these issues in detail with her—and with the Saunders family and a number of other families who have lost loved ones in this way.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Liverpool City Region (Poverty)

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered poverty in the Liverpool city region.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I welcome right hon. and hon. Friends from across the city region to this important debate; we speak with one voice on poverty in our area.

Poverty is not an ephemeral concept. For far too many people in our city region, it is part of their daily grind. During the debate I will celebrate the fantastic achievements of charities, voluntary organisations and community groups that work tirelessly to tackle poverty in our area; highlight some of the challenges individuals and families face; and identify what we can do collectively to try to tackle the issue across the Liverpool city region.

During her coronation in July last year, the Prime Minister spoke on the steps of Downing Street of “fighting against the burning injustice that, if you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.”

However, since her parody of Mrs Thatcher’s 1979 St Francis of Assisi speech, it has been hard to find one policy in which the Prime Minister provides solutions to address the issue.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that the pattern is particularly stark in the Wirral? If a line is drawn down the M53, the difference in life expectancy between the west side and the poorest parts of the east side is 10 years.

Steve Rotheram: I absolutely accept that. If lines are drawn right across maps of the city region, there are similar disparities and instances in which life expectancy rates are completely at odds with the attempt to improve everybody’s life chances, as the Prime Minister said she would on the steps of Downing Street.

Will the Minister address the fact that the 55% of working families in poverty—a record high—need hope that things will improve? We need to ensure that there is aspiration for children caught in the cycle of deprivation, and innovation in Government thinking to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. I think we all remember how things turned out for our area last time there was a Conservative Government. By the time the Tories were ousted from power, our country was far more divided than when Thatcher came to power and promised to heal discord, so Government Members will forgive my cynicism about the veracity of the current Prime Minister’s words and her resolve to tackle poverty.

To get a better understanding of the current situation in the Liverpool city region, it is important to start by charting the economic vicissitudes we have seen in our recent history. Before the financial crash in 2008, the Liverpool city region experienced reasonable levels of economic improvement and was growing faster than the rest of the north-west economy. We benefited from European objective 1 funding and billions of pounds-worth

of private sector investment that catalysed our area's regeneration. The tangible manifestation of our renaissance was the changing cityscape, with projects such as the arena and convention centre and the Liverpool ONE shopping complex generating thousands of full and part-time jobs, helping to boost economic growth and raising visitor numbers. In 2008, we were able to showcase to the rest of the UK what we are capable of when given a fair crack at the whip.

The basic tenet of a decent society, on which I will focus my comments, is fairness. The last Labour Government had taken nearly 1 million children out of poverty by the time we left office in 2010. We helped to alleviate the suffering of many trapped in poverty through the creation of Sure Start centres, which gave our children the best start in life to break the cycle of dispossession. We also introduced tax credits, which helped to make work pay for many low-income families. However, despite improvements, there were still significant problems to tackle in some communities across the six districts.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend also recall that, for the first time in history, the last Labour Government removed the link that there had always been between older age and poverty, and took almost 1 million older people out of poverty?

Steve Rotheram: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Of our great achievements, removing that link was certainly important in taking huge swathes of older people out of the cycle of poverty.

The indicators and indices of multiple deprivation have gone backwards under the current Government. It is estimated that 91,000 children in the city region are growing up in poverty. Analysis by the Children's Society estimates that, in the city of Liverpool area alone, 34% of children live in poverty, while 26,800 children live in 15,500 families in problem debt. Debt is a growing issue for many families simply trying to make ends meet. As StepChange highlights, problem debt costs the UK £8.3 billion a year through the damage it causes to family life, mental and physical health, productivity and employment prospects, and costs to the welfare state, the NHS, local government and other agencies.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. There have been many improvements in my constituency, particularly under the last Labour Government, but he has hit on an important point: working people are suffering poverty because they are on very low wages or can find only part-time jobs. One of the greatest challenges is surely how we ensure that people get a better income, because working people are suffering.

Steve Rotheram: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that in-work poverty is increasing. That can be tackled by giving people a proper living wage. That is something that we have said a future Labour Government will do. According to the Office for National Statistics, 46% of individuals living in households in the lowest total wealth quintile are in financial debt, which is twice as high as households in the highest wealth quintile, on 23%.

At a G8 summit in 2011, David Cameron promised:
"Britain will not balance its books on the backs of the poorest."

However, a recent report by the Resolution Foundation found that this Government's tenure will be the worst for living standards for the poorest half of households since comparable records began in the mid-1960s. Compared with other developed countries, the UK now has the worst household income inequality in the world, and it is at its most iniquitous since the early years of Thatcherism.

Local authorities are often the first port of call for families suffering from poverty. Liverpool City Council is facing an enormous funding headache. The Government slashed its grant by 58%, yet somehow still believe that the city council should provide the same vital services it once did. I challenge the Minister, or any hon. Member, to have their income reduced by significantly more than half and to still be able to afford to do the same things they did before. That is what the Government expect councils across the city region to do. How can local authorities in the areas of greatest need be expected to help families suffering the effects of poverty with such scarce resources?

A study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that child poverty costs the public sector between £12 billion and £22 billion a year, which evidences the need for a co-ordinated and collaborative approach to tackle the issue. However, there is a wide range of complex contributory factors that can leave people facing severe hardship. Unsurprisingly, despite the last Labour Government's rhetoric about eradicating child poverty in the UK by 2020 with the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Tories are making life even tougher for families in our areas that have the highest levels of deprivation. Living costs have risen, welfare reductions are exacerbating child and family poverty, and pernicious policies have had devastating consequences.

The Prime Minister has extolled the vision of a "shared society" although, as with the mantra of the "long-term economic plan", I have not heard her say much about it recently. Bewilderingly, she has tried to claim the crown of social justice for her party, but when was the last time she or her Government spoke about poverty? Under the Tories, life is increasingly difficult for the most vulnerable, and low levels of social mobility are magnified in areas outside London and the south-east.

Policy has included the bedroom tax, which penalises people for living in a property where the Government consider bedrooms are not being utilised. The problem in areas such as ours, however, is that those living in under-occupied homes had nowhere to go, due to the shortage of suitable properties for them to move into. The Government's one-size-fits-all approach failed to solve the problem it was allegedly designed to tackle and instead forced people out of their family homes, exacerbating the breakdown of social cohesion in many of our communities. In Merseyside and Halton, we do not have the right housing mix to accommodate demand, which is creating problems in the private rented sector in particular. Increasingly, we have instances of rent poverty, with unscrupulous landlords charging rent rates that renters simply cannot afford. Direct payments have hindered and not helped, too.

People are having to make unenviable decisions about whether to heat, eat or pay rent, so it is no wonder that some get into arrears. In a number of cases, they end up being evicted and are forced on to the streets to sleep rough. Ministers have to take action to clamp down on

[*Steve Rotheram*]

that growing injustice, instead of spouting erroneous statistics to justify failing policies. I would be happy to accompany the Minister on any night he chooses to walk around any part of our wonderful city region to see the desperation of rough sleepers for himself and to speak to them to find out the reasons behind it.

Year after year, rip-off energy suppliers are racking up the cost of consumers' gas and electricity bills. The latest hike in prices will cause particular concern to the 4 million UK households who live in fuel poverty. The suffering caused by cold-related ill health costs the national health service £1.36 billion a year, and for many the high cost of energy is exacerbated by substandard accommodation. During our time in government, we invested £18 billion into the decent homes standard. Only this week, the UK Green Building Council reported that 25 million homes would need refurbishing to the highest standard by 2050, at a rate of 1.4 homes every minute.

Ms Angela Eagle: In the Wirral, before the previous Labour Government took office, 65% of social housing was below the acceptable standard. Owing to the money that was invested under that Labour Government, when we left office less than 5% of the social stock was below the acceptable standard. Does my hon. Friend recognise how that helped to deal with the problems of poverty, and health related ones in particular? What can be done to take that process further if he is elected Mayor of the city region?

Steve Rotheram: I will concentrate on the first bit, rather than the second bit, if that is okay. On the progress made under the Labour Government to tackle what has to be described as the scourge of people living in substandard accommodation, we did an awful lot of good, and we were hoping to do even more. People have to understand that when they are heating a home without double glazing, for example, the heat is easily lost. Simple things such as double glazing or cavity wall insulation help to retain heat, and so reduce bills. That is what we did for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people throughout the country, and certainly our area benefited.

I hope that the Government will do something simple to tackle the problem of 1.4 homes per minute needing to be brought up to standard until 2050. My party has pledged to get to grips properly with the poor quality of homes. We have made that an infrastructure priority, which would allow us to combat the problem effectively and efficiently. Lamentably, the Government would not join us in the voting Lobby to ensure that homes were fit for human habitation.

Regrettably, my constituency has been ranked No. 1 in the whole country for disability and health deprivation. Life expectancy in Liverpool, Walton is many years shorter than for the residents of Walton-on-Thames, for example. As we heard during Prime Minister's questions today, the Government have encouraged those with minor ailments to visit pharmacies, so as to alleviate the pressure on GP surgeries and on accident and emergency services. It is therefore outrageous that pharmacies in my constituency will not receive a single penny from the pharmacy access scheme, forcing on some the prospect of having to close. Out of the 394 chemists in the whole

of Merseyside, only 18 will be funded, while the constituencies of the Prime Minister and of the Secretary of State for Health will each have seven funded. How does that address poverty of health, as the Prime Minister promised she would do? How does that prevent the knock-on effect for our NHS? How can people help themselves out of poverty when the Government do everything they can to make the basics of life even harder for them?

Recent statistics published by anti-poverty charity the Trussell Trust highlighted the worrying rise in the use of food banks in our area. Between April and September 2016 in my constituency, the North Liverpool food bank supplied 2,638 three-day emergency food parcels to families, of which nearly 1,000 were for children. It is a national disgrace that in the fifth richest economy in the world, almost 1.1 million people rely on food banks.

On this Government's watch, however, things are getting even worse. Only recently I received a letter from the Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions informing me of two proposed jobcentre closures in my constituency. There are similar problems throughout the city region. The Government do not seem to understand that closing a jobcentre and relocating it miles away creates further barriers for local people trying their best to find work. Perhaps the Minister will explain when he sums up why the Government consistently put obstacles in the way of people who are trying their best to find work. As an alternative proposal, will the Minister agree to run a pilot scheme in the Liverpool city region in which we use our libraries, one-stop shops and community centres to provide a neighbourhood service to help people back into employment?

Education provides the essential building blocks to achieve the economic success that we so desperately need, and yet too many children in Merseyside and Halton are going to school hungry. That has a devastating effect on their educational prospects. Teachers and governors are doing all they can to help, such as with the provision of breakfast clubs for children. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) has been a great champion of free breakfast clubs, as research suggests that if children have a decent breakfast, they are more likely to concentrate better, learn more and achieve improved results at school.

The Government are devolving only limited powers to metro Mayors—this is where I should declare an interest—while at the same time fragmenting delivery and centralising accountability in the school system. The Liverpool devolution deal provides the metro Mayor with only limited powers over learning, such as on post-16 skills. Further devolution could present the opportunity for each part of the Liverpool city region to work better together to challenge poor educational performance and spread best practice, rather than for each local authority to operate in splendid isolation. We have the ludicrous circumstance of local education authorities continuing to have statutory responsibility for schools, under legislation such as the Education Act 1996, while being deprived of any levers to pull in order to fulfil those duties and influence outcomes.

When one college reports that 81% of students arrive with English and maths inadequate even to commence studying their courses, we need to address the issues, rather than perpetuate the existing fragmentation. It goes

without saying that protecting per-pupil funding rather than proceeding with the Government's 6.5% real-terms reduction in education spending is a priority for our areas. There is a poverty of aspiration among far too many young people across the city region, so if I am elected in May, I want to be able to convince the next generation that they can be the doctors, nurses or lawyers of the future and start to develop strategies to tackle the root causes of poverty, such as poor educational attainment. I hope that the Minister will explain why the Government are so hesitant about further devolution of education powers.

I also want the Government to give metro Mayors the power to reallocate residual apprenticeship levy funding, which could be ring-fenced for innovative apprenticeship programmes. That would not cost the Government a penny, but would afford areas the opportunity to develop apprenticeship programmes to respond to local need. The Government signed up to local commissioning in the devolution agreement, but can the Minister explain why the Liverpool city region is not allocated its own contract package for the work and health programme? The current deal overlooks our local expertise, which we should harness to support people into employment, and would mean that Manchester could develop innovative approaches unilaterally but we could not. Will he address that? Such levers would enable metro Mayors to make a real difference, so I hope that the Minister will address those issues.

Before concluding, I must pay tribute to the voluntary and community sector and the fantastic charities in our city region that do so much to make the lives of others that much more bearable.

Derek Twigg: May I take my hon. Friend back to apprenticeships? Riverside College in my constituency, which he is due to visit, provides excellent opportunities for apprentices, but further education colleges have had massive cuts to their budgets. The Government need to address that if they want to expand apprenticeships and have good-quality apprenticeships that link in well with local businesses, because local colleges will be key in doing that. I wonder what my hon. Friend's view is about that.

Steve Rotheram: Like many people here, I was at the debate about FE funding and the need to reduce the Government's proposed cuts. We partially succeeded in doing that, but the proposed cuts to the budgets of FE institutions across the city region are still significant and will prevent them from doing some of the things that the Government want them to do.

The Government want 3 million apprenticeships in this Parliament. That will not happen if budgets are constantly slashed. I have suggested an alternative. Companies with a turnover of £3 million or more will have to pay a 0.5% apprenticeship levy. I do not believe that all that money will be used for apprenticeships—not all organisations will draw down their entitlement—so there will be a residual fund. With the Government's help, we could develop an innovative programme so that that ring-fenced money could be used for apprenticeships and we could respond to what is coming down the pipeline and develop skills for the next three, four or five years. I hope that the Minister will address that.

The real issue is that we do not need meaningless slogans from the Prime Minister such as "shared society". From pioneers such as Kitty Wilkinson, Eleanor Rathbone, Dr Duncan and Father Nugent to the organisations that may go unnoticed but will provide vital support today and tonight to people who are less fortunate, our area has been at the forefront of great social advances for many centuries. If the Government are serious about reducing inequality and devolving powers to start to tackle poverty in all its manifestations, the Minister must give proper consideration to my suggestions. I look forward to his response.

2.54 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It seems somehow appropriate that we are here under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, given that you represent a constituency in the Liverpool city region.

Nothing defines poverty more starkly than someone being unable to feed themselves and their family because there is no food in the house and no money to buy it. In my experience, that is not a position that anyone wishes to be in. We still live in one of the richest countries in the world, but that kind of poverty is widespread and increasing. It is a key part of the worst of the poverty that I see increasingly in south Liverpool and Halewood.

Since the global financial crisis hit in 2007-08 and the Lib Dem-Tory coalition Government decided in 2010 that never-ending austerity and public spending cuts were the answer to it, there has been an explosion in the number of our citizens placed in the painful, invidious, unhealthy and humiliating position of having to go to a food bank to feed themselves and their families. Since the election of a Tory Government in 2015, we have also seen a doubling down on cuts in social security support. Scapegoating and a blame culture have become characteristic of the callous and sneering tenure of the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) and his successors in the DWP. It seems that we are to expect more of the same from our new Chancellor of the Exchequer in next week's Budget as he desperately tries to offset the spiralling pressures and economic uncertainties caused by the extreme way in which his Government are intent on us leaving the EU.

The numbers on food bank use are stark. Some 2,894 people accessed a food bank in 2005-06, but just 10 years later, in 2015-16, 1.11 million people had to access Trussell Trust food banks alone. Figures for the first six months of this financial year up to September 2016 show that that number is on course to increase again. However, we do not know the true number of people affected, because the Government, disgracefully and callously, still refuse to collect the statistics. We know that the available figures understate the extent of the problem, because there are hundreds of food banks not included in the Trussell Trust scheme that do not use the vouchers on which its statistics are based, and many people cannot use food banks because they cannot eat the dried, tinned and processed food that is given out in food parcels, for medical, practical or cultural reasons. They sometimes cannot do so because their financial problems mean that they have no gas or electricity and cannot cook what they are given to eat. In my experience, that is an increasing problem.

[*Maria Eagle*]

In December 2014, the all-party parliamentary inquiry into hunger in the UK, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who is in his place, tried to fill the gap in statistics created by Government indifference. In its report, “Feeding Britain”, it stated that 4 million people were at risk of going hungry, 3.5 million adults could not afford to eat properly and half a million children were affected.

Thanks to the work of the “Share Your Lunch” campaign run by the social business Can Cook, which is based in my constituency, I can say that in Liverpool we calculate that our food bank and other food help outlets have had about 60,000 visits in the last year. Some of those will have been repeat visits, but “Share Your Lunch” thinks that the real number of people without food is double that. Indeed, visits to Bridge Chapel, the Trussell Trust food bank in my constituency, increased by 10% last year to 3,890 after a two-year plateau, with 43.5% of visitors coming from Speke-Garston. Some 10% of the households who access help at Bridge Chapel have at least one person in work. That indicates the extent of very low pay and zero-hours contracts that do not guarantee any minimum income. Under-employment is a real problem in our region.

According to “Share Your Lunch”, 45% of Liverpool families live below the poverty line and risk falling into food crisis. The number of children who start school underweight has risen by 16% since 2012, up to one in five children in the UK arrive at school hungry, and one in three teachers surveyed by YouGov have brought in food for children in response to finding hunger in their classroom.

Why do we have this problem in Liverpool when we live in the sixth richest country in the world, and what can be done about it? The Trussell Trust says that the most common reasons for referrals are benefit delays, low income and benefit changes, which account for 27%, 25% and 16% of referrals respectively. That means that a full 43% of people who use food banks have to do so because of the DWP’s inadequacies and poor actions. No wonder the Government will not even collect statistics on why people are forced to go to food banks—they would be embarrassed by the findings.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does my hon. Friend realise that there is also a similar pattern in the Wirral? I suspect the numbers are not quite as high, but the reasons for the existence, running and use of food banks on the Wirral are similar. There are now seven food banks in Wallasey, and according to the Trussell Trust, benefit sanctions, the inadequacy of benefits and delays in paying benefits are why almost half of the people affected find they have to resort to a food bank to feed their families.

Maria Eagle: Indeed. In fact, “Feeding Britain”, the report by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead, had an even higher figure: it said in December 2014 that almost two thirds go to food banks because of benefit issues. That accords with my experience in my advice surgeries in Liverpool and Halewood, where I find that those who most need help have been let down completely by the social security benefit system and that, more often than not, the crisis precipitated by DWP behaviour has left them without money and without food.

Typical scenarios include illness leading to job loss; redundancy leading to an application for jobseeker’s allowance or other benefit, which is then delayed for

months while the family has no income; or sudden Kafkaesque checks on entitlement at the behest of Government, like the recent behaviour of Concentrix in cancelling people’s tax credit on the basis of entirely groundless supposition. It was unavailable to be contacted and delayed putting things right for months. That company had been financially incentivised by the Government to cancel claims, and it did so unjustifiably and at random.

I had many constituents coming to my advice surgery who were in work and had suddenly had their tax credits stopped, which meant that they could not afford their childcare, which in turn meant that they could not go to work. All kinds of problems followed, often leading to visits to our local food banks. Even the current Government were forced to act, thanks to the pressure put on them by colleagues across the House, yet a number of my constituents have been left with no money and no food by that behaviour of Concentrix. Fortunately, some of them are now getting compensation—perhaps up to £100, but more usually £50—from the Government for what has been done to them.

Sometimes, benefit changes precipitate food crisis, such as when people move from JSA to employment and support allowance or from disability living allowance to personal independence payment. Believe me, such a change can, and often does, cause a cascade of catastrophe when things go wrong. People have to manage for months with no money before the system is put right and the backdated payments are made. That is how people end up with no money and no food.

I am seeing benefit sanctions happen increasingly—it is an accelerating problem. Sometimes—this is deplorable—the sanction is open-ended, and my constituents are not told about that. It is often unfairly applied to vulnerable people who have done nothing to deserve having all their money stopped indefinitely.

It is clear that the best way of making inroads into the cause of this problem and cutting food poverty is by turning the DWP back into what it should be—a provider of social security for those who need it—and by ending the punishment of poor and disabled citizens just because of the misfortune of their circumstances, which seems to be the DWP’s *raison d’être* these days. That, however, will require a Labour Government.

I want to say a little about what can be done and is being done about the problem. In my constituency, I have a range of organisations trying to help. They include the Trussell Trust, with its food bank in Bridge Chapel; non-Trussell Trust food banks and more ad hoc arrangements in a number of places in Halewood, Speke and Garston; a FareShare distribution centre in Speke; and Can Cook, a social business that helps run “Share Your Lunch”, an ambitious initiative that aims to eradicate food poverty and provide fresh, nutritious food for those who are hungry rather than food parcels of dried and tinned processed food. There is no shortage of people trying to help. I thank the volunteers and organisers who have been willing to step in to help their fellow citizens when the Government are abrogating their responsibility and are happy to leave people with nothing.

I also thank the public, who make donations. In Liverpool, we are particularly blessed by the solidarity and generosity that people show each other, in particular those less fortunate than themselves. That is true across the city region—it is a defining characteristic of Merseyside

and Halton. That generosity is exemplified by the “Share Your Lunch” campaign, run by Can Cook in my constituency but well and ably supported by the *Liverpool Echo*, which I commend for the work it has done in highlighting this issue and tackling it in practical ways, and by many business supporters and other individual donors. It has raised £51,600, generating a total of 28,800 fresh, nutritious meals that it has supplied to people who need food. More than 19,000 kg of fresh vegetables and 18,000 kg of fresh meat have been provided through its efforts. Indeed, in the campaign’s first week it raised £35,000, all because of the generosity of our fellow citizens in the city region. I hope the Minister accepts that that shows people’s concern about the fact that their fellow citizens are having to suffer the humiliation of not being able to feed themselves and their families.

That huge response has been welcome. It has enabled “Share Your Lunch” to carry out initiatives such as providing everything for Christmas lunch for people who could not afford Christmas and helping families in food poverty get through the school holidays, which are a big problem. When no school dinners are available, it can be almost impossible for certain families to feed their children. The current food bank model is not perfect—it is not the last word—but it does give emergency help to thousands of families when they need it.

There are different ways of tackling this problem. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) set out the long history we have in the city region of charitable assistance and innovative social support, which long predates any of us being Members of this House. He was right to highlight that. That entrepreneurship is continuing in organisations such as Can Cook, with its “Share Your Lunch” campaign in my constituency.

In a typical food bank parcel for a family, there are 22 tins of processed food, all extremely high in salt and sugar. If the food does not go together to make a good meal, some of it may remain difficult for families and recipients to utilise. Food bank parcels do not cater for vegetarians, vegans or those with special dietary needs, so how do those people get help? Perhaps FareShare can help. It has a distribution centre in my constituency and does good work delivering surplus food from supermarkets, which would otherwise go to waste, to third sector organisations. Of course, food banks and other organisations do have to pay to be members and to receive the available food. They also have to take what is available; they cannot order what they would like or what is needed. I know anecdotally that much of what is passed on remains unused or ends up sent to landfill by the third sector organisations rather than by the supermarkets, because it cannot be used for one reason or another. Therefore, while the food bank model operated by the Trussell Trust and the work done by FareShare helps many people—it has been a lifeline for many—there is room for other approaches to be tried as well.

That is where Can Cook and its “Share Your Lunch” comes in. It believes that good fresh food is a human right and that everybody should have access to fresh food by choice, regardless of their circumstances. Given that many people who find themselves with no food and no money are in that position not because of anything they have done but because of circumstances, I agree completely that those people ought to have choice if that is possible. That is an ideal worth pursuing. Why

should those in food poverty have no choice but to eat dried and processed tinned food, full of sugar and fat, which is not healthy or nutritious and may not go together to make balanced meals? Why should they not have a choice of fresh, healthy, nutritious food?

“Share Your Lunch” has developed a good food model with the aim of using some of the profits from its catering operation—it is a social business providing good, fresh to schools and care homes—to generate free, fresh, nutritious meals for those who need them. It has partnerships across the city region—across Liverpool and Knowsley—with councils and with businesses. It aims to develop good food areas where it can feed hungry residents in a designated area with the free meals generated by its commercial activity. That model is interesting and has something to offer. It is a win-win if it works and will give residents an extra choice when they face a food crisis, so that they can access fresh and nutritious food if they prefer or if it suits them, rather than a food bank parcel.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about how the problem is to be tackled across the whole UK. What does he have to say about “Share Your Lunch” and Can Cook’s model? I wish “Share Your Lunch”, the campaign, and Can Cook, the organisation, all the best in their endeavour. If they succeed, even the poorest of my constituents, at the worst time of their lives when they have no food and no money for food, will be able to eat healthily and properly should they choose to do so.

3.11 pm

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Howarth. It is fantastic to have you in the Chair for this timely debate. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), on securing this debate.

All of us here today see in our weekly constituency surgeries low pay, precarious work, zero-hours contracts, energy price rises and benefit delays leaving thousands of our constituents living on the edge of poverty, if not submerged by it. In such circumstances it takes only an unexpected bill, a family illness or an accident to leave people without the means to properly house, clothe or feed themselves and their families.

The number of such cases increased dramatically last year when the full impact of the Concentrix tax credits debacle became felt. We heard a moment ago how that impacted on the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) as well. The most extreme examples of hardship as a result of that fiasco were felt by people such as my constituent, Michelle, who faced repossession as her tax credits were stopped simply because a previous tenant’s mobile phone bill was still registered at her address.

In Liverpool, as in so many places around the country, such personal financial precariousness is compounded by the Government’s long assault on local community services and networks that have traditionally supported people to get back on their feet.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton alluded to in his remarks, we have seen from central Government a cut of 58% to our budget since 2010,

[*Luciana Berger*]

and Liverpool City Council is faced with making a further £90 million of cuts over the next three years, bringing the total amount of central Government spending cuts since 2010 to a staggering £420 million. I will say more about the cumulative impact of the cuts in a moment. It is simply not possible—I am sure that no Minister in their heart of hearts really believes it to be possible—to make such deep cuts over such a sustained period of time without damaging the social fabric that protects people in need from the worst effects of poverty.

The all-party group on fuel poverty and energy efficiency has praised Liverpool City Council's healthy homes programme, which brings together help and advice with practical support on keeping our constituents' homes warmer to tackle fuel poverty. That is particularly relevant in this debate. According to the Government's new definition of fuel poverty, my constituency is in the top five in the country to be affected by this issue. Liverpool is one of the few councils around the country that sees the value in this activity and it does its very best to continue funding a team of environmental health officers who can use enforcement powers to make unwilling landlords improve properties if there are health and safety risks to their tenants.

The healthy homes programme has supported about 46,000 initial assessments, resulting in 22,000 referrals for additional support over the past seven years. The programme estimates that it has saved our NHS about £55 million over a 10-year period, while the enforcement work has made private landlords invest an additional £5.5 million in their properties. It is proof that a relatively small investment in long-term support and preventive work, carried out by local councils in partnership with local agencies, can make a huge difference and actually save money in the long term, as well as improve the health and wellbeing of local people. As a local MP, I have referred many of my constituents to the service. They have gone on to see improvements in their homes and can now afford to heat them properly, particularly during the cold winter months.

However, Government cuts threaten our council's ability to continue to deliver this vital service for our constituents. Of course, our council is doing all it can to protect the most vulnerable. For instance, in children's services, money has been set aside to maintain our network of children's centres for the next 12 months, because we see the value in providing that vital service, with the aim of devising a viable option for the future of the services. However, the council still has to find savings of £4.1 million, which it intends to make by reducing the cost of care placements and packages, and increasing the number of in-house foster carers.

There is a reason why the previous Labour Government invested in creating more than 3,000 children's centres across our country and invested in the early years of a child's life. It was to break a cycle that we know still persists in our country and is getting worse: where a child is born determines their life chances and outcomes. That is why children's centres can and should be making a difference. The council cannot deal with the extent of child poverty in Liverpool with a Government in Westminster that are not interested in contending with this vital issue.

Under this Government, one in three children in my constituency—more than 6,000—are living in relative poverty, and almost half of them are in families where at least one parent is in work. The subject on the Order Paper today is poverty in the Liverpool city region, but of course our children are not alone in experiencing the pain of Tory policies. Across the country, we have seen an increase of 200,000 children living in poverty, up to 3.9 million, in a single year. That is the price children across our country are paying for the Tory Government's failure to tackle inequality adequately.

In one ward in my constituency, Picton, more than half the children—52%—are living in poverty, after housing costs are taken into account. In Kensington and Fairfield ward it is 43%, in Old Swan it is 34%, and so it goes on, in ward after ward, right across our city region, year after year. Children's life chances are being stymied because Government policies have created an economy built on casualised, low-paid, temporary and precarious work for their parents, and removed the safety net that previously ensured children were supported.

For comparison, in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), 13% of children are, after housing costs, living in poverty. In the constituency of the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), the figure is 16%. Frankly, whether the percentage is 13%, 16% or, as in my constituency overall, 33%, children, after housing costs, are living in poverty. Those figures bring shame on the Government, and we must all recognise that poverty is not spread evenly around our country. Some parts, such as our Liverpool city region, carry a heavier burden.

I fear that too many Government Members carry with them a view of some places in the north, such as Liverpool city region, as home to people deserving not of a chance, but of contempt. I do not make that point lightly. I ask Members to ponder this single statistic produced by the Children's Society: more than 3,000 of the children living in poverty in my constituency of Liverpool, Wavertree are from families where at least one adult is in work. Such people are doing the right thing: heading out the door every morning, working hard and returning home, only to see their children still living in poverty.

Ms Angela Eagle: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Will she attempt to explain what the Government's thinking might be, given the disparity in poverty between certain areas that she has just explained? In the Wirral, we have lost 57% of local authority funding, Liverpool has lost 58%, and yet there are some areas, normally represented by Conservative MPs, that have seen nowhere near those levels of cuts, and the average is 37%.

Luciana Berger: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important contribution. It is a point that I was going to make later in my speech. The coalition Government decided to remove the weighting for deprivation. Every Member who has contributed or is about to contribute has made that very point to Ministers sitting on the Government Benches. If we had had the average cut in Liverpool, we would have an additional £84 million a year, which would make a significant difference to the life chances and outcomes of the people we are elected to represent.

The Government talk a lot about increasing aspiration, but some people aspire every day to have enough money at the end of the week to put food on the table and clothes on their children's backs and to secure a roof over their heads, and not to have to choose between those three at any moment.

I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton said about the Government's proposed jobcentre closure plans. Liverpool will be hit hardest of all England's cities by the proposal, which will affect 40% of our jobcentres. I presented a petition last night, on behalf of hundreds of my constituents, against the two proposed jobcentre closures in our area. The issue is very significant, and if the Government are serious about dealing with inequality it does not make sense to treat Liverpool city region in that way.

We should not forget that in 2015, the Tory Government scrapped child poverty targets that were brought in by the previous Labour Government. Ministers no longer have a legal duty to tackle the number of children in poverty. They believe themselves to be essentially unaccountable for their policies, but we will hold them accountable because we meet our constituents and their children in our surgeries every week. We see the faces of people such as my constituent Frank, who, on obtaining custody of his child last year, faced months of delays and administrative errors in trying to have his child benefit and child tax credits paid. That left him financially unable to provide properly for the child placed in his care and plunged his newly reunited family into extreme and abject poverty.

Conservative Members may say, "Well, of course, the poverty target was measuring the wrong thing," or "Poverty ain't what it used to be in my day. Children going hungry—now that's real poverty." If that is what they say, I would reiterate the significant comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood.

I am conscious that another hon. Member wants to speak, so I shall reflect only briefly on the issue of food poverty, which affects too many people not only in the Liverpool city region but across the country. The Central Liverpool food bank, which unfortunately is one of many in my constituency, has fed a total of more than 43,000 people, including 15,000 children. The number of people having to use the service has increased, because of an increase in the number of people being sanctioned. Many are children. Many people not only are using the food bank in a crisis, but have become chronic users because they cannot put enough food on the table for a sustained period of time.

I have raised the issue of food poverty before. In fact, I obtained the first debate on food banks in this House, in 2012. I also made a film about it called "Breadline Britain". At that time, only a few hundred thousand people had to obtain emergency food aid. It is worth reiterating the point made earlier: the fact that more than 1 million people have had to get emergency food aid in the past year, in the sixth richest nation in the world. That is a stain on the national consciousness and I am ashamed to live in a country where that is the case. I am frankly appalled and disappointed that the figures are getting larger every year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton mentioned that I have been a long-term supporter of organisations such as Magic Breakfast, which helps schools provide children with breakfast. There are too

many reports from teachers—and the number is increasing—of children sitting in school not having had breakfast. If it were not for those breakfast clubs, they would not be able to concentrate and learn properly.

The cuts that have been made are significant. It is not just a question of how much is in the pot; it is also a question of how it is distributed. We have been disproportionately affected because of the removal of the weighting for deprivation. I believe that the Government have washed their hands of the tough choices and passed them on to councils, as in the case of our city region and its people. Our early intervention grant was cut by 44% between 2010-11 and 2015-16. It is worth reminding the House that that grant is intended to support children and those most in need. It is no surprise, given that it has been savaged in that way, that people are struggling to get by.

As I said, it takes only one unforeseen event to push people over the edge into debt. That is why, according to the Children's Society, nearly 2,500 children in my constituency are living in families that have problem debt. About a third of families with problem debt say that they have cut back on food in the past month. A third have cut back on heating and a third on clothing. Those are the basics of a decent life, and that is what is happening in this country in 2017. The tough choices being made in Britain today are whether to choose food over heating or heating over clothes, or to run deeper into debt. Children in poverty are more likely to fall behind in school, less likely to secure a job and more likely to experience mental and physical illnesses.

It does not have to be like that. We have heard from other hon. Members about the incredible charitable and voluntary sector efforts being made in the city region, but on their own, those valiant efforts are not enough. On behalf of all my constituents, young and old, and the people of the Liverpool city region, I urge the Minister to consider the issue of poverty seriously, and to outline exactly what the Government and his Department will do to address it properly.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, it may be helpful if I point out that I shall call the first of the Front-Bench speakers at 3.35 pm.

3.25 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I hope to finish long before then, Mr Howarth. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship—a sign of Merseyside's ingenuity at keeping topics within the family. I am also immensely grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) managed to secure the debate.

I want to report two facts from the frontline of people in my constituency fighting against hunger, then I will address four brief questions to the Minister about actions that the Government could begin today to abate that hunger. If I had reported the things that I am about to say when I first joined the House in 1979, most people would have thought I was heralding the post-truth era of politics, but they are ordinary, plain, shocking facts.

Feeding Birkenhead is a wonderful coalition of organisations that feed children in the school holidays, as well as feeding many families. It gave me some information for the debate, including the example of a little girl who arrived at one of the school feeding

[*Frank Field*]

projects, which was full up. The projects insist that just because children are poor it does not mean they should not have fun in their holidays, and be fed as well; the little girl said, “Could I come in if I miss the fun? But I want the food, because I am so hungry.”

The other example was, rather appropriately, from around Christmas. A mother was lowering her child into one of the waste bins of one of our great supermarkets, to scavenge for food and then be brought out. That mother is suffering from cancer. Feeding Birkenhead now feeds her, but the awful indictment is not only that a child was put in danger, risking all sorts of injury from pulling things around in the bottom of a waste bin; it is the fact that the mother now reports that the food she gets, which would otherwise have gone to waste, is providing her with the best diet she has ever had.

My four questions for the Minister are about ways in which we in Merseyside could immediately be helped to fight back against the extent of hunger, particularly among schoolchildren. First, given that the Digital Economy Bill is going through the House, will the Minister require the three Merseyside boroughs that do not use housing benefit data automatically to register children as eligible for free school meals, and therefore the pupil premium, to do so? That approach was pioneered by Liverpool and taken up by Wirral and Knowsley. In my constituency it resulted in £725,000 a year extra coming into Wirral both to feed the children who had not been getting free school dinners and in pupil premium.

Secondly, in what ways will the Government consider helping all six boroughs to run school holiday meal and fun programmes similar to those in your constituency, Mr Howarth, and in Birkenhead? Thirdly, will the Minister choose Merseyside to be one of the first pilot areas for the revolutionary new set of indicators measuring children’s school-readiness, devised by Wirral teachers and the University of Cambridge? We would like that to be part of the roll-out of the Government’s programme on increasing life chances. We would measure whether life chances were equalised before children came to school, during those crucial first years.

Lastly, will the Minister give us the small resources that we need so that all our six boroughs can follow the example of Greenwich, which has managed to set up job creation schemes—not training schemes—so that all families hit by the benefit cap can gain work and therefore get the cap lifted? That makes a huge difference to their income, their wellbeing and the incidence of children being hungry. Those would be four real advances for Merseyside.

I wanted to try to sit down by 3.30 pm, and I will do so now.

3.30 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) on securing this really important debate.

I would like to comment on how strong all the contributions have been this afternoon. My hon. Friend’s speech was wide ranging. He focused on fairness and the fact that we have had a strong economic renaissance in very recent years in the Liverpool city region, which he would like to see re-stimulated. He also focused on

the bedroom tax and child poverty, which many Members picked up on, as well as the closure of jobcentres, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg) made a good contribution on the impact of the cuts to FE colleges and what they mean for apprenticeships. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) made an excellent speech, looking in particular at the Government’s delivery of social security support and the failures in that regard. She gave a visceral description of what it means to so many of her constituents not to have food or money for food.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree also spoke powerfully about the impact of poverty, citing the shocking statistic that one in three children in her constituency live in poverty, and about the shame that we live in the sixth richest country in the world and yet last year saw an increase of 200,000 in the number of children living in poverty. She focused on the cuts to local authority spending, which have had a real impact on support services and the local economy as a whole. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) also spoke about the impact of those cuts to local authority spending and the 10-year disparity in life expectancy between the east and west of Wirral.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) made really strong points about the need to feed children. The example he gave of a mother with cancer lowering her child into a waste bin was Dickensian; we really do not expect to have to picture that kind of scene in this day and age. He also gave an example of a little girl asking for food, saying she could manage without fun but not without food. That has to shame us all. I hope the Minister will respond to the specific requests that my right hon. Friend made.

The Merseyside area, which equates to a large part of the Liverpool city region, has some of the most deprived communities in all of the UK. The latest statistics from the Church Urban Fund suggest that within its boundaries, Liverpool city region has three of the 10 most deprived parts of the UK: Anfield, Walton Breck and Everton. Five of the 20 most deprived constituencies in the country are in the Liverpool city region: Liverpool, Walton; Knowsley; Liverpool, West Derby; Birkenhead; and Bootle. It is clear that the Government’s obsession with austerity, their cuts to local authority spending—which have hit Liverpool and Wirral particularly hard, with cuts of 58% and 57%—and their failure to promote growth and opportunity, coupled with the impact of their social security changes since 2010, have hit the people of the region hard.

My hon. Friends the Members for Garston and Halewood, for Liverpool, Wavertree and for Liverpool, Walton all spoke compellingly about the increase in food bank use. In Merseyside, the number of adults and children receiving help from food banks run by the Trussell Trust leapt from just over 56,000 in 2014 to nearly 61,000 the following year. The figure remained around the 60,000 mark for 2016.

There are many reasons that force a family to visit a food bank, such as delays in being paid, particularly when someone is in insecure work and does irregular hours or is on a zero-hours contract, which we sadly see only too frequently in the current working environment. According to the latest ONS figures for April to June 2016,

the number of people employed on zero-hours contracts in their main job was more than 900,000—nearly 1 million people, or nearly 3% of all people in employment. That figure was 156,000 higher than for the same period in 2015.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2016 study of poverty and exclusion found that 46% of residents in poverty in the north-west belonged to households containing at least one person in work. The Government repeat as a mantra that work is the best route out of poverty. Yes, work should be a route out of poverty, but for many families it leaves them struggling to cope with basic bills. We have heard plenty of examples this afternoon to back that up. Will the Government take urgent action to ensure that work pays, by reversing the cuts to work allowances under universal credit, which was first rolled out in the north-west?

Some 31% of families in the north-west are private renters, and the reduction in the household benefit cap outside London to £20,000 from November last year means that for the first time, the cap is having a real impact outside London. In 2014, 12% of families on Merseyside were in fuel poverty, which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree spoke about with real passion. With inflation expected to rise over the coming year, the number of families who are in poverty despite being in work looks likely to rise even further.

Delays in receiving universal credit or other forms of social security are causing many people real hardship. The Trussell Trust has stated that 44% of all referrals in 2016 were due to changes and delays in social security payments. Of course, that has been reflected in the testimonies of several Members this afternoon about the cases they see coming to their surgeries on a weekly basis. The 2014 independent review by Matthew Oakley of sanctions for JSA claimants on the Work programme recommended that the DWP should pilot the use of warnings and non-financial sanctions, as did the Work and Pensions Committee in 2015.

The last available DWP figures for sanctions, for 2014-15 to 2015-16, show a fall, but their use in particular areas such as Bootle and Liverpool, Riverside remains consistently higher than in other areas. I know those areas well, because I taught in Bootle and in Liverpool, Riverside, and had first-hand experience of the kind of hardship that people have to deal with. I understand that the DWP has not yet carried out a pilot of using warnings in place of sanctions for first sanctionable offences in England or Wales. Will the Government commit to extending the pilot to other areas outside Scotland?

It recently became clear how the delay of at least six weeks at the start of a claim for universal credit is leading to people falling into rent arrears or being forced to look to food banks for help. What will the Minister do to address that? Does he consider it right that families should be forced to turn to food banks for help or fall into rent arrears due to the basic design of the Government's flagship social security policy, designed to lift people out of poverty?

I recently went to a cross-party event on the issue of poverty. There was a girl called Kelly there who spoke of what it felt like when her mum was not able to pay the rent and they had to move into a hostel. That little girl did not want to let people know how ashamed she

felt and how upset she was, so she used to pinch herself to stop herself crying. That should not be happening in a country as rich as ours.

The first pledge the Prime Minister made was that she would lead a Government driven by the interests of families struggling to manage, not the interests of the "privileged few". She referred to the

"burning injustice that if you're born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others."

Within the Liverpool city region, the difference in life expectancy is as much as 12 years for men and 14 for women, as several colleagues mentioned. Life expectancy is highest for men in parts of Childwall, at 83 years, and for women in Ainsdale, at 90. It is lowest for both sexes in Bootle, at 71 for men and 76 for women. Both Ainsdale and Childwall are a 20 to 30-minute drive away from Bootle, but the difference in people's life chances is stark.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey remarked, at the other end of the age scale, the figures for child poverty are also sobering. Some 29% of children in the UK as a whole live in households on relative low income after housing costs—in other words, they live in poverty. The figure for Knowsley is 30% and for Liverpool it is nearly 34%. In the Picton and Princes Park wards of Liverpool, over 50% of children are growing up in poverty after the housing costs of their families are taken into account.

The Government have abandoned targets set in the Child Poverty Act 2010 to reduce child poverty based on household income. Are they still seriously committed to tackling child poverty? It is a concern when the goalposts are moved in such a manner. Perhaps the Government just do not want to see the figures for what they are.

In my own constituency of Wirral West, there is a great deal of hidden poverty, despite some areas being among the most affluent. For example, volunteers at the community shop in Royden Road, Upton, provide food parcels to families from right across Wirral, and they talk of things such as people being on statutory sick pay and not having enough money to make ends meet. Wirral Free Uniform for Secondary School distributes recycled school uniforms free of charge. It told me of one woman who had walked all the way from Birkenhead to Hoylake to pick up a uniform for her child. That is a distance of more than 8 miles, but she walked it because she did not have enough money to pay for a bus.

The Liverpool city region contains areas of deeply entrenched poverty, and the policies pursued by the coalition and the current Government have hit communities on Merseyside hard. Two of the early pioneers in identifying and combating poverty, Charles Booth and Eleanor Rathbone, were born in Liverpool. Eleanor Rathbone fought for the introduction of family allowances—the forerunner of child benefit—in the inter-war period. Charles Booth produced groundbreaking maps of London, based on poverty, to identify the areas of most need. I think that both would be really shocked and greatly disappointed to find that families in work, in the city of their birth, in the 21st century are still forced to turn to food banks for help. It is time the Government took action to alleviate the suffering of those experiencing poverty, not just in Liverpool but across the whole of the UK.

3.41 pm

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotherham) on securing a debate on this most important issue, and congratulate everyone who has contributed to it. These are very serious matters. They are not new, I am sad to say. There have been income disparities and health inequalities in our country for a very long time. The alleviation of poverty and the spreading of opportunity are key aims that have brought hon. Members on both sides of the House into this line of work and into public policy. We may have different approaches to some of the issues, but they are no less important to Members, whichever political party they represent.

I particularly want to join the hon. Members for Liverpool, Walton, for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) and for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) in commending the great work of the voluntary sector in this area. Again, that is not new. Over many decades—centuries, in the case of some organisations—great support has been given to the neediest people in our communities.

I want to set out, in the time that I have, some of what the Government are doing or seeking to do to make further progress, what has already been achieved and what more we believe can be. As a number of hon. Members said, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone, not just a privileged few. That includes building strong economies in every part of the country, ensuring that everyone can benefit from our strong record on the economy.

There is clear evidence that the best route out of poverty is through work. We know that because working-age adults in non-working families are almost four times more likely to be on a low income. According to the “Child poverty transitions” report published in June 2015, 74% of poor children in workless families who moved into full employment exited poverty. I would therefore like to draw hon. Members’ attention to our record on employment and set out what we are doing to help to get even more people into work.

The latest employment figures, as you will know, Mr Howarth, show that the employment rate is at the record high of 74.6%. The number of people in employment is also at a record high—31.84 million. Those trends are being seen broadly across our country. Since 2010, more than 60% of the rise in private sector employment has taken place outside London and the south-east. The employment rate for the Liverpool city region, at 67.7%, is 2.7 percentage points up on 2010. The unemployment rate in the region is now 5.4%, down from 10.4% in 2010.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton suggested that there were particular issues, with people being able to find only part-time work. Of course I acknowledge that there are people working part time who would prefer to be working full time. I am pleased that that number has come down and that less than 14% of part-time workers are now in that position and would prefer to be working more hours. In the last year, more than 70% of the growth in employment has been in full-time work.

Pay is also up, by 6.2% on the year. The people right at the bottom of the income scale—the bottom 5%—have just seen, according to the latest annual figures, the highest rise in their average income since that data series began, in 1997. Income inequality is down.

Our welfare reforms are at the heart of our approach to increasing employment.

Maria Eagle: Given the rosy picture that the Minister is painting of employment and opportunity, can he explain why the number of people having to resort to food banks in my constituency is going up?

Damian Hinds: I do not seek to put any tint or rosiness on the situation. I was merely going through the facts, both at national level and at the level of the Liverpool city region. It is the case that more people are in work and we are now seeing incomes rising. Of course there is more to do; I never dispute that. My colleagues in jobcentres are working night and day on exactly that, and of course the overall stewardship of the economy remains central to people’s prospects.

We are delivering a modern and effective welfare system that ensures that work, and progressing in work, will always pay. Alongside that, we are taking action against child poverty and disadvantage, addressing the complex barriers that face some families and hold them back. Of course, we continue to protect and support those for whom work is not and cannot be an option. We have had to make difficult decisions on welfare spending, but we have never lost sight of that mission. Universal credit lies at the heart of it, transforming the welfare system to ensure that it always pays to work and to progress. That is in contrast to the pre-2010 system, under which in-work poverty increased by 20% between 1998 and 2010, despite, as is well known and as was discussed, welfare spending on those in work increasing by £28 billion.

We are building a fairer system that will mirror the world of work, we are eradicating the complexities and disincentives of the old system, and it is working. There are 828,000 fewer workless families now than in 2010, putting the workless household rate at its lowest since records began. Unemployment is down 894,000 since 2010 as the economy has grown. The employment rate, as I mentioned, is at a record high. In the last year, we have seen nearly 300,000 more people with disabilities, over 200,000 more women and over 150,000 more people from ethnic minority communities moving into work. Almost 1 million households have made a claim for universal credit, and there are nearly half a million current claimants. We began rolling out the full universal credit service on Merseyside in July and will have completed the full service roll-out to all Jobcentre Plus offices on Merseyside by September 2017.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous. Given that he is still painting a rosy picture and that the number of people who are hungry and having to resort to food banks and food assistance in my constituency is going up, will he undertake now to go back and persuade the Government to start collecting statistics about food bank use and why people use food banks, so that we can get a better picture, using official statistics, of what is causing that increasing and distressing problem?

Damian Hinds: The reasons that people use food banks are complex and overlapping, as the hon. Lady knows. Assistance provided by voluntary sector organisations can take a number of different forms. She will know that the Trussell Trust, an umbrella group for food banks, does in fact produce statistics on a regular basis.

Once universal credit is fully rolled out, we estimate that it will generate around £7 billion in economic benefit every year and boost employment by up to 300,000. We believe that making work pay and opening up opportunity for people to realise their potential are central to building an economy that works for all. By reducing the universal credit taper rate to 63%, we will further improve the incentive to progress in work, helping up to 3 million households to earn their way out of requiring welfare support.

Jobcentres across the city region were mentioned. Our jobcentres have an absolutely key role to play in supporting people out of poverty across the country, and I am proud of what our staff—our work coaches and others—do. Day in, day out, they help people to access both the financial and practical support they need to move into employment. As society has changed, so have our jobcentres; the offer in a jobcentre today is unrecognisable compared with what people would have seen in the 1970s. Reforms such as universal credit are revolutionising the relationship between our clients—our claimants—and work coaches, ensuring that the support we offer is more personalised and better suited to their needs. That includes enabling claimants to access our services in different ways that suit them.

It is right that the future of the estate reflects not only those fundamental changes, but the record levels in employment across the country, while always allowing a margin of flexibility for potentially unforeseen circumstances. In 2006, DWP employed 113,000 staff. Today that figure is 79,000, but on the same estate—because we have been locked into a 20-year private finance initiative contract that was signed in 1998. That means money is being spent on space that is not being fully utilised. That contract comes to its end, after 20 years, at the end of March 2018, which is an opportunity to review which offices we need in the future across the country, saving the taxpayer money while ensuring our customers are able to access the support they need.

Margaret Greenwood: On PFI contracts, and personal to my constituency, could the Minister look at the Hoylake jobcentre? I understand that there is a different arrangement there. This is not just about the ending of a PFI contract; I think there is something else going on here. Could he give us a picture as to what percentage of the jobcentres are about PFI and what are about something else?

Damian Hinds: I am happy to, although I also want to make sure I respond to points raised by colleagues. It is the fact of the end of the PFI contract, which covers most of the estate, that gives the opportunity and indeed creates the imperative to review the entire estate because we see the estate all as one. The Telereal Trillium contract does cover most buildings, but of course there is a knock-on effect both ways through buildings that are not covered by that contract.

In Liverpool, we currently use just 66% of the space that we are paying rent for. Even if we go ahead with the changes we propose, Liverpool will still have one of the

highest concentrations of jobcentres relative to other conurbations. When considering this question, our overriding priority has been the future service that we will offer our claimants. In every case in Liverpool, as elsewhere, we have sought to minimise disruption, moving existing jobcentres into nearby sites and co-locating with other services wherever possible.

Luciana Berger: Does the Minister not accept the point I made about Liverpool being disproportionately hit compared with any other city in England, with 40% of our jobcentres now earmarked for closure according to his plan? A not insignificant number of people are affected. In my constituency alone, 3,000 people will have to go to a new centre at least every two weeks. Thousands more have to access those two jobcentres. At least 3,000 people will have to do that. On that basis, does he accept that there is a disproportionate impact on the people of Liverpool? People not only in my constituency, but in others will be affected, as Members have said in this debate.

Damian Hinds: There are, of course, public consultations being run for both Edge Hill and Wavertree. As I was saying, even with the effect of these changes, there will still be a significant concentration of jobcentres in Liverpool compared with other major cities.

Frank Field: As the Minister is turning his notes over, might he give way?

Damian Hinds: I am short of time, but of course.

Frank Field: Given that I sprung my questions on the Minister, might he write to us so that he does not have to turn so many pages over?

Damian Hinds: I will be delighted to write to the right hon. Gentleman.

Looking at our benefit reforms alone fails to appreciate the wider work on support for those on low incomes. I mentioned the increases that we have recently seen in pay. I do not have time to list all the other advances, but they include the national living wage, the changes in the personal tax allowance and the triple lock on pensions—the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton brought up the link with pensions, but it was in 2010 that the triple lock came in. We have frozen fuel duty, helped to keep mortgage rates low and are cutting stamp duty—all of those are things to help people with their incomes.

Like many other areas, as the hon. Gentleman knows, Liverpool is benefiting from radical devolution. The city region devolution deal involves £900 million going to the city region, and that is just part of the picture. The regional growth deals involve £333 million from the local growth fund from 2015-21, bringing forward at least £249 million of additional investment from local partners and the private sector. We do think that devolution has an important role to play in helping to promote and push forward economic prosperity.

Since 2010, we have seen income inequality and the proportion of people on relative low-incomes falling to nearly their lowest levels since the 1980s. Official statistics show that, in Liverpool, the rate of relative low-income has fallen since 2010, and there has been a similar reduction nationally.

[*Damian Hinds*]

I want to turn quickly to some of the points raised in the debate. The rate of sanctions in Liverpool is down by 50% in the year to 2016. We are looking at the results from the Scottish pilot that the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) referred to. We have taken on the recommendations of the Oakley review and, indeed, a number of recommendations from the Work and Pensions Committee. Debt was mentioned a number of times. I am proud of this Government's commitment to the credit union sector, the action that has been taken on payday loans, the introduction of the help to save programme and that budgeting support is at the heart of universal credit.

The hon. Gentleman asked, "Why not more devolution?" He talked about schools. I would argue that free schools and the academies programme are the ultimate in devolution, giving power and accountability right down to individual schools. In terms of all these matters, we are always open to further proposals. The Government will of course be keen to work with whoever is elected as Mayor of Liverpool on employability and other things. The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about work in community locations. Edge Hill jobcentre—somewhere I visited recently—does exactly that, for example in its programme with refugees. Mr Howarth, I am out of time and I know that the hon. Gentleman would like to speak.

3.58 pm

Steve Rotheram: I could simply use the time allocated—just over a minute—to enter into a stats war with the Minister. There are certainly more people on zero-hours contracts, more in insecure work and more working families in poverty. However, I will use the time to concentrate on some of the questions I asked. Obviously, there are different methodologies by which we collate statistics, but as local MPs we see the result of Government policies on a daily basis—we do not need stats to prove that.

We have a particular problem with the five constituencies in our city region being in the top 20 for child poverty, but this debate was about poverty in its widest context: poverty of opportunity, poverty of aspiration, poverty of esteem, fuel poverty, rent poverty, child poverty and older people poverty. I started by saying that it is about fairness—that is all we want. I have made a number of innovative suggestions to tackle some of those issues and I am happy to have further discussions with the Minister on health inequalities, decent homes, energy problems, rough sleeping, the apprenticeship levy, the work and health programme, school collaboration and jobcentres.

Just as a last comment, the Minister talked about there being £900 million for the Liverpool city region. I will be 85 years of age by the time we draw down our last instalment—I will be happy to meet the Minister to celebrate that.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Emily's Code: Pleasure Vessel Safety

[*MRS ANNE MAIN in the Chair*]

4 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Emily's Code and safety on pleasure vessels.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to debate Emily's code. Today's debate is the story of a personal and family tragedy and of how to turn something that knots together an extended family, school and other friends, and a community—a whole small world—into something positive that can reach a much wider world. It is about how the image of a young girl can make all recreational boating more responsible and maybe, just maybe, help to save lives.

This debate is particularly poignant given that Emily's parents Clive and Debbie Gardner, her sister, Katie, her brother, Todd, and her grandparents are all in the Chamber with us today. The family scars are still raw, and emotions are never far from the surface. I hope you would agree, Mrs Main, that the sympathy of the whole House is with the Gardner family. Colleagues will be struck by the family's determination—like that of other Gloucester families, such as the Gazzards, the Powells and the Evanses, who have recently been through the agony of a child's death and then inquiries or even trials—that this will not overcome them and that they can do something both to honour the memory of a much-loved child and to make a difference.

Let me first explain what happened on Saturday 2 May 2015 and then what the family and the world of boating, with my support throughout, are doing with Emily's code. Fourteen-year-old Emily Gardner went to Brixham harbour that day with friends to go out on a boat. The Gardners had been on boating and canoe trips before and Emily was not frightened either of boats or of the water. As the marine accident investigation branch stated in its report that was published in October 2015:

"At approximately 1142...an unnamed Fletcher speedboat with one adult and three teenage children on board capsized after encountering a large wave. Three of the occupants managed to swim clear of the upturned hull but one of the children"—

Emily—

"became trapped. Despite valiant attempts to free her, she was only recovered following attendance of the RNL12 lifeboat 25 minutes later. Although medical treatment then started immediately, she never recovered consciousness."

The investigation found that the strap of Emily's buoyancy aid had become snagged on the speedboat's cleat, which trapped her underneath it. Other potentially contributing factors to the accident were outlined. First, the speedboat capsized after it hit a large wave at approximately 11.42 am and a new propeller, which had recently been installed, generated more torque, causing the boat to twist to port in opposition to the propeller's direction of rotation. It then capsized. The thrust of the boat had been exacerbated by the new propeller, by the fact that there was just a small amount of fuel in the engine and by the driver accelerating almost to full speed.

Secondly, despite some 25 years of experience and a water skiing qualification gained several years beforehand, the driver was unable to combat the contributing factors that led to the boat capsizing. Emily's buoyancy aid was also too big, increasing the risk of it getting caught.

The report noted, thirdly, that it had been “fortunate the accident was seen by members of the public ashore, who were able to raise the alarm. Had one of the drivers carried a waterproof VHF radio, which is recommended good practice,” he could have contacted the coastguard directly with the most accurate information available. The report also stated:

“Even if embarking on a short trip, it is better to be fully prepared, as minor emergencies can quickly escalate.”

Fourthly, the speedboat driver had not been wearing the kill cord. Although that had not been needed in this incident, the report highlighted that it showed the need to continue raising awareness of the issue in the speedboat community.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is recounting a clearly tragic case. However, even in the absence of a wave, which appeared to trigger this accident, does he agree that when the sun is out and the waters are calm, there is a tendency for someone on a boat to be lulled into a false sense of security, and that there is therefore a case for making anyone who embarks on a boat go through a thorough process of safety procedures beforehand, rather as people who are on a plane have to? Passengers on a plane are encouraged to read a checklist; does he agree that something similar might help in cases such as this?

Richard Graham: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In fact, he brilliantly anticipates exactly what I will say about Emily's code, and I am grateful to him.

Emily never regained consciousness, and it was determined that she died from drowning. I should mention one other point. The report pointed out that the speedboat was older than the recreational craft directive of 1996, which set out new guidelines for boats that could have helped the boat to float and not to sink by the stern, which was where Emily was trapped. The report concluded:

“Buyers should be cautious and aware of the potential shortcomings of leisure craft constructed before...1996, or those that might have been substantially modified.”

I cannot help wondering how many of us who have been on the sea in a recreational vessel are aware of that small but important difference in boat design, and whether all boat owners know how their boat will float in an extraordinary accident such as this.

Let me come on to the second part of this debate. When Emily's family had absorbed the accident report, they led a call for something to be done. They started fundraising; they ran a relay from Brixham to Gloucester for Winston's Wish and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution; and they organised Emily's diamond charity ball in October last year. They have raised an amazing £21,000—it may be more than that now, but that is the latest figure that I have—and they wanted to use those funds in the best possible way.

I met Clive and Debbie in Gloucester and heard their urge to do something to honour their daughter Emily. I then talked to the Royal Yachting Association and the chief executive of Her Majesty's Coastguard, Sir Alan Massey, who was extremely helpful and sympathetic. After a subsequent meeting between the Gardners and the RYA, Emily's code began to take shape and will now be launched in two days' time, on Saturday, with the full support of the RYA at its Suzuki dinghy show. I have copies here of what Emily's code will look like; they are available for any colleagues who would like them.

The RYA is recognised as the national body for all forms of recreational and competitive boating. It represents all the different elements involved, and it sets and maintains an international standard for recreational and small commercial boat training. Its ethos is one of proficiency and self-sufficiency, learned through its world-class training, and its purpose is to promote and protect safe, successful and rewarding British boating. It issues an annual advisory notice and safety notices throughout the year through the boating press, members' newsletters and social media, yet inevitably there are some people it has not reached whose safety awareness could be stronger. I hope that the very human appeal behind Emily Gardner and the code named in her honour will help the messages of the code to reach more widely.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an impassioned speech. I hope that there will be something in Emily's code about kill cords. He might be aware that in the Camel estuary a couple of years ago, there was a tragic incident when a kill cord was not used. I wonder whether there is any mention of kill cords in the code—for example, the mandatory use of them by people on the water.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I know that he has experience in his constituency of a death that received a lot of publicity at the time. It was a sad incident indeed, which I know he cared very much about. He is right, and I will come on to kill cords.

I hope that the very human appeal of Emily's code will help its message to reach a wider audience. In this House, as hon. Members know, publicity can be a double-edged sword, but in this case I would be grateful if every newspaper, online forum and TV and radio station gave Emily's code maximum coverage. I say to all members of the media that they, too, can help to make a difference.

The key, so far and in the future, is a spirit of partnership, bringing together designers, experts and parents, who know the real impact that safety notices have when they are put into practice well. The code has the support of all the major players—the coastguard, British Water Ski and Wakeboard, and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

What is the code? Let me go through it in some detail. Each element of it contains a letter that spells “Emily's code”. The first is:

“Wear a suitable lifejacket or buoyancy aid”.

The lifejacket should be a comfortably snug fit and should be fastened fully—are the straps tightened up, or is there too much room underneath? The second is “Service equipment”—is there fuel, and is the engine working? The third is “Get trained”—have I had any training courses? The RYA offers courses that can save lives. The fourth is “Make a plan”—where do I plan to go? Will I be inland, onshore or offshore? What will I do if the worst happens? Have I planned my passage? The fifth is “Know your limits”—have I ever been out on the sea before? What is a safe speed?

The sixth element is “Carry distress signals”—it is fine not to have those until suddenly it is not, and no one knows when that will be. Understanding the benefits of marine VHF—very high frequency—radios, and how to use them, is critical. The seventh is “Use the kill cord”—as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall

[*Richard Graham*]

(Scott Mann) mentioned, it should always, without fail, be attached both to the ignition and to the person's body before they operate the engine. The eighth is "Know your boat"—there may have been upgrades to it recently. Do I know what they are and what the impact of them could be? Do I know whether it was made before '96 and is therefore not built to the standard of the recreational craft directive? The ninth is "Have a radio", which is so simple to do.

Last, but by no means least, is "Check the weather", which is a point that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) made. People should check it the day before, again in the morning and again when they go out. We know how changeable weather can be. Most of us now have weather apps on our phones, and a simple tap can tell us what to expect. Thinking about the weather is crucial to the safety of a boating expedition.

The purpose of this debate is to highlight what happened to my constituents and what they have done to try to prevent it from happening again, but it also shows how Government agencies, the voluntary sector, a family and their MP can work together to try to make something good out of something ghastly. I am very grateful to all involved.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister cares deeply about young people and their opportunities; all the work he did on apprenticeships shows that clearly. I hope that he agrees that the cause of preventing fun days on the sea from turning into nightmares is a very good one, and that he will agree to support Emily's code and the message that it sends about boating safety. We have to recognise that a voluntary code like this is only as good as its take-up, its publicity and its ability to make us all think more carefully.

Will the Minister also agree to look at the recreational craft directive, which is an EU directive? Will he see whether we can ensure that it is carried over into UK law and that if it is ever abolished, it is replaced by an equivalent UK minimum technical and safety standard for boats sold here, including requirements for stability, freeboard, buoyancy and flotation? In this case, the boat sunk by the stern, but the RCD harmonised standards for speedboats like this one made after 1996 direct that they should float horizontally when swamped—that sounds technical, but it is crucial. The directive has clearly improved boat user safety; we do not want to move backwards when EU laws are converted into British law.

Finally, let me address what Emily's code is about and what it is not about. The code may have lessons for different activities that are equally fun, but that need careful supervision—not in order to stop, prevent or restrict them, but to make sure that risk management is a natural part of having fun. People setting off up mountains on beautiful days need a map, a compass, a mobile with battery, emergency rations, water and a waterproof, just as much as if they were going out on the sea.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I very much commend the hon. Gentleman and his constituents for the efforts that they have made. Looking beyond the leisure boating sector, does he agree that

there is also an opportunity for lessons about planning, training and servicing equipment to be learned in the commercial sector? Fifty-four commercial fishermen were killed at sea between 2010 and 2014. Does not that show that the same lessons have a wider application?

Richard Graham: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I did not know that figure; it is surprising and shocking. All these tragedies, whether in Cornwall, Scotland or Devon, have implications for how we improve things.

The important thing is not to prevent people from having fun, but to make that fun more risk-aware. Emily's code is for boating in the sea, but I wonder in whose honour other codes may be needed on the land one day, because we are always learning lessons from accidents.

I hope that this debate in honour of Emily Gardner and her family will be the warm-up act for the launch of Emily's code on Saturday. It recognises all the help from the organisations that I listed and the input from my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), whose constituency includes Brixham harbour. It salutes the determination of Debbie and Clive Gardner and the whole family, who have stuck together through this, as well as the generosity of those who have raised funds for them, with runs at Wall's Club, bike rides, Debbie's own runs and much more besides, to create this enduring legacy of love for a girl and awareness for everybody in the boating world.

After the launch on Saturday, emilyscode.org will also launch. I encourage everyone to look at the materials on offer, to get in touch with Clive and Debbie and ask them to come and speak in their constituency about safety, and to make sure that the next time a child goes out on a boat, they check their lifejacket, check the weather and check everything. Next time anyone goes out to sea in a boat, please will they stop and think first about Emily's code?

4.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is a pleasure to respond to this short debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for securing it and bringing these matters to the House's attention.

I have been a Member of Parliament for 20 years, a Front-Bench spokesman for my party for 18 years and a Minister since 2010. Over that time, I have spoken in Parliament hundreds of times, sometimes about significant things, often about insignificant things and usually, I hope, with good humour, but I have rarely spoken on an occasion that combines solemnity and importance as much as this one. This is a sad occasion, but a hopeful one too.

It is important that I emphasise how valuable this debate is. It provides the opportunity for me not only to join my hon. Friend in offering personal condolences, and those of Her Majesty's Government, to Emily's family and friends—I note that her parents, Clive and Debbie, her sister Katie, her brother Todd and her grandparents are here today; I welcome them and offer those condolences to them—but to join him in my admiration for their campaign, their effort, their spirit and the difference that they are making.

I do not understand death—I barely understand life, actually—but what I do know is that each life has a purpose. That purpose is not entirely a matter of the span of a life; it is really about the fact that, throughout the time we spend here, each of us touches and affects many other people. Through the development of this work and this code, little Emily, who died in this tragedy, is not only touching the lives of those who were close to her, but the lives of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of others. Her impact will be much greater than the span of her short life. It will change all those lives for the better. It is therefore a real pleasure for me not only to welcome, but to endorse Emily's code. It will be a lasting legacy and memorial to the daughter who was so loved and to the sister and the granddaughter who is so missed by the family, who are here today.

We in politics are in this business because we want to make a difference. That is why we are what we are and why we do what we do. We try to make a difference for good, don't we, but other people can make as much of a difference—perhaps more of a difference—than most of us do, however long we spend here and however much we succeed. What I am so impressed by is the seriousness and care that has been taken in the development of this code.

It is true, as John Masefield said in his poem, "Sea Fever", that

"the call of the running tide"

is a feature of our lives and these islands. It has been for all the time that men and women have lived here. We cherish our seagoing heritage and all that it means. It can, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester said, bring immense joy, excitement and thrills, but it also brings risk and danger, and that is precisely why it is important that we establish good practice and underpin it with regulation in the way that he suggested. An important principle at the heart of what he said today and what the code embodies is that learning through education and the establishment of what he described in his short speech as a set of rather simple, rather straightforward principles can make such a difference in guaranteeing the wellbeing of those who are called down to the running tide.

I have a long and detailed speech prepared for me by my excellent officials, but I will not give it, because I do not feel I should give it. Instead, I want to respond to this debate as a father of two young sons. I feel this, like everyone listening to this debate will, in that spirit. I looked at the code, and thought, "This is exactly as good as it could be. It is just perfect, isn't it?" The code is in line with RNLI practice and has its support. The code is very much in the spirit of our wonderful Maritime and Coastguard Agency, which does such valuable work in providing the assurance of safety that I mentioned a moment or two ago. I met the MCA just today to discuss the code and this debate.

The code is in tune and chimes with the work we do through our regular inspections and through the intelligence provided about ships, the weather, our coast and the dangers that those circumstances can bring. More than that, through its straightforwardness, persuasiveness and its relationship with Emily, it will make an immense difference in changing people's perceptions of the joy and the risks associated with the sea.

The code is, as I have said, straightforward. It states:

"Wear a suitable lifejacket or buoyancy aid

Service equipment

Get trained

Make a plan

Know your limits

Carry distress signals

Use the kill cord"—

that is a way of turning off the engine in a boat—

"Know your boat

Have a radio

Check the weather".

Those may sound like rather routine things, but my goodness, if the code is applied with rigour and enthusiasm and people know how much it matters, it will make an immense difference. So many accidents and tragedies are associated with one or more of those straightforward, but timeless principles.

It is a delight to speak in this debate, but it is also a responsibility. It is critical that education, training and voluntary initiatives associated with the leisure sector emerge from the work that has been done by Emily's family. With the guiding hand of the Royal Yachting Association, the pleasure boats sector has aspired to and achieved very good safety standards, and we need to say that Emily's loss was an exception. It is not the rule; our seas are safe and they are well policed. All the agencies I have described do sterling work to ensure that that continues to be the case.

Having said all that—I have also been in contact with the RYA, and I know that its training is of the highest standards—it is still important that we know there will be those who, for one reason or another, get involved in boats and do not take for granted those straightforward, resonant messages. There will be those who will not necessarily know the sea as well as they might. There will be those who are therefore at risk. The Government's commitment is such that not only do I give an assurance that we will do all that is necessary to make the code as widely established and as well-known as it can be, but we will formally launch the code at the Royal Yachting Association's dinghy show at Alexandra Palace and we are sending a senior coastguard commander to do so. We will continue to promote the national drowning prevention strategy, which aims to halve the 400 or so accidental drownings in all forms of water by 2026. Even where accident levels are thankfully low, we must do more. It is our purpose, but more still, it is our mission.

I started by paying tribute to Emily's family, and I do so again. The difference they are making is profound and appreciated. As I have said, the code will change many, many lives for the better. Marcel Proust said:

"Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind."

That is not an easy lesson to learn. When one is obliged to learn it by circumstance and then turn the power of the mind to a noble purpose, it deserves to be recognised in the way that my hon. Friend has allowed us to do today. I thank him for that and once again offer the thanks of the whole House of Commons and the Government to Emily's family for the difference they are making.

Question put and agreed to.

Fathers in the Family

4.29 pm

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call Neil Gray to move the motion, I point out that eight hon. Members have put their names down to speak in this debate. We also have the wind-ups, which will start at 10 past five. Depending on how long Mr Gray chooses to speak—it is his debate—there will be a time limit on speeches. If people are here to make interventions, I ask that they are kept brief and that Members are mindful of colleagues who may wish to speak later in the debate. I call Neil Gray to move the motion.

4.30 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of fathers in the family unit.

I am delighted to be leading this debate with you in the Chair, Mrs Main.

One of my proudest moments, not only as a father, but as a parliamentarian, was taking my young daughter and son through the voting Lobby with me on Friday to see the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (Dr Whiteford) pass its final stages in the Commons. I hope that by ratifying the Istanbul convention on gender-based violence we are taking another step to eradicate domestic violence and violence against women and girls.

It is thanks to Nick Thorpe of Fathers Network Scotland and Frank Young from the Centre for Social Justice that I applied for this debate. I was involved in a very small way in helping to promote Scotland's Year of the Dad in 2016, but at a relatively recent meeting with Nick, I agreed to do what I could to help promote reflection on last year and to encourage something similar elsewhere in the UK.

Dad, father, stand-in dad, daddy, step-dad, foster father, adoptive dad, daddies who have to be mummies too—there are so many ways to describe the male role in the family, but its meaning is slowly starting to change. In 2016, Scotland celebrated the Year of the Dad to help promote the contribution fathers or those in a fatherly role make to child development, families and society, and to provide greater understanding of the benefits reaped from organisations acknowledging the family roles of men.

The Year of the Dad was established by Fathers Network Scotland and supported by the Scottish Government because we are at a tipping point in our cultural evolution. The project's review paper states:

"The old stereotypes of dad as breadwinner and mum as carer no longer serve us in an age of increasing diversity and gender equality at home, work and throughout society."

Some 95 events reached nearly 15,000 people, more than half a million people were reached through media coverage, and there were tens of thousands of visits to the website, where more than 40 resource documents for families, services and employers were available. Some 5,800 individuals and 1,300 organisations signed up to the campaign in 2016, highlighting the positive message about fatherhood and the importance of dads in child development and parenting.

It should be obvious that recognising the role fathers play or should play does not in any way diminish the role mothers play—quite the opposite. I am clear, and the research shows, that society as a whole benefits from the positive involvement of fathers. As I see it, the increased wellbeing, confidence and educational attainment of children is the biggest benefit. So getting it right for fathers is about getting it right for every child.

The Scottish Government were clear that supporting the Year of the Dad was a central part of their gender equality policy. Male parental leave is key to narrowing the pay gap that disgracefully still exists for women. Clearly, it is all about having choices and giving parents the ability to choose what is best for them, but from a public policy perspective, we need to change societal norms to give parents a better opportunity to choose what is right for them. The current vicious circle of expensive childcare, low pay and societal pressures on women and men keeps many women in the primary caregiver role instead of allowing them to return to the workplace if that is what they want to do.

Last week, after patiently waiting almost a year for the UK Government to respond to its recommendations on tackling the gender pay gap, the Women and Equalities Committee set out its three priorities for the Government, including a more effective policy on shared parental leave. Unless the UK Government recognise the value of men and women sharing care responsibilities equally, and encourage men to take parental leave, we will not see any changes to current behaviour. Recent research from PwC found that, on current trends, it would take another 24 years to close the gender pay gap between men and women, which is clearly unacceptable.

If a woman faces discrimination when she returns to the workplace after having a child, such as not receiving a promotion in line with her male counterparts or being dismissed for requesting flexible working hours, that does not incentivise men to do more at home to care for their children. Of course, some men do not need incentives—they want to be at home more—but workplace norms make that request awkward to make. Why should a man be at home when his wife could be there? Research from Plymouth University from earlier this year stated that dads face a "fatherhood forfeit" when applying for part-time employment in the workplace—dads who want to work reduced hours or on a flexible basis are perceived as suspicious or deviant and questions are raised about their commitment.

The SNP Scottish Government are working hard to promote and reward flexible working and childcare in Scotland, using our devolved powers. They have supported the "Happy to talk flexible working" job advert strapline, which I added to my own recent job adverts. Working in partnership with Family Friendly Working Scotland, they have supported the top employers for working families awards. This year's award ceremony is taking place next week, and I look forward to attending.

The Scottish Government are also committed to almost doubling free early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours a year by 2020. The UK Government need to ensure that advice and support is available to fathers so that they are aware of their rights to paternity and parental leave.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. I wonder whether he has seen the helpful Barnardo's briefing, which points

out that without appropriate support, young and vulnerable fathers in particular can end up feeling isolated and marginalised by services and agencies. It goes on to recommend that local authorities should have an identified lead professional responsible for co-ordinating work.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I ask that interventions are brief, otherwise I shall overrule them.

Neil Gray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. That is sage advice from Barnardo's, as is normally the case from that organisation.

Shared parental leave was introduced by the last UK Government, but there was a widespread admission, including from its architect Jo Swinson, that the current policy does not go far enough. We need to ensure that employers are supported in offering all employees the opportunity to take a period of leave to care for their child, so that the responsibility does not fall de facto on women's shoulders. We need an effective shared parental leave policy that will help men at home and also women at work. It would also help the economy, because a 2014 Centre for Economics and Business Research study suggests that a "work from anywhere" culture would add an extra £11.5 billion a year to the UK economy.

Some mums want to stay at home for as long as possible and would not choose to share parental leave with their partner—I can perfectly understand that—but we are failing to help the mums who want to return to work and the dads who want to spend more time at home. In a similar vein, employees now have a right to request flexible working, but there is no definition of what that means, nor any compulsion on employers to do anything other than just consider it. As a society we are starting, rightly, to move away from the definition of fathers as the breadwinning disciplinarians, but we have not yet caught up in the workplace. The shift in fathers' desire to be more involved at home does not match the predicted uptake of parental leave by men of between 2% and 8%. There is still a reticence among men to ask to be at home more and a market expectation on them to continue in the traditional role as working breadwinners.

The only way to shift societal norms is to support or incentivise behaviour through policy, but employment law is currently decided here at Westminster. The UK Government must acknowledge the reality that gender-based discrimination against both men and women is not only hugely detrimental to individuals and our society but is harming our continued economic growth.

There was no prouder or more important moment of my life than when I became a father—on either occasion, in case my daughter or son look back on this and suggest any favouritism—but fatherhood and parenthood is clearly not a single event; it is a lifelong adventure and responsibility. My experiences as a dad are already different from my father's, as society moves on. The Year of the Dad highlighted why being a dad is so important. I have raised this issue today to suggest to the UK Government that they need to do more to help in that regard. We need to support the changing societal ideas about what being a dad is about and support employers so that dads can live up to the new expectations and aspirations of fathers. I make an offer to the Minister today to help constructively to ensure that the UK Government's employment law is directed towards supporting all mums and dads to be able make the choices that are right for them and their children.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I must tell hon. Members that we are operating on a four-minute time limit.

4.40 pm

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I am pleased to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I, too, am a father—I have two little daughters, one who is barely a month old and one who is two. I agree that fatherhood is a lifelong commitment. Fathers are part of the family unit and mothers matter too, so we should consider the role that fathers and mothers play together as families.

Families sometimes need help, and I believe the Government have a role in ensuring that families get the help they need when they need it most, which is why I am concerned that the tax burden on families is much higher in the UK than it is elsewhere in the world. At the OECD average wage for the UK of £36,017, the tax burden is 20% greater than the OECD average for single parents with two children and 26% greater for one-earner married couples with two children. That unfavourable position for single-parent or single-earner households mainly results from the fact that UK income tax does not sufficiently take account of marriage or family responsibility, which puts a burden on both fathers and mothers. We need to be mindful of that.

Let me put that in context. The UK has low taxes overall. In contrast with the position of single-earner families, single people without family responsibilities pay 8% less than the OECD average, 21% less than the EU15 average and 19% less than the EU21 average. I believe that the Government should consider the support they can provide families through the tax system. They should recognise that although for plenty of families, including many in my constituency, it is totally the norm for both spouses to work, there are also many families for whom it is not, whether because one spouse cannot work or because they want to be at home. I do not think the Government should tell families what they must do. They should not tell families that both parents have to go to work and that childcare will be provided for them. It should be for families to decide those things. It should be for mothers and fathers to make those decisions for their children.

In that vein, the Government should be more neutral on these matters. They should say, "Yes, great—we are going to do more to provide childcare for those who want it." They have a great agenda on that, but they should also ensure that people who want to look after their own children are not forgotten.

Each year, £1 trillion-worth of unpaid work is done in this country. That phenomenal amount of work goes on under the radar and is uncaptured by most statistics. It is important that we do not allow people up and down this land to be forgotten. There is good that the Government can do, and they can do it for married-couple families too.

4.43 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this important debate. I want to make a brief

[Mr David Lammy]

contribution as the chair of the all-party group on fatherhood. I welcome the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, which looked at this important issue in solidarity with all fathers across the country.

This is a cross-party issue that really ought to command the attention of all political parties, but unfortunately the political class in this country is behind the general public. All political parties are sometimes hijacked by other agendas. In my party, the attention on rights—particularly on women's and children's rights, although they are important and I stand by them—has sometimes drowned out the ability to talk about fatherhood. I also think that my political tradition's emphasis on the state and state support, particularly for poorer families and poorer fathers, has meant that we have sometimes tended to think that the state should do everything, and we have found it hard to talk about children and the role of fathers. For colleagues on the right of the political spectrum, sometimes, just sometimes, the emphasis solely on marriage and the way the state and tax breaks can be used to deal with marriage has made it difficult to talk about other sorts of arrangements in our country, and specifically about fathers. Sometimes the language can slip into talking about feckless fathers.

Perhaps those are the reasons why we stand so far behind many of our continental European brothers and sisters in other countries, who are much further forward on this agenda. It is deeply worrying that the figures for parental leave are so low for fathers, and that we do not recognise, as the public do, that couples make these decisions every day of the week. If we give them a year or so off to care for their children, they will decide between them who is going to do what bit.

We know that fathers want to spend time with their children. They want to be engaged right from the get-go. How can we as a state facilitate that? I was worried when I was mooting changes to child benefits, because there is a very strong group that believes that we cannot give dad the child benefit or put it in his name because he is going to run off down the pub with the money. That seems a very old-fashioned view, and is not my experience of the fathers I meet up and down the country.

I am very worried about how we support young fathers. We cannot deal with teenage pregnancy unless we support young fathers and think about their housing and how they are going to be connected to their children. We need to think about the fact that our public services really do not respond to young fathers, particularly those from a working-class background, whether white or black. Some children's centres have not even got a male toilet—such is their low expectation of those fathers. There is much to do, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts on securing this important debate.

4.47 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and to follow the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this important debate.

As far as I am concerned, being a dad is the best thing in the world. It is the most important job I will ever do. I often say to people that, even if our nation were unfortunate enough to have me as its Prime Minister, I would still consider being dad to my boys to be far more important than that role.

Sadly, there is a growing crisis of absent fathers in our country. It is a sad fact that 3 million children in the UK live in lone-parent families, 86% of which are headed by the child's mother. When we talk about family breakdown, more often than not we are actually talking about dad leaving the family home. There are 1 million children in our country today who have no meaningful contact with their father at all, and a 15-year-old boy today is far more likely to have a smartphone than a father at home. That surely must be a wake-up call for our country. Fatherhood should be seen as a social justice priority. Unless we tackle the issue of absent fathers and provide more support for fathers to be better dads, we will not effectively address the issues of social justice and social mobility in our nation.

Children from low-income households who have an active father figure at home are 25% more likely to escape the relative poverty they are growing up in. At the most extreme, 76% of all male prisoners come from households without a father figure in the home. Boys with little or no involvement with their fathers are twice as likely to become offenders as boys with highly involved dads.

Research commissioned and collated by Care for the Family found that children with dads involved in their lives had better attitudes towards school, better behaviour at school, higher educational expectations, greater school progress, higher qualifications and greater enjoyment from being at school. Surely those are all things that we should want for every one of our children.

I stress at this point that I am not putting down households of single mothers. I know from my experience of helping lone parents—the vast majority of them are single mothers—that they provide a loving, caring and positive environment for their children. They are often the unsung heroes of excellent parenting, even in challenging circumstances. However, we cannot ignore the fact that we do have a crisis of fatherhood going on. The right hon. Member for Tottenham alluded to the fact that there are changing attitudes in our country today, with a far greater desire particularly among millennial fathers to be more involved in their children's lives, whatever their situation with regards to a family. We should welcome that and support it.

I put it to the Minister that the Government should be doing more to support fathers. Will the Government consider following the example of Scotland, which last year had a Year of the Dad—it is not often that I congratulate the Scottish National party, but on this occasion I am more than happy to—and call for a UK-wide Year of the Dad, where we can celebrate, support and promote the important role of fathers in our country? Will the Government also consider putting together a working group of colleagues with an interest and experience in this issue, in conjunction with their forthcoming social justice Green Paper, to work to identify policies that are effective in supporting fathers?

This issue is far too important to leave to chance. We need the Government to take a lead and to put policies in place to support dads.

4.52 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. Let me thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for securing this important debate. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who made an outstanding contribution, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who made a passionate and smart speech on these important issues.

I share the view of the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay on the Year of the Dad. I was not aware of it until earlier in the week, when I started researching it, but I agree that we could see it rolled out not just in Scotland but across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That would be welcome.

What I have studied of the campaign has been overwhelmingly positive. That businesses, charities and public sector organisations are all coming out to promote and celebrate the role of fathers is to be appreciated. I read the comments by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts on the PoliticsHome site with regard to the shockingly low number of men who take up parental leave. We have a lot to do to change the culture so that men feel more comfortable in approaching their employers to be able to take time off to support the children and mothers.

The other issue I would like to raise is dads' lack of fair access to their children after separation from their partner—if we are honest, it is often the dad, as the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay made clear. Perhaps we have to look at changes in legislation to make access for fathers easier and simpler when a separation has occurred. Another particularly important point that has not been mentioned yet is parental alienation, where, following a separation, one or indeed both parents psychologically harm the child—it is effectively child abuse—by convincing the child that the other parent is not doing a good job, does not love them or something like that. That really warrants further debate and examination in this place and in wider society.

Even in the best of circumstances, separation can cause and exacerbate problems for the individuals involved. Matt O'Connor, the founder of Fathers 4 Justice, has spoken about several tragic cases where fathers who have lost contact with their children have thrown themselves under trains or off bridges. He has also highlighted Department for Work and Pensions data showing that parents who leave their children are almost three times more likely to die earlier than the average. Those statistics clearly need attention.

In summary, I welcome the success of Scotland's Year of the Dad campaign, which should be rolled out across the country. It would particularly help fathers who are separated from their children, and we should build on its successes.

4.55 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on bringing this important debate before the House and the tone with which he introduced it. I am also grateful to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for saying that he wants to take party politics out of the issue. This should be a no-brainer for us all and something on which people from different political traditions can come together.

It is right that we need to be careful about language. We all support the fantastic work that single mums do—indeed, many of us are passionate about this issue because we want single mums to have more help with the very tough job of being a parent. When Gordon Brown left Downing Street for the last time, he said that he was going on to do an even more important job and devote himself fully to being a father to his children, which he viewed as more important than being Prime Minister of our country.

I am encouraged by Early Intervention Foundation research, which the Government are taking very seriously as they work on their social reform White Paper—we all look forward to seeing that shortly—showing that the role of fathers is increasingly recognised as an important influence on child development. I am grateful to Tavistock Relationships for pointing that out. That has not always been recognised, and it is important that we do so.

It should be hugely concerning to us that there are what are sometimes called “dad deserts” up and down the country. The Centre for Social Justice, which also provided a very good briefing, identified 236 hotspots across the country, which should concern us from a social justice and inequality standpoint. When the number of fathers in a community diminishes, it gets harder for the fathers who are there to take their role seriously and to be good role models.

We must also think about how we can ensure that both young women and young men make wise choices about who they partner with. Young women need to look to men to be the fathers of their children who will be there for the long haul and take their important responsibilities seriously. We need to have frank conversations with young men about the incredible joy but also the responsibility of bringing a child into the world. One of the animal charities says that a dog is for life, not just for Christmas. How much more should that be true of having a child?

I am impressed by quite a lot of what happens in this area in north America. The National Fatherhood Initiative has existed in the United States for some time, and there is bipartisan support from Democrats and Republicans. President Obama made incredible father's day speeches, which were really moving and powerful, not least because he did not see a lot of his own father when he was young. He said that we can pass all the laws in the world, but it takes parents at home to do the long, hard work of bringing up children, and we want more dads to be present to help mums to do that important work.

I know that the Government take this matter seriously and I am encouraged by the Early Intervention Foundation research. I know that the Minister absolutely gets this issue, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say about it.

4.59 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Thank you, Mrs Main, for your chairmanship of this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) for calling the debate, in which I am pleased to take part.

Strong families, stable relationships and fulfilling familial ties between children and their parents, grandparents and extended families are the bedrock of our society, but for too long, regardless of which party has been

[*Suella Fernandes*]

in power, a narrative of deadbeat dads, mothers knowing best and hapless fathers has prevailed and a damaging culture has become entrenched in some of our institutions.

To be clear, I am not condoning irresponsible fathers who do not pay their child support upon a divorce or family breakdown or, even worse, as I encounter frequently in my surgeries, fathers who deliberately change their employment status from salaried to self-employed in order to escape the radar of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Child Support Agency. That is irresponsible. Nor am I condoning perpetrators of domestic abuse. As a barrister who represented victims of domestic abuse, I saw up front the tragedy that that causes. I am talking about the treatment of fathers in the family justice system when a marriage sadly breaks down.

The truth is that there are 114,000 divorces per year, half of which involve children. There are 1 million children growing up without a father in their lives at all, and 35% of children of non-resident parents do not see that parent at all. That is a tragedy, and it is unfair. The truth is that our justice system treats fathers unfairly. Good dads are systematically shut out of their children's lives by the system, and 50:50 access is rare. A father is doing well if he gets a couple of weekends and a weekday per month. If he wants greater access, he needs to perform feats or miracles involving the courts, expensive applications, re-litigation of facts and an extended and drawn-out procedure.

The debilitating legal framework presumes that the father's equal access is a privilege, not a right. That is unjust. The Children and Families Act 2014 went some way to addressing that issue, requiring involvement of both parents to be instilled in child arrangement orders. However, that parental involvement can be direct or indirect, and there is no minimum access of 50:50. In some of the worst cases, the maximum can be a Christmas card or a birthday card every year. How can that be a meaningful relationship between a father and his child?

Another problem is the lack of enforcement against resident parents—who are, in large part, the mothers—who breach those child arrangement orders and stop non-resident parents seeing their children. They can get away with it without any consequence or enforcement. Will the Minister consider some ways of reforming that?

Lastly, we need to encourage more mediation as an alternative to litigation. Many divorces start off amicably and reasonably and end up high-conflict and very expensive, ruining the father and mother both emotionally and financially. That can be avoided, and there are many examples around the world of how. Children need both parents. I hope the Government will take action to remedy this burning injustice.

5.3 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this debate. I declare an interest, as not only a father but a criminal defence solicitor. I refer to the latter because I certainly can amplify the stats given by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). When I reflect on the consistent themes in my filing cabinet, there were issues of addiction and mental health, but the predominant

theme was an absence of involvement of fathers in the lives of those young people—predominantly men. It is clearly an issue of social justice. We must take the role of fathers seriously.

Some 36% of male prisoners come from households without a father's involvement. Of those male prisoners, 50% have a child, and we need to take their responsibilities as fathers seriously. We cannot just cast them out from the justice system. Those responsibilities have an important role to play in their future rehabilitation. When I think of those prolific offenders, the light switched on not only when they took responsibility for themselves and for their habits—getting the next fix or the next stolen item—but when they suddenly realised they were a father.

Neil Gray: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman making that point. The Year of the Dad campaign specifically went into prisons to talk to fathers. Will he commend that work and encourage the Minister to pick up where Scotland has been leading on that?

Mr Burrowes: I will. There is also good work in—

Andrew Selous: The Farmer review.

Mr Burrowes: My hon. Friend reminds me about the Farmer review, which is looking in particular at the relationship with fathers and at making that link. It is about that responsibility for another. The opportunity for rehabilitation is so important in the long term.

Involving fathers is a route out of poverty, as has been mentioned. Therefore, we must recognise that it makes social and economic sense to take the role of fathers seriously. In dealing with family relationships and crucial moments such as the birth, the early days, weeks and months, maternity services should involve paternity services. Barnardo's makes that point clearly. The relationship with midwives and health services must involve fathers. Children's centres, which the Government are looking at, and family hubs must take seriously how to involve fathers. There are some good examples in my constituency and elsewhere of involving fathers in such work. Fathers can play a crucial antenatal and postnatal role. Sadly, that has become too much a middle-class preserve, with the national childbirth trusts and others involving fathers. All of us may have been involved in that, but sadly fathers from more disadvantaged backgrounds are not involved. We must look practically at how to get fathers involved from the early stages before birth and afterwards.

Preventive work in terms of education is also important. As I should have said at the beginning of my speech, I pay tribute to the Centre for Social Justice for championing the role of fathers, along with other organisations, such as the Relationships Alliance—reference has been made to it. We must recognise the preventive role. Education can play an important role in that. Today, the Government rightly responded to cross-party calls to require relationship education in primary schools, providing a foundation for sex education. That is crucial in terms of the role of fathers and understanding that from a very young age.

The Minister has a cross-cutting role in this area. There is an issue of equality here. She has responsibility for equality. We have made a cross-party call on a practical issue of equality—the joint registration of births. That has been on the table since 2009—schedule 6 to the

Welfare Reform Act 2009 provides for the joint registration of births. That happens automatically for mums, but why not for unmarried fathers?

Mr Lammy: Is the hon. Gentleman as concerned as I am that 500,000 fathers are not on birth certificates every decade because of a failure of the political establishment to sort that easy problem out?

Mr Burrows: Yes. The measure must be implemented, rather than having the elongated process to get on the birth certificate. There are already exceptions in law to deal with violent fathers who should not be anywhere near the mothers, and we recognise that. However, that is not an excuse. We must implement that as soon as possible. It is a very practical measure. We talk here about the role of fathers. There are lots of ways to do this, but this is a matter of law. We all battle for a change in the law. That happened in 2009. Implement it, so that we can say loud and clear on the registration certificate that there is a joint enterprise of mothers and fathers and that we are taking it seriously. It is there from birth—it should be in the registration. We are saying loud and clear that of course mothers matter, and fathers matter too.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call the SNP spokesman to wind up, I point out that I would like to offer Neil Gray a minute or so at the end of the debate.

5.8 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing the debate. We have had a number of speakers, including the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), who invited us to imagine him as Prime Minister. I can only point out that the unexpected can often happen in politics. There is clearly an appetite to debate this issue, and perhaps we can revisit it in a longer format in future. It is also good to hear so many MPs from south of the border looking to copy Scottish Government initiatives—it is always a welcome thing to hear, as an SNP Member.

Thankfully, the days of dads being passive players in the raising of their children are increasingly rare. Nowadays most dads want to get involved in every part of their child's life. The modern-day father comes in various forms, and today's family unit thankfully no longer has to conform to the traditional parenting paradigm of the man being the traditional breadwinner and disciplinarian in the family. He can be single or married, an employed or stay-at-home dad, gay or straight, an adoptive parent or step-parent, and a more than capable caregiver to children facing physical or psychological challenges.

The purpose of the debate is not to downplay the critical role that mothers play in families, but simply to celebrate the father's role, and to debate what can be done through Government and workplace policy to enhance that role. From my experience of helping to raise two beautiful daughters aged 10 and six—Eilidh is seven in two weeks and four days, as she is keen to remind us—I know that the modern-day father wants to be there for their child at every stage. We want to help feed the baby, change their nappies, read them their bedtime stories, drive them to after-school activities

and actively discourage any interest from any potential suitor until at least their mid-20s. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] I feel your pain.

However, our society still makes it difficult for fathers to be actively involved in raising their children. Some 53% of millennial dads want to downshift into a less stressful job because they cannot balance the demands of work and family life. If I thought it was difficult to achieve a good work-life balance in my old job, it has pretty much gone out of the window with this one. However, after two years in this role, I know that I must try to do better in striking some sort of balance, for the sake of not just my children but my wife, who is a full-time student, a part-time worker and, for half of the week, has to juggle those roles with being a full-time parent with no assistance whatever from me.

Our economy also retains bias about the role of fathers in the family unit. According to University of Plymouth research, fathers face a "negative bias" from managers when seeking time off work to take care of their children. I know from speaking to other dads that workplaces tend to question their commitment to the job should they request a period of flexible working in order to look after their children. That complements University of Edinburgh research that showed that many dads would prefer to lie and say that they had a dentist appointment, rather than admit that they were leaving work to look after their children.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Does he agree that the problem of fathers not seeking parental time off is more pronounced among young fathers at the outset of their careers? In fact, their being able to be more flexible on that would actually improve outcomes for children and families.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend; he makes a powerful point. I think we have all seen circumstances in which that is definitely the case.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that all the evidence from the work of the Women and Equalities Committee—including the gender pay gap report, the pregnancy and maternity discrimination report and the current fathers and the workplace inquiry—outlines that there is an economic benefit to fathers playing an active role in their children's lives?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend; if she had waited a few seconds I would have come on to that. Those factors help to create a situation in which men in the UK still spend only 24 minutes caring for their children for every hour that women do. Policies to create an economy that empowers and promotes the positive role of fathers in the family would help to achieve equality for women. In Sweden, it was found that for every additional month of leave dads took, mums' career earnings increased by 6.7%.

However, despite some progress—such as the Scottish Government's Year of the Dad initiative, which highlights the positives of active dads and which my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts spoke of in detail earlier—there is still a lot of work to do in creating an economy that allows dads to achieve an appropriate

[Gavin Newlands]

work-life balance. Attitudes towards the role of the father have changed somewhat, and for the better, but our economy has not adapted to the changing role of the modern dad. I think we all want to see any dad be able to achieve an appropriate, family-friendly work-life balance. That would benefit not only families but our economy.

In closing, it would be remiss of me not to speak of families in which the parents' relationship has not survived, and there is either no father figure, or one whose influence is via scheduled weekly access. Like an increasing number of children, I experienced growing up in a traditional family unit, but following my parents' separation when I was around eight, I was brought up, in the main, by my mother through my formative years. Although we talked earlier about promoting parental equality and enhancing the role of fathers, we must ensure that those who bring up children on their own—be they male or female—are fully supported, and we must try to end the stigma that the *Daily Mail* and other such publications attach to such parents.

Let us be clear: in the vast majority of single-parent families, it is women who bring up the children. They are often vilified in said press, whereas a single father will often be depicted as brave and an all-around good egg. That inherent bias aids no one and must end now. The truth is that although we would all like to see relationships succeed and children growing up in stable and loving families, that has become more an exception than the rule. Equally, there can be no doubt that children brought up lovingly in single-parent families have a better environment in which to grow up than children whose parents constantly argue and are trying to stay together for the sake of the child. That rarely works.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Gentleman be brief? I thought he said "in conclusion" quite a long time ago.

Gavin Newlands: I do not often say this—in fact, I may have never said it—but I would like to thank my own mother for doing a fantastic job in raising my sister and me following my parents' separation. I would like to reiterate that there is no one perfect model for perfect parenting—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is eating into other Members' time. I have to call the Opposition spokesperson.

5.15 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this interesting debate.

We know that families come in many shapes and sizes. Regardless of the gender of the parent, children need a safe, loving and stable environment in which to thrive and develop into healthy and happy adults. We also know that many fathers wish to spend significantly more time with their children than they are currently able to, in order to create that loving environment. However, many fathers find themselves unable to avoid working long hours or are subject to an inflexible working environment that prevents them from sharing parenting duties more equally.

Many of the underlying causes of those issues are inextricably linked to the same deep and corrosive structural barriers that hold women back in the workplace and contribute to a persistent gender pay gap of 18.9%, which, at the current rate of progress, could take 60 years to close. Occupational segregation, for example, sees women stuck in low-paid and undervalued sectors of the economy. Women make up more than 60% of those earning less than the living wage set by the Living Wage Foundation. Meanwhile, men continue to dominate the best-paid positions. Women make up 67% of the management workforce in entry-level roles, but only 43% of senior managers and 29% of directors. Those factors, taken together, often give families little choice as to whose wage they rely on.

Women continue to play a greater role in caring for children and sick or elderly relatives. According to Office for National Statistics analysis of time use data, women put in more than double their proportion of unpaid work in cooking, childcare and housework. As a result, more women—42%, compared with 11% of men—work part time, and those jobs are typically lower paid, with fewer opportunities for progression. The issue therefore becomes cyclical.

The impact of women being stuck in low-paid or non-paid caring roles has implications for fathers in the workplace too. Research undertaken by the TUC last year shows that as many as two in five new fathers are ineligible for shared parental leave, as their partners are not in paid work or they fail to meet the qualifying conditions. That prevents fathers from spending time with their newborn children. Will the Minister tell us what steps she is taking to ensure that all new fathers who want to take shared parental leave are able to?

Another solution to enable greater flexibility for parents is to provide high-quality, universal, affordable childcare, as Labour has promised to do. We believe that childcare can play a vital role in promoting gender equality, particularly by making it easier for parents to balance the competing demands of work and family life. The Government's promise of 30 hours of free childcare a week for three and four-year-old children of working parents is looking more and more likely to collapse as each day passes. Research by the Family and Childcare Trust shows that providers and local authorities feel that the 30 hours requirement will mean either that they are forced to reduce the total number of places on offer or that they will simply no longer remain financially viable.

The Government have also admitted that the majority of children who are eligible for the current universal 15 hours of childcare per week will not be eligible for the expanded entitlement, leaving hundreds of thousands of children from working families—particularly those with parents on low or insecure incomes—shut out of the 30-hour-a-week offer. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are going to do to ensure that providers and local authorities can afford to provide 30 hours of free childcare? Does she have plans to expand the current entitlement?

Finally, the Women and Equalities Committee report on the gender pay gap recommends increasing paternity rights, particularly those around leave, to ensure that men can spend more time with a new child. Increased paternity rights for men, on top of existing maternity rights, would make both men and women's lives better.

We know that fathers want to play an active role in their children's lives and families want to spend more time together with a new baby, which is why Labour would increase both paternity leave and paternity pay.

One of the most pervasive underlying causes of the imbalance between men's and women's roles in the family is workplace discrimination. Government research with the Equality and Human Rights Commission estimates that 54,000 women a year are being forced out of their jobs due to maternity discrimination. Does the Minister agree that extending paternity leave and consequently increasing workplace flexibility would be one way of addressing that appalling discrimination? Does she also agree that women suffering maternity discrimination must be able to uphold their rights, yet—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Lady finish her sentence and then conclude?

Paula Sherriff: Okay, sure. If we are to support men in taking a greater role in the family unit and, as a consequence, tackle the barriers facing women, we need to support men and women in having a real and meaningful choice when it comes to accessing well-paid and family-friendly employment.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mrs Main. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this really important debate. I also congratulate both him and other hon. Members on doing such a great job of articulating clearly how involving dads in their children's lives is good for the emotional health and wellbeing of both parents, great for childhood development and really good for society.

As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, this debate is timely, as the Women and Equalities Committee recently launched its important inquiry into fathers in the workplace. We welcome that inquiry and will look with great interest at what the Committee comes up with. The role that fathers play in family life is a subject of great importance for me in my role as Minister for Women and Equalities and for the Government more broadly, and it is intrinsically connected to the work that the Government Equalities Office is doing to close the gender pay gap.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing the House's attention to this year's successful Year of the Dad campaign in Scotland. Highlighting fathers' really important role in child development was key to that campaign, and I wholeheartedly support that sentiment. Nothing is more important than childhood development. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), among others, asked whether we could have a UK-wide Year of the Dad, and I will certainly consider that. It is vital that we support fathers and encourage businesses, employers and society more broadly to do the same.

We know that dads want to be more involved in their children's lives, and we are committed to supporting them to do that. The role of dads in family life is already changing. Increasingly, men are choosing to

work part time. Although mothers continue to do the majority of childcare, dads do ever more. Dads these days are much more actively involved in their children's lives—they are not afraid to change a dirty nappy or spoon-feed some pureed carrot into an unwilling mouth—and that is great. The Year of the Dad campaign has rightly sought to advance father-friendly practices among employers and others.

Tackling the gender pay gap is a central part of what the Government are trying to do to ensure that there is a balance between work and family. The gap is now 18.1%, which is the lowest on record, but there is still more to do. Its causes are broad, but one is the time that women spend out of the labour market caring for children. Helping fathers and mums to share that responsibility will not only help us to reduce the gender pay gap but, crucially, allow fathers to better balance work and family. It will also build stronger relationships between fathers and their kids, and help us to build a stronger and more productive economy. That is why we will introduce legislation next month requiring large employers to publish their gender pay gap. That will shine a light on the inequality in business and encourage employers to do more to ensure that they have family-friendly policies and actively promote and encourage their staff to take advantage of those policies.

One such policy is shared parental leave, which this Government introduced in April 2015. It enables working parents to share up to 50 weeks of leave and up to 37 weeks of pay in the first year of a child's life, if they so wish. That is designed to give parents more flexibility in who cares for their child in that first year and to give fathers a bigger role. Shared parental leave also helps to strengthen working parents' connection to the labour market, giving them more flexibility to combine work with family responsibilities. It gives mothers and fathers the opportunity to equalise care and work responsibilities, and it is crucial in helping mothers to retain a link with the labour market. Neither parent should have to make a binary choice between having children and having a career, so we hope that shared parental leave will address long-standing gender stereotypes. There is nothing more important in a child's development than the role of parents, and it is essential that we support them both in playing a full part in their children's life.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Dinenage: I think the hon. Gentleman will have time to sum up at the end, so he can speak then.

The Government have extended the right to request flexible working to help men and women maintain a better work-life balance. Since June 2014, all employees with 26 weeks' continuous service have had the right to request flexible working, and that extension has doubled the number of employees who are able to make that request to more than 20 million people.

We already have one of the most diverse ranges of working arrangements in Europe. The OECD rates us as the fourth most flexible place to operate a business. Flexible working is steadily becoming more popular. Some 60% of employees surveyed in 2011 had done some form of flexible working; that was up from 56% in 2006 and continues to rise. It is great news for business and the economy that employers have access to the widest pool of talent, but it is also good for individuals.

Mr Jayawardena: Does my hon. Friend agree that it should be the parents' decision whether they work or not if they can afford it?

Caroline Dinena: Absolutely; that is fundamental. Parents should make their own decisions about whether they want to work or stay at home and look after their children, and about which of them decides to do that role.

Flexible working can allow fathers to spend more valuable time with their children and achieve a better work-life balance. Some Members and the Women and Equalities Committee have called for shared parental leave and flexible working to be made compulsory, or for the regulation to be extended. All I will say is that these are relatively new regulations. It is going to require a culture shift in order for these things to take off properly, and that will take time.

Andrew Selous: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Caroline Dinena: I have very little time. If my hon. Friend does not mind, I want to make a bit of progress.

I am determined to keep further action on this in my back pocket to see how these policies bed in for just a little bit longer, especially when we bring in the gender pay gap regulations next month, before imposing any further changes that would impose significant costs on business and the public purse. I do not want to do that unnecessarily.

We know that for families with young children childcare is not an issue, but the issue, and is hugely important for both mothers and fathers. That is why we are increasing our spending to a record £6 billion per year by 2020—more than any Government ever. That means we are doubling the childcare entitlement to working parents of three and four-year-olds from 15 hours to 30 hours. That will start in September 2017, saving parents who get the full entitlement about £5,000 per year.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) is wrong—we have eight early implementer areas that are already delivering that. I have met most of them, and the policy is going really well and making a measurable difference to parents up and down this country. More than 80% of local authorities will see their money go up. We are spending a record amount of money on this, so it is unfortunate scaremongering to say that it is not going to be a success. It comes in addition to the 15 hours a week we give to the 40% most disadvantaged two-year-olds. She asked about parents who are not in work; we are also helping with 70% of childcare costs for people on low incomes through working tax credits, and 85% for parents on universal credit.

We will shortly publish an early years workforce strategy, which aims to support and attract the best people into the early years workforce. Crucially, it will

include how we can get more men into early years work. If we are going to focus on how we get more girls into science, technology, engineering and maths, it is only right that we get more boys into caring roles, and it will do something to break down gender stereotypes and ensure that more men work in caring professions.

The hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk) and my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) mentioned family law. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the law changed in 2014, bringing in a statutory presumption that both parents should be involved in their children's lives. I will certainly pass on their comments to my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice, along with those of my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) on the issue of joint registration.

My hon. Friends the Members for St Austell and Newquay and for Enfield, Southgate talked about offenders who grew up in fatherless households. Positive family relationships have also been identified as a factor in preventing reoffending. For example, research has found that prisoners who reported improved family relationships while in prison were less likely to reoffend after release.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. May I ask the Minister to wind up to give one minute to the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts?

Caroline Dinena: Absolutely. We are entirely committed to achieving gender parity in the workplace. I conclude by paying tribute to the dads, the stepdads, the foster dads, the granddads and the other remarkable father figures up and down the country, including my own, who are making a positive difference to young lives and old lives on an hourly and daily basis.

5.29 pm

Neil Gray: First, I thank all Members who have contributed today. We have had a fantastic turnout and a very positive debate, which is what I hoped it would be. I am pleased that the Minister has committed to considering a UK-wide Year of the Dad. I hope that that takes off, and I know other Members who have spoken today will put pressure on to ensure that it takes place. I am slightly disappointed that she said she would not utilise further powers to push shared parental leave and incentivise it better, but most of all, I am clear that this debate has been about being positive about the role of dads. It is an equality issue. I am clear that enhancing and promoting the role of fathers at home helps women at work.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 1 March 2017

TREASURY

Public Service Pension Indexation and Revaluation 2017

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Legislation governing public service pensions requires them to be increased annually by the same percentage as additional pensions (state earnings-related pension and state second pension). Public service pensions will therefore be increased from 10 April 2017 by 1%, in line with the annual increase in the consumer prices index up to September 2016, except for those public service pensions which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro rata increase.

Separately, in the new career average public service pension schemes, pensions in accrual are revalued annually in relation to either prices or earnings depending on the terms specified in their scheme regulations. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 requires Her Majesty's Treasury to specify a measure of prices and of earnings to be used for revaluation by these schemes.

The prices measure is the consumer prices index up to September 2016. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of prices, therefore, will use the figure of 1% for the prices element of revaluation.

The earnings measure is the whole economy average weekly earnings (non-seasonally adjusted and including bonuses and arrears) up to September 2016. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of earnings, therefore, will use the figure of 2.6% for the earnings element of revaluation.

Revaluation is one part of the amount of pension that members earn in a year and needs to be considered in conjunction with the amount of in-year accrual. Typically, schemes with lower revaluation will have faster accrual and therefore members will earn more pension per year. The following list shows how the main public service schemes will be affected by revaluation:

Scheme	Police	Fire	Civil service	NHS	Teachers	LGPS	Armed forces	Judicial
Revaluation for active member	2.25%	2.6%	1%	2.5%	2.6%	1%	2.6%	1%

[HCWS510]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

UK Digital Strategy

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I am delighted to announce the publication of the UK digital strategy. The strategy is being deposited in the Library and is available online at: www.gov.uk/ukdigitalstrategy.

The UK has a proud history of digital innovation: from the earliest days of computing to the development of artificial intelligence, the UK has been a cradle for inventions which have changed the world. Today, this

history translates into a world-leading digital economy. The digital sector contributed £118 billion to the economy and employed over 1.4 million people across the UK in 2015. The digital economy is growing fast and digital technology is transforming every sector and all aspects of our lives.

Our digital strategy applies the principles outlined in the industrial strategy green paper to the digital economy and develops them further. It sets out our vision of a world-leading digital economy for everyone, with the benefits and opportunities spread across every region and every community.

The digital strategy is formed of seven strands, each underpinned by bold ambitions: no part of the country or group in society should be without adequate connectivity; everyone should develop the skills they need to participate in the digital economy and help all businesses harness the productivity benefits of digital innovation; making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a digital business; for the UK to be the safest place in the world to be online; maintaining the UK Government as the world's leader in serving its citizens online; and to unlock the power of data and improving public confidence in their use.

Overall, industry has come forward with over 4 million training places to ensure more people can get the digital skills they need. This is the start of an ongoing conversation and relationship between the digital sectors and Government: as we develop our industrial and digital strategies, we will build on that conversation. To facilitate this, we will work with the tech community and others to support the growth of the UK digital economy. By working together and putting each of the elements of this strategy in place, I believe we will cement our position as a world-leading digital economy and ensure it works for everyone.

[HCWS508]

EDUCATION

Sex and Relationships Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I am today announcing my intention to put relationships and sex education on a statutory footing, so every child has access to age-appropriate provision, in a consistent way. I am also announcing my intention to take a power that will enable me to make PSHE statutory in future, following further departmental work and consultation on subject content.

The amendments that the Government will table to the Children and Social Work Bill place a duty on the Secretary of State for Education to make regulations requiring:

All primary schools in England to teach age-appropriate "relationships education"; and

All secondary schools in England to teach age-appropriate "relationships and sex education"

The amendments also create a power enabling the Government to make regulations requiring PSHE to be taught in academies and maintained schools—it is already compulsory in independent schools. By creating a power on PSHE, we are allowing time to consider what the right fit of this subject is with relationships education and relationships and sex education.

The statutory guidance for sex and relationships education was introduced in 2000 and is becoming increasingly outdated. It fails to address risks to children that have grown in prevalence over the last 17 years, including cyber bullying, “sexting” and staying safe online.

Parents will continue to have a right to withdraw their children from sex education. Schools will have flexibility over how they deliver these subjects, so they can develop an integrated approach that is sensitive to the needs of the local community; and, as now, faith schools will continue to be able to teach in accordance with the tenets of their faith.

The Department for Education will lead a comprehensive programme of engagement to set out age-appropriate subject content and identify the support schools need to deliver high-quality teaching. Regulations and statutory guidance will then be subject to full public consultation before being laid subject to the affirmative resolution procedure. In line with this timetable, schools will be required to teach this content from September 2019. My Department will today publish a policy statement, which sets out more detail.

Copies of the Government amendment to the CSW Bill and the policy statement will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS509]

TRANSPORT

Rail Franchising

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Today the Department for Transport has announced that the following companies have

successfully pre-qualified to bid in the competition for the East Midlands franchise, to run rail passenger services from November 2018:

Arriva Rail East Midlands Limited a wholly owned subsidiary of Arriva UK Trains Limited;

First Trenitalia East Midlands Rail Limited, a joint venture company wholly owned by First Rail Holdings Limited and Trenitalia UK Limited; and

Stagecoach East Midlands Trains Limited a wholly owned subsidiary of Stagecoach Transport Holdings Limited.

In order to pass the pre-qualification evaluation each of the prospective bidders had to demonstrate that they have the financial strength, safety and operational experience to run this important franchise. This announcement marks another key milestone in the rail franchising programme and is the next step in delivering real benefits for the passengers along the East Midlands routes.

In due course, once the invitation to tender has been issued, the bidders will be required to submit plans to demonstrate how they will deliver the enhancements for passengers using the East Midland services.

The Department will evaluate the submitted bids to determine passenger benefits, deliverability, and value for money.

As for all rail franchise competitions, and as is consistent with the Secretary of State’s duty, the Department will ensure that alternative plans are in place for the continued running of passenger services in the event that the Department determines that the bids would not provide services in the most efficient or economic manner.

[HCWS507]

Petitions

Wednesday 1 March 2017

OBSERVATIONS

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework should avoid large-scale residential development on the greenbelt, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people; and further declares that brownfield land should be prioritised for residential development provided that proper infrastructure is in place.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Department for Communities and Local Government to make such provisions in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr David Nuttall, *Official Report*, 13 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 763.]

[P001994]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning, (Gavin Barwell):

Green Belts are created by local authorities, who are expected to protect them in line with policy set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. The Framework states that a Green Belt boundary can be altered only in exceptional circumstances, using the Local Plan process of public consultation followed by examination in public of the draft Plan.

Local authorities, working with their communities, are responsible for determining the best location for the new homes needed in the area. The Framework recognises that, in exceptional circumstances, a local authority may find it necessary to review the extent of its Green Belt. In the Housing White Paper, *Fixing our broken housing market*, the Government reaffirmed their commitment to Green Belt protection, but also proposed a strengthening of the test of the exceptional circumstances in which Green Belt boundaries can be adjusted. This proposal is that local authorities should amend Green Belt boundaries only when they can demonstrate that they have examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements, and that any impact of removing the land from Green Belt should be offset by improvements to the environmental quality or accessibility of the remaining Green Belt land.

When any Green Belt alteration is proposed, the revised draft Plan with the supporting evidence is submitted for examination by a planning inspector. The inspector, who exercises independent judgement in the name of the Secretary of State, will consider whether the draft Plan is sound. A Plan will be found sound only if it is properly prepared, justified, effective and consistent with policy in the Framework.

The Framework encourages the re-use of brownfield land, if not of high environmental value. Brownfield sites differ greatly, and local authorities are best placed to assess their suitability, viability and availability. If desired locally, a local authority may consider having its own Plan policy to increase the take-up and prioritisation of brownfield sites.

To support development of brownfield land, the Government have accelerated disposal of public sector brownfield suitable for housing, and extended permitted development to give new life to thousands of under-used buildings. We are also introducing Brownfield Registers and Permission in principle. Brownfield Registers will provide up-to-date accessible information on the brownfield sites suitable for housing in each local authority area, giving developers, communities and investors more certainty about the potential of these sites. Permission in principle will give certainty from the outset that the fundamental principles of redevelopment are acceptable. Moreover, the £3 billion Home Building Fund will provide loans for small and medium-sized building firms, custom builders and offsite construction, and help to make more land, much of it brownfield, available for new homes. An additional £1.2 billion will be available to enable starter homes to be created on brownfield land.

I encourage the Petitioners to contribute to the preparation of Greater Manchester's Spatial Framework for the period to 2035, and to support creation of a plan where growth can be accommodated sustainably.

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework should avoid development on the green belt; further that Cheadle could lose much of its precious and much valued land if development is permitted on green belt land; and further that action should be taken to prioritise development on suitable brownfield sites to protect our green space.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council and the Department for Communities and Local Government to agree a Greater Manchester Spatial Framework that prohibits development on green belt land and prioritises development on brownfield sites.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mary Robinson, *Official Report*, 13 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 674.]

[P001995]

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework should avoid large-scale residential development on the greenbelt, which is a valuable barrier to urban sprawl and is hugely valued by local people; and further declares that brownfield land should be prioritised for residential development provided that proper infrastructure is in place.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Department for Communities and Local Government to avoid including large-scale residential development on the greenbelt in the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework, as well as prioritising brownfield land for residential developments.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by William Wragg, *Official Report*, 13 December 2016; Vol. 618, c. 763.]

[P001993]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):

Green Belts are created by local authorities, who are expected to protect them in line with policy set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. The Framework states that a Green Belt boundary can be altered only in

exceptional circumstances, using the Local Plan process of public consultation followed by examination in public of the draft Plan.

Local authorities, working with their communities, are responsible for determining the best location for the new homes needed in the area. The Framework recognises that, in exceptional circumstances, a local authority may find it necessary to review the extent of its Green Belt. In the Housing White Paper, Fixing our broken housing market, the Government reaffirmed their commitment to Green Belt protection, and proposed amendments to national policy that would require greater transparency about what constitutes exceptional circumstances, so that communities can hold their local authorities to account. The Government propose that local authorities should amend Green Belt boundaries only when they can demonstrate that they have examined fully all other reasonable options for meeting their identified development requirements, including:

- making effective use of suitable brownfield sites, and the opportunities offered by estate regeneration;
- the potential offered by land which is currently underused, including surplus public sector land where appropriate;
- optimising the proposed density of development; and
- exploring whether other authorities can help to meet some of the identified development requirement.

When any Green Belt alteration is proposed, the revised draft Plan with the supporting evidence is submitted for examination by a planning inspector. The inspector, who exercises independent judgement in the name of the Secretary of State, will consider whether the draft Plan is sound. A Plan will be found sound only if it is properly prepared, justified, effective and consistent with policy in the Framework.

The Framework encourages the re-use of brownfield land, if not of high environmental value. Brownfield sites differ greatly, and local authorities are best placed to assess their suitability, viability and availability. If desired locally, a local authority may consider having its own Plan policy to increase the take-up and prioritisation of brownfield sites. The Housing White Paper also confirms the Government's intention to amend the National Planning Policy Framework to ensure that maximum use is made of brownfield sites suitable for homes, including an increase in the density of development.

To support development of brownfield land, the Government have accelerated disposal of public sector brownfield suitable for housing, and extended permitted development to give new life to thousands of under-used buildings. We are also introducing Brownfield Registers and Permission in principle. Brownfield Registers will provide up-to-date accessible information on the brownfield sites suitable for housing in each local authority area, giving developers, communities and investors more certainty about the potential of these sites. Permission in principle will give certainty from the outset that the fundamental principles of redevelopment are acceptable. Moreover, the £3 billion Home Building Fund will provide loans for small and medium-sized building firms, custom builders and offsite construction, and help to make more land, much of it brownfield, available for new homes. An additional £1.2 billion will be available to enable starter homes to be created on brownfield land.

I encourage the Petitioners to contribute to the preparation of Greater Manchester's Spatial Framework for the period to 2035, and to support creation of a plan where growth can be accommodated sustainably.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Boat Moorings on the River Avon

The Humble Petition of residents of Saltford, Sheweth,

That the petitioners would prefer the inhabitants of some boats moored on the River Avon in Mead Lane to refrain from staying for long periods of time.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House ask Her Majesty's Government to consider the opinions of local residents and other boat owners in this regard.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, & c.—[Presented by Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg, *Official Report*, 11 January 2017; Vol. 619, c. 429.]

[P002002]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom):

The Government would like to thank the petitioners for raising the issue of mooring along the River Avon, Mead Lane, Saltford.

The Government do not have responsibility for operational matters, including mooring, on the waterways as this usually sits with either individual navigation authorities who have a duty to manage and operate their waterways; or riparian landowners, who may own the banks or the bed of the river.

For the stretch of the River Avon at Mead Lane, Saltford, the Canal & River Trust (the Trust), an independent charity established in July 2012 to replace British Waterways in England and Wales, is the navigation authority. This means that any vessel on the river would therefore require a boat licence from the trust. However, the trust does not own the banks or the bed of the river in this location, and as such, they do not control the mooring of boats along the side of the river adjacent to Mead Lane, unless it obstructs navigation in any way. The control of long-term moorings is likely to be with the riparian landowners on that side of the river and therefore a matter for them.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Closure of Anniesland Jobcentre

The petition of residents of Glasgow North West,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions' plan to close Anniesland Jobcentre and half of all Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow is morally outrageous; express our concerns that the city is being used as the testing ground for more devastating cuts across the UK; further that the proposals to close eight of the 16 Jobcentre offices across Glasgow, will impact on tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit; further that the UK Government has already indicated that 20% of the Jobcentre estate will see closures, and Glasgow has been handpicked to take a disproportionate hit of 50% closures; further that it will result in the poorest communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support; further that thousands of people could also have to travel further at additional cost to attend their appointments; further that the UK Government have brought forward these proposals without carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment and without consulting the Scottish Government; and further that any Jobcentre closures in Glasgow will see one of the most deprived

parts of the UK starved of a vital service that should be available in communities; impacting both on Scottish workers at these centres and also those most disadvantaged in need of benefits.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt any moves to close Anniesland Jobcentre, or at the very least carry out an Equality Impact Assessment immediately prior to a full public consultation across Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Carol Monaghan, *Official Report*, 8 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 572.]

[P002008]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of rent is going toward space we are not using. As a result we expect to save an estimated £180 million per year for 10 years as a result of our proposals for estate rationalisation.

We have sought to redesign our estate in a way that will continue to meet the needs of customers across Glasgow and Scotland, and this includes maintaining local staffing levels across our Jobcentre Plus network. All of our staff at Anniesland jobcentre will be relocated to our proposed site at Benalder Street. They will continue to offer the same support and services to our claimants and will maintain the relationships they have built up over time. In fact we are recruiting nationally and will have more Work Coaches in every nation and region and more in the city of Glasgow by March 2018.

Our plan has always been to reduce the amount of space we occupy nationally by 20% and we have announced similar proposals across England, Scotland, and Wales in line with this plan. As Jobcentres vary in size this 20% figure does not relate directly to the number of Jobcentres in a specific area. Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a disproportionate number of small jobcentres. Even if we do implement our current proposals, Scotland will continue to have a higher number of Jobcentres relative to both total population and claimant count compared to England, Scotland, and Wales as a whole.

We have carefully considered the wider impacts on local communities as part of review of our estate and the sites we intend to keep were identified based on a wide range of factors, including geographical coverage and accessibility. Where we are proposing to close a jobcentre we are taking all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers and vulnerable people. This includes using face to face, e-mail, telephone and postal contact and, where none of those routes are appropriate, home visits.

We believe that it is a reasonable expectation that a customer travels to a new location which is within three miles or 20 minutes by public transport of their existing

jobcentre. Where we propose moving a Jobcentre to a location which is further away than this we are consulting publicly. This includes our proposals for moving the services currently based at Maryhill, Bridgeton and Castlemilk in Glasgow and also Broxburn in West Lothian.

The Department has been mindful of its duties under the Equality Act 2010 throughout the development of these proposals. Statistical analysis of the potential impact of the proposals on people with the protected characteristics has informed high-level decision-making so far. We are now collecting local, site-specific information and will be conducting Equality Impact Assessments which will be reflected in our final business decisions.

Closure of Bridgeton Jobcentre

The petition of residents of Glasgow Central,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions' plan to close Bridgeton Jobcentre and half of all Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow is morally outrageous; express our concerns that the city is being used as the testing ground for more devastating cuts across the UK; further that the proposals to close eight of the 16 Jobcentre offices across Glasgow, will impact on tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit; further that the UK Government has already indicated that 20% of the Jobcentre estate will see closures, and Glasgow has been handpicked to take a disproportionate hit of 50% closures; further that it will result in the poorest communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support; further that thousands of people could also have to travel further at additional cost to attend their appointments; further that the UK Government have brought forward these proposals without carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment and without consulting the Scottish Government; and further that any Jobcentre closures in Glasgow will see one of the most deprived parts of the UK starved of a vital service that should be available in communities; impacting both on Scottish workers at these centres and also those most disadvantaged in need of benefits.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt any moves to close Bridgeton Jobcentre, or at the very least carry out an Equality Impact Assessment immediately prior to a full public consultation across Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alison Thewliss, *Official Report*, 08 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 572.]

[P002006]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of rent is going toward space we are not using. As a result

we expect to save an estimated £180 million per year for 10 years as a result of our proposals for estate rationalisation.

We have sought to redesign our estate in a way that will continue to meet the needs of customers across Glasgow and Scotland, and this includes maintaining local staffing levels across our Jobcentre Plus network. All of our staff at Bridgeton jobcentre will be relocated to our proposed site at Shettleston Road. They will continue to offer the same support and services to our claimants and will maintain the relationships they have built up over time. In fact, we are recruiting nationally and will have more work coaches in every nation and region and more in the city of Glasgow by March 2018.

Our plan has always been to reduce the amount of space we occupy nationally by 20% and we have announced similar proposals across England, Scotland, and Wales in line with this plan. As Jobcentres vary in size this 20% figure does not relate directly to the number of Jobcentres in a specific area. Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a disproportionate number of small jobcentres. Even if we do implement our current proposals, Scotland will continue to have a higher number of Jobcentres relative to both total population and claimant count compared to England, Scotland, and Wales as a whole.

We have carefully considered the wider impacts on local communities as part of review of our estate and the sites we intend to keep were identified based on a wide range of factors, including geographical coverage and accessibility. Where we are proposing to close a jobcentre we are taking all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers and vulnerable people. This includes using face to face, e-mail, telephone and postal contact and, where none of those routes are appropriate, home visits.

We believe that it is a reasonable expectation that a customer travels to a new location which is within three miles or 20 minutes by public transport of their existing jobcentre. Where we propose moving a Jobcentre to a location which is further away than this we are consulting publicly. This includes our proposals for moving the services currently based at Maryhill, Bridgeton and Castlemilk in Glasgow and also Broxburn in West Lothian.

The Department has been mindful of its duties under the Equality Act 2010 throughout the development of these proposals. Statistical analysis of the potential impact of the proposals on people with the protected characteristics has informed high-level decision-making so far. We are now collecting local, site-specific information and will be conducting Equality Impact Assessments which will be reflected in our final business decisions.

Closure of Cambuslang Jobcentre

The petition of residents of Rutherglen and Hamilton West,

Declares that Department for Work and Pensions plans to close eight Jobcentres in the Glasgow area, including Cambuslang Jobcentre, will impact tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit, and that the consequences will be severely felt by some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people; have concerns that these closures will result in the poorest

communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support, with people running a greater risk of falling foul of the UK Government's sanctions regime; and are further concerned that these plans will also impact Scottish workers who will be forced to relocate to other Jobcentres.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to halt any move to close Glasgow's Jobcentres and carry out a thorough Equality Impact Assessment and go through a full and proper consultation before making any decision on the future of the estate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Margaret Ferrier, *Official Report*, 9 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 748.]

[P002013]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of rent is going toward space we are not using. As a result we expect to save an estimated £180 million per year for 10 years as a result of our proposals for estate rationalisation.

We have sought to redesign our estate in a way that will continue to meet the needs of customers across Glasgow and Scotland, and this includes maintaining local staffing levels across our Jobcentre Plus network. All of our staff at Cambuslang jobcentre will be relocated to our proposed site at Macdonald Street. They will continue to offer the same support and services to our claimants and will maintain the relationships they have built up over time. In fact we are recruiting nationally and will have more Work Coaches in every nation and region and more in the city of Glasgow by March 2018.

Our plan has always been to reduce the amount of space we occupy nationally by 20% and we have announced similar proposals across England, Scotland, and Wales in line with this plan. As Jobcentres vary in size this 20% figure does not relate directly to the number of Jobcentres in a specific area. Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a disproportionate number of small jobcentres. Even if we do implement our current proposals, Scotland will continue to have a higher number of Jobcentres relative to both total population and claimant count compared to England, Scotland, and Wales as a whole.

We have carefully considered the wider impacts on local communities as part of review of our estate and the sites we intend to keep were identified based on a wide range of factors, including geographical coverage and accessibility. Where we are proposing to close a jobcentre we are taking all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers and vulnerable people.

This includes using face to face, e-mail, telephone and postal contact and, where none of those routes are appropriate, home visits.

We believe that it is a reasonable expectation that a customer travels to a new location which is within three miles or 20 minutes by public transport of their existing jobcentre. Where we propose moving a Jobcentre to a location which is further away than this we are consulting publicly. This includes our proposals for moving the services currently based at Maryhill, Bridgeton and Castlemilk in Glasgow and also Broxburn in West Lothian.

The Department has been mindful of its duties under the Equality Act 2010 throughout the development of these proposals. Statistical analysis of the potential impact of the proposals on people with the protected characteristics has informed high-level decision-making so far. We are now collecting local, site-specific information and will be conducting Equality Impact Assessments which will be reflected in our final business decisions.

Closure of Castlemilk and Langside Jobcentres

The petition of residents of Glasgow South,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions' plan to close Castlemilk and Langside Jobcentres and half of all Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow is morally outrageous; express our concerns that the city is being used as the testing ground for more devastating cuts across the UK; further that the proposals to close eight of the 16 Jobcentre offices across Glasgow, will impact on tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit; further that the UK Government has already indicated that 20% of the Jobcentre estate will see closures, and Glasgow has been handpicked to take a disproportionate hit of 50% closures; further that it will result in the poorest communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support; further that thousands of people could also have to travel further at additional cost to attend their appointments; further that the UK Government have brought forward these proposals without carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment and without consulting the Scottish Government; and further that any Jobcentre closures in Glasgow will see one of the most deprived parts of the UK starved of a vital service that should be available in communities; impacting both on Scottish workers at these centres and also those most disadvantaged in need of benefits.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt any moves to close Castlemilk and Langside Jobcentres, or at the very least carry out an Equality Impact Assessment immediately prior to a full public consultation across Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Stewart Malcolm McDonald, Official Report, 8 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 574.]

[P002012]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the

future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of rent is going toward space we are not using. As a result we expect to save an estimated £180 million per year for 10 years as a result of our proposals for estate rationalisation.

We have sought to redesign our estate in a way that will continue to meet the needs of customers across Glasgow and Scotland, and this includes maintaining local staffing levels across our Jobcentre Plus network. All of our staff at Castlemilk and Langside jobcentres will be relocated to our proposed site at Newlands. They will continue to offer the same support and services to our claimants and will maintain the relationships they have built up over time. In fact we are recruiting nationally and will have more Work Coaches in every nation and region and more in the city of Glasgow by March 2018.

Our plan has always been to reduce the amount of space we occupy nationally by 20% and we have announced similar proposals across England, Scotland, and Wales in line with this plan. As Jobcentres vary in size this 20% figure does not relate directly to the number of Jobcentres in a specific area. Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a disproportionate number of small jobcentres. Even if we do implement our current proposals, Scotland will continue to have a higher number of Jobcentres relative to both total population and claimant count compared to England, Scotland, and Wales as a whole.

We have carefully considered the wider impacts on local communities as part of review of our estate and the sites we intend to keep were identified based on a wide range of factors, including geographical coverage and accessibility. Where we are proposing to close a jobcentre we are taking all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers and vulnerable people. This includes using face to face, e-mail, telephone and postal contact and, where none of those routes are appropriate, home visits.

We believe that it is a reasonable expectation that a customer travels to a new location which is within three miles or 20 minutes by public transport of their existing jobcentre. Where we propose moving a Jobcentre to a location which is further away than this we are consulting publicly. This includes our proposals for moving the services currently based at Maryhill, Bridgeton and Castlemilk in Glasgow and also Broxburn in West Lothian.

Closure of Jobcentres in Parkhead and Easterhouse

The petition of residents of Glasgow East,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions' plan to close Parkhead and Easterhouse Jobcentres and half of all Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow is morally outrageous; express our concerns that the city is being used as the testing ground for more devastating cuts across the UK; further that the proposals to close eight of the 16 Jobcentre offices across Glasgow, will impact on tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit; further that the UK Government has already

indicated that 20% of the Jobcentre estate will see closures, and Glasgow has been handpicked to take a disproportionate hit of 50% closures; further that it will result in the poorest communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support; further that thousands of people could also have to travel further at additional cost to attend their appointments; further that the UK Government have brought forward these proposals without carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment and without consulting the Scottish Government; and further that any Jobcentre closures in Glasgow will see one of the most deprived parts of the UK starved of a vital service that should be available in communities; impacting both on Scottish workers at these centres and also those most disadvantaged in need of benefits.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt any moves to close Parkhead and Easterhouse Jobcentres, or at the very least carry out an Equality Impact Assessment immediately prior to a full public consultation across Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Natalie McGarry, *Official Report*, 8 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 573.]

[P002007]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of rent is going toward space we are not using. As a result we expect to save an estimated £180 million per year for 10 years as a result of our proposals for estate rationalisation.

We have sought to redesign our estate in a way which will continue to meet the needs of customers across Glasgow and Scotland, and this includes maintaining local staffing levels across our Jobcentre Plus network. All of our staff at Parkhead and Easterhouse jobcentres will be relocated to our proposed site at Shettleston Road. They will continue to offer the same support and services to our claimants and will maintain the relationships they have built up over time. In fact we are recruiting nationally and will have more work coaches in every nation and region and more in the city of Glasgow by March 2018.

Our plan has always been to reduce the amount of space we occupy nationally by 20% and we have announced similar proposals across England, Scotland, and Wales in line with this plan. As Jobcentres vary in size this 20% figure does not relate directly to the number of Jobcentres in a specific area. Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a disproportionate number of small jobcentres. Even if we do implement our current proposals, Scotland will continue to have a higher number of

Jobcentres relative to both total population and claimant count compared to England, Scotland, and Wales as a whole.

We have carefully considered the wider impacts on local communities as part of review of our estate and the sites we intend to keep were identified based on a wide range of factors, including geographical coverage and accessibility. Where we are proposing to close a jobcentre we are taking all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers and vulnerable people. This includes using face to face, e-mail, telephone and postal contact and, where none of those routes are appropriate, home visits.

We believe that it is a reasonable expectation that a customer travels to a new location which is within three miles or 20 minutes by public transport of their existing jobcentre. Where we propose moving a Jobcentre to a location which is further away than this we are consulting publicly. This includes our proposals for moving the services currently based at Maryhill, Bridgeton and Castlemilk in Glasgow and also Broxburn in West Lothian.

The Department has been mindful of its duties under the Equality Act 2010 throughout the development of these proposals. Statistical analysis of the potential impact of the proposals on people with the protected characteristics has informed high-level decision-making so far. We are now collecting local, site-specific information and will be conducting Equality Impact Assessments which will be reflected in our final business decisions.

Closure of Maryhill Jobcentre

The petition of residents of Glasgow North,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions' plan to close Maryhill Jobcentre and half of all Jobcentre Plus offices in Glasgow is morally outrageous; express our concerns that the city is being used as the testing ground for more devastating cuts across the UK; further that the proposals to close eight of the 16 Jobcentre offices across Glasgow, will impact on tens of thousands of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit; further that the UK Government has already indicated that 20% of the Jobcentre estate will see closures, and Glasgow has been handpicked to take a disproportionate hit of 50% closures; further that it will result in the poorest communities not being serviced by a Jobcentre and make it even harder for those seeking employment to get support; further that thousands of people could also have to travel further at additional cost to attend their appointments; further that the UK Government have brought forward these proposals without carrying out an Equality Impact Assessment and without consulting the Scottish Government; and further that any Jobcentre closures in Glasgow will see one of the most deprived parts of the UK starved of a vital service that should be available in communities; impacting both on Scottish workers at these centres and also those most disadvantaged in need of benefits.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt any moves to close Maryhill Jobcentre, or at the very least carry out an Equality Impact Assessment immediately prior to a full public consultation across Scotland.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patrick Grady, *Official Report*, 8 February 2017; Vol. 612, c. 571.]

[P002005]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):

On 31 March 2018 DWP's PFI PRIME (Private Resource Initiative for the Management of the Estate) contract with Telereal Trillium expires. This 20-year contract covers the majority of DWP's current property portfolio of over 900 sites. This has given us a unique opportunity to review which offices we will need in the future, taking account of the increased use of our online services, the impact of Universal Credit and the anticipated demand on our services.

The falling claimant count and the increased use of our online services in recent years means that 20% of rent is going toward space we are not using. As a result we expect to save an estimated £180 million per year for 10 years as a result of our proposals for estate rationalisation.

We have sought to redesign our estate in a way that will continue to meet the needs of customers across Glasgow and Scotland, and this includes maintaining local staffing levels across our Jobcentre Plus network. All of our staff at Maryhill jobcentre will be relocated to our proposed site at Atlas Road. They will continue to offer the same support and services to our claimants and will maintain the relationships they have built up over time. In fact we are recruiting nationally and will have more Work Coaches in every nation and region and more in the city of Glasgow by March 2018.

Our plan has always been to reduce the amount of space we occupy nationally by 20% and we have announced similar proposals across England, Scotland, and Wales in line with this plan. As Jobcentres vary in size this

20% figure does not relate directly to the number of Jobcentres in a specific area. Scotland, and Glasgow in particular, has a disproportionate number of small jobcentres. Even if we do implement our current proposals, Scotland will continue to have a higher number of Jobcentres relative to both total population and claimant count compared to England, Scotland, and Wales as a whole.

We have carefully considered the wider impacts on local communities as part of review of our estate and the sites we intend to keep were identified based on a wide range of factors, including geographical coverage and accessibility. Where we are proposing to close a jobcentre we are taking all possible precautions to minimise disruption for customers and vulnerable people. This includes using face to face, e-mail, telephone and postal contact and, where none of those routes are appropriate, home visits.

We believe that it is a reasonable expectation that a customer travels to a new location which is within three miles or 20 minutes by public transport of their existing jobcentre. Where we propose moving a Jobcentre to a location which is further away than this we are consulting publicly. This includes our proposals for moving the services currently based at Maryhill, Bridgeton and Castlemilk in Glasgow and also Broxburn in West Lothian.

The Department has been mindful of its duties under the Equality Act 2010 throughout the development of these proposals. Statistical analysis of the potential impact of the proposals on people with the protected characteristics has informed high-level decision-making so far. We are now collecting local, site-specific information and will be conducting Equality Impact Assessments which will be reflected in our final business decisions.

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**not later than
Wednesday 8 March 2017**

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