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28 March 2017**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 28 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

NEW WRIT

Ordered,

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the Borough Constituency of Manchester, Gorton, in the room of the right hon. Sir Gerald Bernard Kaufman, deceased.—(*Mr Nicholas Brown.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Zimbabwe

1. **Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): What assessment he has made of whether Zimbabwe's next election will be conducted freely and fairly. [909508]

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister, the right hon. Tobias Ellwood. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

In Zimbabwe, presidential and parliamentary elections are due to take place in 2018, but time is running out to implement the necessary preparations to allow voter registration to be completed. We regularly raise our concerns and the importance of free and fair elections, and this was done most recently on 21 March with the deputy Foreign Minister.

Kate Hoey: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his honour.

Are the Government aware that the opposition parties and human rights groups are all saying that the rigging of elections has now commenced in Zimbabwe? Rural chiefs are being forced to take ZANU-PF cards and food is being used as a weapon, and if we do not get the United Nations, the African Union and particularly the South African Development Community to do something about the electoral registration system, we will not have free and fair elections. Can Her Majesty's Government do even more to impress on those agencies that something must be done to keep the flame of hope alive for the Zimbabwean people?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady, who has deep experience in the country, is absolutely right to point to the worries about the electoral registration process and the prospect of unfair elections taking place. She is aware that we do not have the access we would like. We are concerned about the misuse of biometric data even now and about registration kits going missing and then being used. We are working with our counterparts, including the United Nations, as well as multi-donor programmes, to improve access to justice and for the media so that, hopefully, the elections can take place in a fairer atmosphere.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that Chinese, Russian and Israeli money is flooding in, buying influence in anticipation of a post-Mugabe—probably ZANU-PF-led—environment. With that in mind, what are the Government doing to meet their manifesto pledge to uphold the rule of law in Zimbabwe, which could again become the centre of sub-Saharan Africa?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend is right to point to our manifesto commitment. Given the fact that Mugabe is still in place, he will understand that there are limits to what I can say, but I can assure him that we are working on this very hard indeed.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his actions last week.

There have been disturbing reports in which six women allege they were targeted for refusing to follow instructions to feign illiteracy, blindness and physical injury, which would have allowed someone else to assist them by marking their ballot. Will the Foreign Secretary urge the police officer in command of Mashonaland central province to investigate these disturbing reports?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady illustrates just one example of what is happening in the country as we lead up to these elections. That is why we and other nation states in the United Nations, and indeed in the African Union, are very concerned. We have limited access ourselves, so we need to place pressure on those countries that are working in the country, to make sure that free and fair elections can take place and that this sort of activity is not carried out.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): May I, too, on behalf of those on the Conservative Benches, pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his actions last week?

Has my right hon. Friend made any representations to Zimbabwe's SADC neighbours—South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia—to try to put pressure on the Zimbabwean Government to ensure free and fair elections?

Mr Ellwood: Yes, we have done so, and continue to do so. I will be visiting South Africa in the very near future, and this will be on the agenda. We are also working with the African Union to place pressure on Zimbabwe.

Israeli Settlement Goods

2. **Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith) (Lab): What representations he has made to the Israeli Government on that country's ban on visitors who have advocated boycotts of Israeli settlement goods. [909509]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The British deputy ambassador met Israel's Europe director on 13 March to discuss the new immigration rules, and we continue to push for clarification from Israel on the impact on UK nationals. We have updated our travel advice for Israel.

Andy Slaughter: UK citizens such as Hugh Lanning, the chair of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, have already been refused entry because of this ban, which has been widely condemned, including within Israel itself. The advice on the Foreign Office's website says that people should contact the Israeli embassy. Should not the Foreign Secretary be contacting the Israeli embassy to say that people should not be restricted from travel to Israel and Palestine simply because they wish to enforce international law due to the ban on goods from settlements?

Boris Johnson: We have of course offered to provide consular assistance to Mr Lanning. He did not in fact request our support, nor did he seem to need it. As the hon. Gentleman will know, Israel's immigration policy is a matter for Israel. We firmly oppose boycotts—the boycott, divestment and sanctions approach—against Israel, as I am sure he does too, although clearly it is a two-way street.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Is there not a need to be even-handed? Many countries have banned people from entering and are indeed deporting people. Does not this underline how right the Government were to warn the UN Human Rights Council of its disproportionate bias against Israel?

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in his verdict on the UN Human Rights Council. I thought it was absolutely preposterous that there should be a motion condemning Israel's conduct in the Golan Heights when, after all, we have seen in that region of Syria the most appalling barbarity conducted by the Assad regime. I think that was the point the UK Government were rightly making.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary says that he is seeking clarification from the Government of Israel. What questions is he actually asking them? In particular, has he asked what kind of activity would lead to someone being denied entry, particularly given that the Foreign Office's own website discourages financial and commercial dealings with settlements? Is he saying that someone who advocates that is likely to be denied entry to Israel? Has he asked that question?

Boris Johnson: We are of course seeking clarity about exactly how the law would be applied in practice, although, as the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, the Israeli Government, like our Government, already have very wide discretion about how to apply their immigration laws.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): What is our policy on goods and services produced in the settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories?

Boris Johnson: Our policy, as my hon. Friend will know, is that consumers should have the right to judge for themselves whether they wish to purchase them. That is a policy that this Government have pursued for many years.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): A Foreign Office Minister has previously described the situation in Hebron as apartheid and settlement endorsement as a form of extremism. Can the Secretary of State tell the House whether the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), would fall foul of the new law if he attempted to travel there?

Boris Johnson: I do not believe that my right hon. Friend has said anything of the kind or called for any such boycott, and nor do I believe for a second that he would be interrupted if he chose to go to Israel. I must stress that the policy of the Government is unchanged. We remain opposed to illegal settlements and we believe that they are an obstacle to peace. I have said that many times already in this House, but I am happy to repeat it to the hon. Lady.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The main aim of the boycott movement is to delegitimise the state of Israel, so will the Government continue to strongly oppose it?

Boris Johnson: We certainly shall.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Has the Foreign Secretary had any indication that such a ban might be extended to those who advocate a ban on goods from the occupied Golan Heights? Does he agree that the UK Government's refusal to support a resolution at the UNHRC condemning the occupation of the Golan Heights increases that likelihood?

Boris Johnson: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I have made very clear what I thought was the profound absurdity of denouncing Israeli conduct in that region at a time when we are seeing absolute barbarism conducted by the Assad regime against the people of Syria.

Bilateral Relations: Poland

3. **Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the strength of relations between Poland and the UK. [909510]

13. **Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con):** What recent assessment he has made of the strength of relations between Poland and the UK. [909521]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): British-Polish relations are strong and getting stronger. The inaugural intergovernmental consultations last November were a firm demonstration of our commitment. I was delighted to launch the first Belvedere civil society forum earlier this month in Warsaw with the Polish Foreign Minister and many others.

Ben Howlett: Given this Government's proud record of tackling modern slavery, does my right hon. Friend welcome the UK, Poland and Lithuania modern slavery

conference, held in Warsaw in March, as a signal of how we can work together to strengthen the fight against human trafficking and modern slavery?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Prime Minister has rightly called this

“the great human rights issue of our time”.

The Home Office-funded conference to which my hon. Friend referred, and the workshop that went with it, was the culmination of an intense period of Government activity. As a result of the workshop, we have strengthened regional co-operation to tackle modern slavery in central and eastern Europe.

Caroline Ansell: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Belvedere forum is a sign of our high-level engagement with Poland and a signal that it is entirely possible to have constructive and cordial discussions with our European friends, even as Brexit is being discussed?

Sir Alan Duncan: It was exactly that. I am pleased to say that more than 120 people attended, including leading representatives of UK-Polish businesses, along with representatives from universities and think tanks, Parliaments, media outlets, cultural institutions and, indeed, the Polish diaspora from the UK.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): In the wake of Brexit, I have been left deeply concerned by the rise in hate crime and the subsequent insecurity felt by our Polish communities. I was very saddened to read a report in a local newspaper of a Polish-born mother in the north-east saying that when she speaks Polish to her daughter,

“I can’t guarantee I would feel safe.”

Will the Minister clarify what steps he is taking with his Polish counterparts to reassure Polish communities that hate crime is not acceptable and will not be tolerated in the UK?

Sir Alan Duncan: Following an absolutely deplorable spike just after the referendum, I am pleased to say that the number of reported crimes has significantly declined. We have been working very closely with our Polish counterparts, reassuring them at every conceivable opportunity. Indeed, we did so very publicly at the Belvedere forum.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): The Polish community constitutes the largest component of EU nationals in the UK and by far the largest percentage in Scotland. The Minister of State and, indeed, the Foreign Secretary have in previous incarnations been known for their cosmopolitan, pro-immigration attitudes. Can the Minister think of anything on the eve of Brexit that would better enhance the relationship going into negotiations than to unilaterally and immediately consolidate the position of the 3 million EU nationals in this country? Is not that something the Government should do now?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am confident that when the starting gun for Brexit is fired tomorrow, the issue mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman will be an essential part of the negotiations that will then follow.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister believe that Poland deserves congratulations, as a frontline state against an increasingly fractious Russia, on being one of only five NATO members to meet the minimum level of 2% expenditure of GDP? Does he think it would send a good signal to Russia if the Foreign Secretary were to throw his considerable weight behind perhaps a Polish candidate to be the next Secretary-General of NATO, rather than a member of the comfortable club of the usual suspects?

Sir Alan Duncan: If I might say so, the manner in which my right hon. Friend expressed his views was characteristic of him. I am confident that, even though we are going to leave the European Union, the United Kingdom will remain a force for good in the defence and security of eastern Europe, and we will increase our engagement on all levels.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Has the Minister received the same representation as we have from the Polish and other European embassies on the difficulties that many EU nationals are having with the 85-page form that they have to complete in order to apply for permanent residency in the UK? Has he relayed those concerns to the Home Office? *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State does not even know about it. In that case, will the Minister, the Secretary of State and perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), the shadow Secretary of State, accept my challenge and try to fill in the form and see how they get on?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have to say that I have not received such representations, but I look forward to raising the matter myself when I next see the Polish ambassador, as I do on regular occasions.

Yazidi Captives: Daesh

4. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help secure the release of Yazidi women held captive by Daesh. [909511]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As the House will know, significant progress has been made in liberating the city of Mosul, which will be a symbolic landmark in defeating Daesh in Iraq. We are extremely concerned for all those held by Daesh, including members of the Yazidi community. Ultimately, the only way of protecting minorities is by defeating Daesh and establishing strong governance and lasting peace.

Maria Caulfield: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. What support will be given to Yazidi women when they are released? Can he confirm that evidence will be taken from them so that we can accurately record the genocide of the Yazidi people?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In the short term, we are providing refugee assistance and resettlement schemes, including Gateway, Mandate and Children at Risk, as well as putting funds into United Nations programmes. For the long term, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his

Iraqi and Belgian counterparts have launched a global campaign to bring Daesh to justice. The campaign is designed to support all victims, including Yazidis.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman will know that when Yazidi women are released, they have great difficulty accessing the medical services—particularly the psychiatric services—that they need. Plane-loads of Yazidi women have been flown to Germany for treatment. Can Britain now do its bit and undertake to do the same thing?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady raises an important point. We have programmes that bring the vulnerable and those who have been affected to the UK, and we are also investing a huge amount of funding in programmes in-country. I will be more than delighted to write to her with more details of what we are doing.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): The brutalisation of the Yazidi by Daesh has been a deliberate attempt to destroy the Yazidi people. Yazda, a Yazidi advocacy organisation, estimates that 35 Yazidi mass graves have been found. What support can my hon. Friend present to ensure that these crimes and graves are collated and evidenced?

Mr Ellwood: As I have mentioned, the Foreign Secretary is leading on this, and it will take time. We need to be patient, because it is important that we conduct forensic examinations, preserve evidence and take testimonies, but we will bring to account those who have committed these atrocities.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the establishment of a psychological training centre for former Daesh sex slaves at the University of Dohuk in Iraq, which is the first of its kind in the region? Can he confirm what support the UK Government will be giving to that groundbreaking trauma unit?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady illustrates just one example of how Iraq needs to step forward and move on from the period in which minority ethnic groups and others were not represented in the country. If we are to make a success of the situation once Daesh is removed, it is important to have facilities such as this in place to support those who have been affected. Most importantly, there needs to be an inclusive Government to ensure that ethnic groups are not isolated or persecuted as they have been.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It has been almost a year since the House of Commons voted to express its desire for the atrocities against the Yazidi people to be described as genocide. At the time, the Government said that they would not rush to judgment but would allow the legal process to take its course. Could the Minister give us an update on the process of those legal proceedings and when the Government anticipate that the genocide against the Yazidis will be recognised as such?

Mr Ellwood: I have said that I believe that war crimes have taken place. However, it is not my judgment that counts, but that of the International Criminal Court,

and when this was put to the International Criminal Court in 2014 we were vetoed by Russia and China. It is important that we continue to make the case, and it is important that we hold the perpetrators to account.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I congratulate the Minister on his actions last week.

I have been lucky enough to visit northern Iraq and to meet Yazidis in some of the internally displaced persons camps. What resources and preparation are we putting in place to make sure that they and others can get back to their homes once we have defeated Daesh?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman raises two important points. On the work that is happening in northern Iraq, we have put forward an extra £40 million to provide assistance to the displaced people. We should make it clear that despite their urge to return to their original houses—their original dwellings in their original communities—that must be done in line with the Iraqi authorities, because we are concerned about IEDs that have been placed there causing all the more stress, harm and, indeed, death.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I pay tribute to the Minister for his extraordinary courage last Wednesday? As PC Palmer's family said this weekend to the Minister and to others who rushed to help:

“There was nothing more you could have done. You did your best and we are just grateful he was not alone.”

Yazidi women, including girls as young as nine, have been raped, kidnapped and sold into slavery by Daesh terrorists. If proper mechanisms are not established to investigate these crimes, crucial evidence and witnesses will be lost and the victims will never have their day in court. What are the Government doing to prevent that, and will the Minister tell us how he is ensuring that the perpetrators of these heinous crimes will be brought to justice as quickly as possible?

Mr Ellwood: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for her kind remarks. I make it clear that I was one of many who stepped forward on that dark day. Our thoughts and prayers remain with the families and friends of the victims, including our own PC Keith Palmer.

The right hon. Lady raises an important point. We have not announced or trailed the exact details of the work we are doing to collect the evidence because there is a fear that there are those who would try to interrupt that process. Organisations are working quietly behind the scenes to collect the forensic evidence that they need, to preserve the evidence, as she said, and to collect testimonies. It will take time, but that is not broadcast in the way other things are for fear that people could try to disrupt it.

Hezbollah

5. **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): What recent reports he has received on the expansion of Hezbollah's weapons arsenal. [909512]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): We are aware of reports that Hezbollah continues to amass

an arsenal of weapons, which is in direct contravention of UN Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701. In addition to Hezbollah's interference in Syria, there is also a risk of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah returning. If what happened in 2006 were repeated, it would not just devastate Lebanon but be hugely destabilising for the region.

John Howell: I thank the Minister for his response. Earlier this month, Iran's Defence Minister said that Hezbollah is now capable of producing rockets that can hit any part of Israel, and reports have emerged that Iran has established rocket factories under the control of Hezbollah. What steps is he taking to stop Iran's unconstrained financing of terror?

Mr Ellwood: The involvement of Iran through proxy influences across the region is of huge concern, not least in Lebanon, and we are looking at these reports very carefully indeed. I should also say that Hezbollah, which has a political involvement as part of the Government in Lebanon, needs to move forward and be more constructive. It is thanks to disruption by Hezbollah and its blocking decisions in the Lebanese Government that the country was without a president for two years.

Mrs Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): But what urgent action can be taken to counter Iran's malevolent involvement in destabilising the middle east? We have already heard reference to Hezbollah being armed by Iran, but Iran is also arming Hamas in Gaza with rockets aimed specifically at Israeli communities within Israel, across the border from Gaza. What action will be taken to stop this?

Mr Ellwood: We are now engaging with Iran at a level that we have not done for over a decade, thanks to the nuclear agreement that has been made. That allows us to have more forthright and frank conversations, and we have made it very clear that if Iran wants to join the international community—we want stability in the middle east—it must desist from having an influence in the areas to which the hon. Lady referred.

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's earlier answer, but does he accept that Israel's decision in 2006 to bomb all parts of Lebanon, including those represented by people who had been fighting Hezbollah for more than a generation, catapulted Hezbollah from a sectional group of extremists right into the heart of the powerbase of the Government of Lebanon?

Mr Ellwood: I visited the country right after those attacks had taken place and the devastation was indeed huge. It is in all our interests not to go down that road again. I pay tribute to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, which has done an amazing job in reducing tensions between the two countries.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): One way to reduce the supply of weapons to Hezbollah is to stop them at source. What discussions has the Minister had with, for instance, Egypt on the tunnels and the access they provide for bringing weapons in? If they can be stopped there, we can stop them being used.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we need to work together on this with our partners across the middle east. We are engaging not just with Egypt, but with other countries too.

Anglo-American Relations

6. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart on strengthening the diplomatic relationship between the UK and the US. [909513]

11. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his US counterpart on strengthening the diplomatic relationship between the UK and the US. [909518]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I had a series of excellent meetings last week at the White House, the State Department and elsewhere with Secretary of State Tillerson, Vice-President Pence and others. We discussed areas of common interest and shared objectives on Syria, Russia, NATO, global free trade and other questions.

Nigel Huddleston: There are 212,000 Americans living in the UK and 715,000 Brits living in America. Americans, when visiting the UK, spend more than visitors from any other nation. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that this shows that the special relationship is very much alive?

Boris Johnson: This is a long-standing extraordinary relationship that goes from strength to strength. Hon. Members may know that last year exports to the United States rose by 20%. It is the absolute determination of the new US Administration to do a free trade deal that will take those trade figures even further forward.

Mims Davies: Visiting the Cabinet War Rooms this morning with youngsters was a timely reminder that the US is one of our closest allies and that a strong relationship between the two countries remains vital. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it must be a key part of our new geopolitical role outside the EU?

Boris Johnson: I passionately agree with that. It is the function of the UK to be the intermediary between our European friends and partners and the United States, and to campaign for the things that matter deeply to us all: the transatlantic defence alliance that has kept the peace in our continent for the past 70 years, and, of course, global free trade, which is of huge value to all of us.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to praise the democracy of the United States? Its independent judiciary has rejected President Trump's plans to bring in bans on refugees, while at the same time Congress has seen sense and not approved his proposals to abolish Obamacare.

Boris Johnson: It is not for me to intrude into the domestic politics of the United States, except to say that I think many people around the world who criticise and attack the United States and who are viscerally anti-American in their attitudes will look at the balance of

power represented by that decision and see that this is a mature democratic system in which we can confide our trust.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): But what damage is done by fantastical and ridiculous outbursts like those levelled at GCHQ by President Trump? Will the Foreign Secretary assure the House that our invaluable intelligence relationship with the United States is not compromised by the current incumbent of the White House?

Boris Johnson: The damage done by such remarks can be likened to that of a gnat against a rhinoceros or an elephant. They will not make any difference to a fundamental relationship that is, as I say, of great international importance. As for the assertion that there was some sort of collusion by GCHQ to bug the presidential candidate, I think that has been accurately described as absurd and ridiculous.

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): May I just bring the Foreign Secretary down to earth? The core element of the Anglo-American relationship is based on “Five Eyes” and intelligence. President Trump’s allegation, repeated from Fox News, was not like a gnat at a rhinoceros; it was deeply damaging, and I would be grateful if the Foreign Secretary told the House exactly what comments he made to the President or senior members of the White House to refute that.

Boris Johnson: I must respectfully disagree with my hon. Friend’s characterisation of the episode. I believe that it has done no lasting damage to our relationship, and certainly not to the special relationship or to intelligence sharing, which will of course carry on between our countries. As I say, that relationship is of huge value to the security of the west. As for the allegations themselves, let me repeat that they are utterly ridiculous and should be ignored.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Let me welcome the Secretary of State back from his trip to Washington. More than ever, it is vital that Britain uses, in his words, our “extraordinary relationship” to ensure that America makes the right decisions on the world stage. The Secretary of State has consistently told us that we should be optimistic about the outcome. Indeed, two days ago, he told us: “They have an agenda very close to ours. The U.S. is back.” With that in mind, will he tell us specifically what impact he believes today’s presidential energy independence Executive order will have on the Paris climate change agreement? During his trip to Washington, what representations did he make about that Executive order?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Lady will know that the UK Government have played a leading role in securing the Paris agreement on climate change. The United States remains a supporter of that. In the course of my conversations with the US Secretary of State on that issue, I received some encouragement—I do not want to exaggerate the outcome of the conversations—that, as in so many other dossiers, the US is moving from the position we saw during the campaign, when some remarks came across as being perhaps out of line with UK

Government thinking, into a position that is much more closely aligned with our thinking, even on climate change.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, but I am not sure that he really understands that by lifting curbs on power plant emissions, today’s Executive order will make it practically impossible for the US to hit the targets that were agreed in Paris. The right hon. Gentleman says that he received some encouragement, but to be honest one wonders whether he raised the issue in Washington and was just ignored, or did not raise the issue at all. One thing is certainly clear—

Boris Johnson: I did raise it.

Emily Thornberry: I am very glad to hear that the Secretary of State raised the issue, but it is such a shame that we have so little influence on the United States that today an Executive order is being signed—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a gnat against a rhino!

Emily Thornberry: It is unfair to call the Secretary of State a gnat against a rhino, and I would obviously never suggest such a thing. If the Secretary of State claims to have influence, he needs to start showing us some evidence of it. He needs to learn that the only way he will get listened to by Trump is if he is prepared to stand up and challenge him. I ask him to begin today by condemning the Executive order and telling the Trump Administration that we will not stand by in silence while they wreck the Paris climate change agreement.

Boris Johnson: With great respect, I must say that I think the right hon. Lady is again being far too pessimistic. We were told by the US presidential candidate that NATO was obsolete; we now hear that he is 100% behind NATO. We were told that the JCPOA, the joint comprehensive plan of action on Iran, was going to be junked; it is now pretty clear that America supports it. We were told that there was going to be a great love-in between the new US Administration and Russia; they are now very much more in line. As for climate change, I think the right hon. Lady is once again being too pessimistic. Let us wait and see. We have heard the mutterings of the right hon. Lady; let us see what the American Administration actually do. I think she will be pleasantly surprised, as she has been, if she were remotely intellectually honest, in all other respects.

Eastern Ukraine

7. **Sir Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot) (Con): What assessment he has made of recent developments in eastern Ukraine. [909514]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The causes of the conflict in Ukraine lie very much with the Russians, who bear the overwhelming responsibility for the considerable loss of life there. I was pleased to be able to raise the matter with my Polish counterpart, Witold Waszczykowski, during a visit to Kiev a few weeks ago. What is crucial to progress in Ukraine is not just for the Russians to

desist from supporting military activity in Donbass and pull out of Crimea, but for the Ukrainians themselves to make the reforms that will increase international confidence in Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: We must hasten progress somewhat. Sir Gerald Howarth—briefly.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Is it not clear, though, that unless we do more to help our Ukrainian friends, Russia will continue with impunity to seek to destabilise Ukraine? Given that the western Ukrainian-owned businesses in Donbass have just been expropriated by so-called separatists, no doubt with the support of Russia, perhaps we should consider expropriating Russian assets in the United Kingdom, starting with football clubs.

Boris Johnson: I am grateful for that suggestion. This country already leads the way in imposing sanctions on the Russians for their actions in Ukraine, and we continue to insist on those.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Does the Foreign Secretary agree with me, and with the Secretary General of Amnesty International, that the United States President's Executive order implementing a travel ban on people from six countries—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, no. I thought that the hon. Gentleman was seeking to take part in an exchange about Ukraine, possibly in anticipation of our not reaching his question. We probably will reach his question, but I am afraid that, whether we do or not, he cannot talk about the travel ban purported to be applied by the United States in respect of an exchange about Ukraine. Does any other Member wish to take part, in an orderly way? Yes: Mr Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: It is clear that the Russians have behaved perniciously and disgracefully in Ukraine. As the Foreign Secretary has said, their behaviour has led to many deaths, many people have been detained incommunicado, and terrible human rights abuses are going on, as well as the expropriation of assets. The Foreign Secretary regularly boasts about how well we have done in ensuring that there are sanctions in the European Union, but how will we be able to do that when we are no longer a member of the European Union?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Gentleman will know that there is to be a White Paper very soon, presaging a Bill on how we will continue to take part in sanctions jointly with our friends and partners across the channel.

Sudan and South Sudan

8. **Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Sudan and South Sudan. [909515]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Despite some improvements, the security situation in Sudan remains concerning, particularly in Darfur and the Two Areas. In South Sudan the security situation is much worse as fighting continues across the country and the humanitarian situation becomes increasingly desperate.

Mr Cunningham: Sudan was recently appointed vice-chair of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, at a time when the organisation is considering investigating Sudan's alleged use of such weapons. Does that not constitute a conflict of interests?

Mr Ellwood: There are a number of concerns about Sudan, one of which is the use of chemical weapons. The United Nations has looked into the issue in detail, and to date there is no firm evidence that that is taking place, but we will continue to investigate.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Minister will share my concern about the recent attack on aid workers in South Sudan, which left seven dead. What support does he think the United Kingdom Government can give the United Nations to allow aid agencies to deal with the emerging famine in parts of the country?

Mr Ellwood: I had an opportunity to visit South Sudan at the end of last year. We are now deploying 400 British troops in one of our largest peacekeeping operations in the world. This is a complex conflict: not only is there conflict between the two major tribes, but numerous sub-conflicts are taking place throughout the country. It is important that we are able to support the work of the Church that is trying to reconcile local differences, which will then allow non-governmental organisations to get in and provide the necessary humanitarian aid.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): May I add my sincere tribute to those given to the right hon. Gentleman for his actions last week?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of allegations that both Salva Kiir and Riek Machar are currently using British passports to travel around Africa and elsewhere? Given that the terrible situation in South Sudan—both the famine and the security situation—is in significant part man-made, does he think that is appropriate, if it is true?

Mr Ellwood: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments.

I will certainly look into this question. Both Salva Kiir and Riek Machar have huge responsibility for what is actually a man-made conflict—let us not mince our words. South Sudan, a mineral-rich country, could be one of the richest in Africa, but it needs to reconcile its differences. It is the youngest country on the planet, yet its first few footsteps have been absolutely dire because of poor leadership, mostly by these two individuals.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why do African nations and African regional organisations prove to be so ineffective not only in stopping the fighting but in relieving the misery?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important observation, but I would say that they are getting better at recognising that countries in Africa must honour their constitutions, and that leaders cannot simply hand over power to their son or daughter. The best example of that was in Gambia, where the neighbouring countries stepped forward to make sure that there was a peaceful transition to a new President.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I would like to press the Minister on the Amnesty International report that found strong evidence of the use of chemical weapons by Sudanese forces in Darfur, but which has been met, sadly, virtually by silence from his Government. Will the Minister explain which international partners he is working with, and how the Government will ensure that these deeply disturbing allegations are fully investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice?

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to look into this in more detail. Our understanding is that this came to the attention of the United Nations, and it has conducted investigations as well. But it is difficult to collect evidence, simply because we do not have full access to the country, as we would like. I will certainly redouble my efforts to see what more I can find out.

Belarus

9. **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): What assessment he has made of the human rights situation in Belarus. [909516]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Despite some positive steps, the human rights situation in Belarus remains of serious concern. We continue to raise human rights issues with the Belarusian authorities and use every opportunity to call on Belarus to establish an immediate moratorium on the use of the death penalty.

Mrs Miller: Will my right hon. Friend join calls led by the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee for the Belarusian President unconditionally to release all the many hundreds of people brutally arrested in Belarus over the last few days? Will he also consider asking the European Union to rethink its recent decision to lift the personal sanctions against the ruling Belarus elite?

Sir Alan Duncan: Following the demonstrations on 25 March, the Foreign Office issued a statement on 26 March calling on the Belarusian authorities to respect and uphold the right to freedom of association, assembly and expression, and to release all the peaceful demonstrators still detained. Among those originally detained were two British nationals, but I am pleased to say that they have since been released.

Executive Orders: United States

10. **Chris Law** (Dundee West) (SNP): What discussions he has had with his US counterpart on that country's Executive order implementing a travel ban on people from six countries and on certain refugees. [909517]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We have been clear that the Government do not agree, as I have said previously to the House, with the recent changes to US immigration policy, and that that is not the approach the UK would take.

Chris Law: Therefore, will the Foreign Secretary agree with me and the secretary general of Amnesty International that the President's Executive order implementing a travel ban on people from six countries and certain refugees is "unconstitutional, inhumane and illogical"?

Boris Johnson: I think I have made my position on the travel ban clear: "divisive, discriminatory and wrong" was the formula we came up with, after exhaustive research of the thesaurus. I think that was agreed among all members, and we will settle on that.

Death Penalty: United Arab Emirates

12. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough) (Lab): When he last discussed the use of the death penalty with his counterpart in the UAE; and if he will make a statement. [909519]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The UK firmly opposes the death penalty in all circumstances. We have made that clear to all countries that still have it in place, including the United Arab Emirates.

Fiona Mactaggart: Jennifer Dalquez is an overseas domestic worker working in the Emirates to provide for her two children in the Philippines. In a struggle with her employer, who was trying to rape her, she killed him, and she now faces either execution or a fine of 100 camels' value, over \$60,000, which she has no prospect of paying. What can the Minister do to ensure that this barbaric justice system comes into the 21st century and respects the human rights of people, especially overseas domestic workers?

Mr Ellwood: I will certainly look into that consular case and get back to the right hon. Lady. Many countries in the Gulf and across the wider middle east are advancing their justice systems, but many of them have existed as independent centralised countries for less than 50 or 60 years. That is not an excuse for continuing to have outdated practices in the 21st century, but I will do my best to provide her with an update.

Bilateral Relations: India

14. **Stuart Andrew** (Pudsey) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of relations between India and the UK. [909522]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): The UK shares a long-standing and deep friendship with India, covering economic ties, defence and security, and people-to-people links. We want the strongest possible economic relationship with India post-Brexit. That is why my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister visited India in November—her first bilateral visit outside Europe.

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful for that answer. Strong relations between our two nations should be welcomed, particularly given the potential trading opportunities, but "good relations" means talking about concerns as well as successes. What discussions has the Foreign Office had with the Indian Government on Kashmir and human rights?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We of course remain concerned about the reports of unrest in Indian-administered Kashmir. In fact, I raised the Kashmir issue with Indian Minister of State

for External Affairs Akbar during his visit to London on 16 March, and I will continue to monitor developments in this area.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): This year marks the UK-India year of culture, so will the Minister set out the Government's plans to celebrate this important event?

Alok Sharma: A range of events are coming up this year to celebrate the year of culture. The right hon. Gentleman will know that we were visited by Finance Minister Jaitley in February, showing the strength of our relationship. He visited Buckingham Palace, where Her Majesty the Queen hosted an event celebrating the year of culture.

Topical Questions

T1. [909498] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I want to pay my own tribute to my ministerial colleague and right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and to all those innocents who lost their lives or were injured last week. Over the centuries, many people have tried to attack this Parliament, but none has shaken our faith in our values of freedom and democracy, which inform our policies.

My immediate priority is to play my part in ensuring that article 50 is invoked smoothly and leading the process of building a new relationship and partnership with our European friends. In the past two weeks, I have visited east Africa, the United States and Turkey. Following that, I aim to take forward our campaign against Daesh.

Mrs Gillan: I join the Foreign Secretary in paying tribute to our courageous right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood).

Following the vote in the US Senate yesterday, what assessment has the Foreign Secretary made of Montenegro's accession to NATO?

Boris Johnson: I thank my right hon. Friend, because I believe, with maximum humility, that that is another example of how the United Kingdom's influence is being felt in our conversations with our American friends and partners. There is strong support for NATO on Capitol Hill, and it is absolutely right that they should be moving forward with the integration of Montenegro into the north Atlantic alliance.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I am worried that the Foreign Secretary is now excluded from Cabinet decision making. When he told Robert Peston a week past Sunday that no deal from Brexit would be totally okay, his Cabinet colleague was simultaneously telling another station that it would be really bad for Britain and Europe. What estimates or forecasts, official or any, have led him to believe, and to say to Robert Peston, that no deal from Brexit would be "perfectly okay"?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Prime Minister is going into these negotiations in the spirit of optimism and positivity, from which he could learn a little. I have absolutely no doubt that there

will be a great deal for this country, because a great deal for this country is ultimately in the interest of our friends and partners on the other side of the channel, who have a huge amount to gain.

T2. [909499] **Will Quince** (Colchester) (Con): Will the Secretary of State kindly set out what discussions he has had with his international counterparts in relation to the campaign against Daesh?

Boris Johnson: We had a counter-Daesh coalition meeting last week, and the House will know that huge progress is being made. Daesh's territory in Iraq has been reduced by about 60%, and its territory in Syria has been reduced by about 30%. The UK is at the forefront of that effort, in concert with our American allies and a coalition of 68 other countries.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): According to the Basic Law of Hong Kong, the ultimate aim is for the city to select a Chief Executive by universal suffrage, yet two days ago a new Chief Executive was chosen by a committee comprising 0.03% of Hong Kong's registered voters. As we prepare to mark the 20th anniversary of the handover, how can the House be confident that the Chinese Government are committed to progress towards genuinely democratic elections in Hong Kong?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): The new Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, was elected by the Election Committee, and of course we respect the decision. However, we have consistently taken the view that the best way to secure the future of one country, two systems is through a transition to universal suffrage, which meets the aspirations of the people of Hong Kong, within the parameters of the Basic Law.

T5. [909502] **Dr Daniel Poulter** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), has made clear his concerns about Iranian state-sponsored terrorism destabilising the state of Israel and the whole middle east. As a consequence, will he please confirm that ensuring it recognises the right of the state of Israel to exist is first and foremost in future engagement with Iran?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is an opportunity for Iran to re-engage following the nuclear deal and to show that it is meeting 21st-century standards. I am pleased we have had the Airbus deal, which is an example of how we can work together commercially, but we also need to work together on governance and on recognising the boundaries of states.

T3. [909500] **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): It is more than three years since my constituent Ray Tindall and the other men of the Chennai six were detained and subsequently imprisoned in India for a crime they did not commit. Will Ministers pick up the phone to their counterparts in India and suggest that

the men are simply deported? The men do not want to be in India, and the Indians do not want them in India. It is an easy way out.

Alok Sharma: I know that the hon. Gentleman is incredibly concerned for the welfare of his constituent, as we are for all the men. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and I have all raised the case in meetings with our counterparts. We are providing consular support, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and my office has written to the families to say that I stand ready to meet them ahead of the verdict that is due.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary outline what his priorities have been during the UK's 62nd presidency of the UN Security Council this month?

Alok Sharma: The theme of the UK's presidency of the UN Security Council has been conflict prevention in Africa, with a focus on the Lake Chad basin, South Sudan and Somalia. The UK has also held an open debate on modern slavery. Throughout our presidency we have been action-oriented, transparent and consultative, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has chaired two Security Council meetings.

T6. [909504] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): Many hon. Members on both sides of the House have called for a ban on goods produced in the illegal settlements on the west bank. Does the Foreign Secretary think that those hon. Members should be banned from travelling to Israel?

Boris Johnson: I am sure that hon. Members who wish to travel to Israel will have absolutely no difficulties, but it remains up to the Israeli immigration authorities to decide whom they choose to admit.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): In light of the interim report and the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State in Burma, which were published this month, will the Under-Secretary join me and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in working towards an international, independent investigation into what is happening in Rakhine state, especially against the Rohingya community?

Alok Sharma: Mr Speaker, I know that both you and my hon. Friend care deeply about Burma. The UK has helped to deliver a United Nations Human Rights Council resolution that sets up a fact-finding mission to investigate reports of human rights abuses, and it will be composed of independent, international experts.

T7. [909506] **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I want to go back to that meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva last Friday and the rather petulant tirade by the British mission, which ended with the threat to

“adopt a policy of voting against all resolutions concerning Israel's conduct in the Occupied...Palestinian Territories.”

Will the Secretary of State make it clear that it continues to be Her Majesty's Government's policy to oppose illegal settlements in the west bank?

Boris Johnson: Yes.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One forum where we foster our relationships with other European countries is the Council of Europe. As we leave the European Union, what role do Ministers see the Council of Europe playing? Can we deepen those relationships further?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): We continue to have important regard for the Council of Europe and we will continue to work closely with it. We consider it an important forum for the co-operation of the countries that attend such meetings.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): UK firms have been granted 194 licences and made some £3.3 billion in arms sales to Saudi Arabia during the two years of war in Yemen, completely eclipsing the UK Government's aid efforts. Can the Foreign Secretary really claim that the licensing regime is legally and morally legitimate? Will he put more efforts into peace than into war?

Boris Johnson: We have the strongest and most rigorous criteria—there must be a clear risk of a serious violation of international humanitarian law—of any country in the world. That remains the position.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Following the walk-out this morning by members of the Brexit Select Committee, does the Foreign Secretary agree that, far from being gloomy, we should agree with Pascal Lamy and Wolfgang Schäuble that it would be more damaging to Europe than to the UK if a success were not made of Brexit?

Boris Johnson: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the spirit he is bringing to this, which is very much the one the Prime Minister is going to adopt in the negotiations. I believe she will be absolutely vindicated, because I think our friends and partners on the other side of the channel understand exactly what he sets out. It will be an opportunity to get rid of some of the burdensome regulation that has accreted over the past 44 years, and I applaud the campaign that I know he supports and which has been outlined in the pages of this morning's *The Daily Telegraph*.

T8. [909507] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): While the UK Government make representations to the Israeli Government, we have seen an increase in demolitions, including of donor-funded structures; the land regularisation Bill; the possibility of construction in area E1; and the travel bans imposed by the Israeli Government. If the UK is really committed to doing all it can to achieve a two-state solution, is it not time to recognise Palestine, before it is too late?

Boris Johnson: Both the Prime Minister and I have raised this issue specifically with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and we will continue to do so. We are opposed to such demolitions and, as I have said many times this morning, we continue to believe that continued illegal settlements are an obstruction to peace.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Pakistani Government have announced their intention to annexe Gilgit-Baltistan, a sovereign part of India that Pakistan illegally occupies. What representations has my right

hon. Friend made to the Pakistani Government to say that this act is illegal and the UK Government will oppose it?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend knows, we have very good relations with both India and Pakistan, but on issues of a bilateral nature it is for those two countries to reach a settlement; it is not for us to prescribe a solution or act as a mediator. Of course we encourage both sides to maintain good relations and we will continue to talk to them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What would the Foreign Secretary say to President Putin about his treatment of demonstrators if he got the chance today?

Boris Johnson: I am pleased to inform the House that I raised the matter with my Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov—indeed, I raised the case of the mistreatment of a 17-year-old British national.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Why does Saudi Arabia consistently feature in the backstory of terrorists, as in the case of the one who struck here last week? What representations do we make to that country about it?

Boris Johnson: The backstory of terrorists is of course a subject of continual analysis, and in respect of the individual who struck last week that analysis has yet to be completed. It goes without saying that in our discussions with our Saudi counterparts we make very plain our view that the struggle against terror is a struggle we face jointly.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to Question 10, is it not a bitter tragedy that the US, which has been a beacon of democracy and tolerance for so long, has produced a President whose comments and stance echo those of the Blackshirts of 80 years ago?

Boris Johnson: As I said to the House a few weeks ago, such analogies and comparisons trivialise that epoch and the tragedies of the 1930s. We have a very different situation today and we are working with our American friends and partners to produce the best outcomes for the security, stability and prosperity of the world.

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary join me in thanking the Libyan House of Representatives for their condolences after Wednesday's tragic and traumatic event? Does he agree that urgent and active engagement with the House of Representatives is vital for a stable Libya and the ending of the mass export of migrants to their death by militia?

Boris Johnson: The fundamental thing has to be a rapprochement between the two sides in Libya. We certainly believe that General Haftar has to be part of the solution, but he cannot be the whole solution. There must be a political and constitutional resolution to the crisis in Libya.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Everyone wants to see territory liberated from the murderers of the so-called Islamic State, but is the Foreign Secretary aware of the deep concern over the recent air strikes, which have caused the death of so many innocent civilians, including children? There was no attempt to save the children. Is he aware of how important it is to try to minimise civilian tragedies, and will he make representations accordingly?

Boris Johnson: I believe the hon. Gentleman is referring to air strikes by the Americans—he did not spell that out. Of course, there have been innumerable barbaric air strikes by the Assad regime, the Russians and others, as I am sure he would acknowledge. The United States has said that it is investigating and will produce a full report.

Northern Ireland: Political Developments

12.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on recent events in Northern Ireland.

Since the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 2 March, I have been engaged in intensive talks with the political parties and the Irish Government, in line with the well established three-stranded approach. There has been one clear purpose: to re-establish an inclusive devolved Administration at Stormont, in accordance with the 1998 Belfast agreement and its successors.

Progress has been made on a number of issues, including on a budget, a programme for government, and ways of improving transparency and accountability. We have seen further steps forward on agreeing a way to implement the Stormont House agreement legacy bodies to help to provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the troubles. In addition, progress was made on how the parties might come together to represent Northern Ireland in our negotiations to leave the EU, which is so important in the context of article 50 being triggered tomorrow. That said, it is clear that significant gaps remain between the parties, particularly over issues surrounding culture and identity. Throughout the process, the Government have been active in making positive proposals to try to bridge those gaps and help the parties to move things forward.

In law, the period allowed to form an Executive is 14 days from the date of the first sitting of the Assembly after an election. That 14-day period expired at 4 pm yesterday with no agreement, and therefore no Executive. This is a source of deep disappointment and regret to me and many others, and I know that there is widespread dismay throughout the country. From all my extensive engagement across Northern Ireland with business, civil society and members of the public, I am in no doubt that inclusive devolved government is what the overwhelming majority of the people want to see, working for them, delivering on their priorities, and continuing the positive progress we have seen in Northern Ireland over recent years. They want to see devolved institutions up and running and serving the whole community. Yet following the passing of yesterday's legal deadline, Northern Ireland has no devolved Administration. That also means that other elements of the Belfast agreement, including the north-south bodies, cannot operate properly. The consequences of all of this are potentially extremely serious, the most immediate of which is the fact that we are rapidly approaching the point at which Northern Ireland will not have an agreed budget.

From tomorrow, a civil servant, the permanent secretary at the Department of Finance, will exercise powers to allocate cash to Northern Ireland Departments. This is an interim measure designed to ensure that services are maintained until such time as a budget is agreed. We are keeping in close contact with the head of the Northern Ireland civil service on these matters, and I understand that the Department of Finance will be setting out more details later today.

Let me be very clear: this situation is not sustainable and, beyond a short period of time, it will impact on public services such as the health service, schools, voluntary groups and services for the most vulnerable in society.

That is not what people voted for on 2 March. During the course of the past 24 hours, I have spoken to the leaders of the five main Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government. I am encouraged that there remains a strong willingness to continue engaging in dialogue with a view to resolving outstanding issues and forming an Executive, and that must absolutely remain the priority. However, the window of opportunity is short. It is essential, therefore, that the intensity of discussions is stepped up with renewed intent and focus. A positive outcome remains possible.

To that end, I will, over the coming days, continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government as appropriate, and I will need to keep the situation under close review. If those talks are successful, it would be my intention, quickly, to bring forward legislation after the Easter recess to allow an Executive to be formed, avoiding a second Assembly election for which I detect little public appetite.

I am also determined to take forward the legacy bodies in the Stormont House agreement in accordance with our manifesto commitments, and I will be involving a range of interested parties, including the Victims' Commissioner. In the absence of devolved government, it is ultimately for the United Kingdom Government to provide for political stability and good governance. We do not want to see a return to direct rule. Our manifesto at the last election stated that

"local policies and services should be determined by locally elected politicians through locally accountable institutions."

Should the talks not succeed in their objectives, the Government will have to consider all options. I therefore want to give the House notice that, following the Easter recess, as a minimum it would be my intention to bring forward legislation to set a regional rate to enable local councils to carry out their functions and to provide further assurance around the budget for Northern Ireland.

It is vital that devolved government—and all the institutions under the successive agreements—is returned to Northern Ireland as soon as possible, and the Government's unrelenting focus is on achieving that objective. Northern Ireland needs strong devolved government to deliver for teachers, doctors and nurses, businesses, industry and the wider community and to ensure that it plays a full role in the affairs of our United Kingdom, while retaining its strong relationship with Ireland. It must continue the work of the past two decades to build a stronger, peaceful and prosperous future for all. That needs to be the focus of everyone as we approach the crucial next few days and weeks. I commend this statement to the House.

12.43 pm

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to send my condolences to the family of PC Keith Palmer, who gave his life in the protection of all who work in this building.

I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of his statement. Things have changed dramatically since he last gave a statement to this House and called an election. The result of that election reflects the real worry on the ground that the political institutions—not just at Stormont, but at Westminster and the Dáil—have not delivered in the way the public expect. We need a significant change in direction that includes both

Governments as well as the parties on the ground. The Irish Government must have more direct engagement. They are not just interested observers, but the co-guarantors of an internationally endorsed agreement that brought to an end the sad episode in the story of these islands. We need direct and continuing intervention from representatives of the Irish Government.

This House must end the hands-off, “Let them get on with it”, “It’s all done and dusted” attitude that prevailed under the Cameron-led Governments. We need the Prime Minister to show greater leadership and encouragement in the process, and to show all in Northern Ireland that the Government want to make this work. The people of Northern Ireland have spoken, and they have said very clearly that there are no longer any minorities in the place that they call home. They want to be treated fairly and equitably. They demand that we—the political classes—get our act together now, and move forward on things pledged to them many years ago. Failure to do so is fraught with danger.

As the Secretary of State said, the budget has not been signed off, and that could soon start to have an impact on the day-to-day lives of businesses and the general public. It is not fair to expect the Northern Ireland Office to run Northern Ireland again. Brexit negotiations in Northern Ireland are the most sensitive of all parts of the United Kingdom. Michel Barnier, the European Commission’s lead negotiator, has identified the implications for the peace process as one of the three main priorities for him entering these negotiations, but we do not even have properly elected spokespeople attending the talks under the Joint Ministerial Committee.

In the background to all this is the worry that any vacuum could be filled by those who prefer the bullet to the ballot box. We all have a stake in this process. We cannot turn our backs on the situation, as many advocated through the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s. Our collective future is at stake, and nothing should get in the way. The parties on the ground need to take a long, hard look at themselves, and stop saying, “This is what we want”—no matter how legitimate they believe those demands to be—and start saying, “What can we give to move forwards?” It is not easy, but it is the only chance we have to resolve this.

I have not even mentioned the farce that was the final straw in Northern Ireland: the debacle of the renewable heat initiative. Will the Secretary of State look at whether the financial burden placed on the people of Northern Ireland by this failure is limited and reasonable? None of us envies him, or the job he faces. We all want this to succeed and we should use all avenues to reach that goal. To that end, I have some questions. Will the Secretary of State consider whether external support would help to reach an agreement? History tells us that this is sometimes necessary. I can assure him that recent talks with good friends of the peace process from the USA show that they remain ready to help at any time. Will he ensure that the Irish Government have hands-on involvement in the talks, and that the Prime Minister is fully engaged in the process? History has shown us the real difference that that can make. Will he ensure that, unlike so far, multilateral all-party talks are set up as soon as possible in the coming days?

I said earlier that no one wants this to fail, and that is especially true of my party. We have a great deal invested in this process and we do not want it to collapse.

Hopefully, we can all use all our efforts to reach a deal as soon as possible. This process has to be built on partnership, genuine compromise and consensus if we are to build up faith and confidence not just in the institutions, but, much more importantly, across the whole the population of Northern Ireland. That cannot be done unless politicians on all sides are prepared to move from their entrenched positions.

This is not just abstract debate for me. For the 12 years from 1993, I had the great privilege to represent 30,000 public sector workers in Northern Ireland. Many had spent years cleaning up the fallout of the actions of failed politicians and terrorists: the ambulance personnel ignoring the risks to their lives to save the lives of others; the nurses dealing with the mutilated, traumatised and dying; the porters dealing, at the sharp end, with the follow-through from yet another sectarian shooting; the social workers dealing with the bereaved, those suffering from addiction and those who were simply lost; the housing officers trying desperately to find homes for those who were burned or bombed out simply because of their religion; and the community workers trying to convince young men and women facing a life on the dole that putting on a balaclava and picking up a gun was not the way forward. It is these people and their kids who we are letting down. Every time we say, “No”, “We can’t” or “We won’t”, we betray the trust they put in us that we had put all that behind us. These people did their duty. It is time for us all to do ours.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his clear comments on what is at stake. Yes, this is about those very individuals he spoke to in the last part of his contribution—those in the health service and in education—and the progress in Northern Ireland that we have seen in such a positive and constructive way. We all have that shared determination and commitment to ensure that that progress continues, and that young people growing up in Northern Ireland can look to that future with a strong, positive intent of fulfilling their dreams, ambitions, aspirations and hopes. We can all agree on that message as we look to the days ahead.

The hon. Gentleman asked a number of questions on the process, but I should tell him that there is no hands-off role for the Government in relation to Northern Ireland. We take our responsibilities very seriously in relation to political stability and governance, and, fundamentally, to that sense of devolved government serving the people of Northern Ireland. That is profoundly what we want to be restored at the earliest opportunity.

On the various different roles of people and organisations, I can say to the hon. Gentleman that the Irish Government have been actively involved over the last days. I pay tribute to the work of Charlie Flanagan, the Irish Foreign Minister, who has worked alongside me, consistent with the three-stranded approach that governs these discussions and the framework. He has played an extremely important part, and has underlined the Irish Government’s continued support for the restoration of the devolved Administration, and for the broader institutions set out in the Belfast agreement and its successors functioning effectively and properly—the devolved Government sit at the heart of seeing that structure fulfilling its intent.

The Prime Minister has been fully engaged in the process and remains so. She has had a number of conversations with the Taoiseach. I have kept her very

[James Brokenshire]

closely informed and she has very much been there, understanding the need to see progress and supporting the process. She will continue to do so.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the issue of others providing support. The important thing to recognise is that, fundamentally, this is about the parties themselves coming together and devolved elements of agreement. Therefore, the scope for what outside partners can support and achieve is limited. It is important in that context to consider the issues, and how best we can find that way forward and that positive outcome.

Yes, we are considering the intensification and the strengthening of the process, working with the parties. I will continue to discuss that with the parties in the immediate hours and days ahead to ensure that we have the process in place to get the positive outcome that they have said they want—they want that return to devolved government, and they want an Executive performing for the people of Northern Ireland. We need to support and galvanise them in that work and give them all assistance to achieve that outcome. That is what the House would endorse, and that is the work that the Government intend to bring about.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. In an attempt to accommodate the extensive interest in this subject, I appeal to colleagues to ask brief questions without long preamble, and to the Secretary of State to offer us characteristically pithy replies.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for supplying an advance copy of his statement, and for engaging with me as Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee regularly during the process.

When people turned out to vote in greater numbers, they expected politicians and not civil servants to run affairs in Northern Ireland. Given the way we are going, could those people be forgiven for becoming disillusioned with the whole process of devolution if we are not careful? Should we not therefore remind all the parties in Northern Ireland that power sharing means working with people they do not like, and accepting decisions that they would not automatically choose? If they do not do that, power sharing will not have a future.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend, in his characteristic way, has set out the challenges. I commend him and the Select Committee for their work in supporting our activity. I have appreciated the conversations I have had with him in recent days. Yes, there is a great deal at stake. It is about the parties recognising that need to reach out, which they have demonstrated in the past, and our providing that context and ability for them to do so, in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for giving us advance sight of his statement.

I pay tribute to Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley for the work they did in advancing devolution. That contribution was and remains important.

Given that the negotiating position seemed to be set in granite at the start of the process, it is perhaps little surprise that there has been little movement. It appears to have moved from stalemate through deadlock to impasse without ever giving any appearance of compromise. Given that the two major parties appear to have enough cold shoulder left over comfortably to see them through the small window of opportunity to which the Secretary of State referred, is it time to consider other options? There appears to be a presumption against having another election, but that would seem to be where the process is headed. What preparations is he making for that new election?

Considering that the election would come in the middle of the early Brexit negotiations, what measures is the Secretary of State discussing that will allow Northern Ireland's politicians to play a proper part? Has he discussed with the Prime Minister the possibility of delaying the article 50 trigger? Given how Scotland has been treated over article 50, I would advise anyone against holding their breath on that.

In the longer term, is it time to revisit the principles of power sharing and look once again at whether the two largest parties should be able to hold the whole legislature in lockdown, as they are doing? Perhaps it is time to allow Stormont to set its own rules on forming the Executive.

Finally, what consideration is being given to curtailing salary spend on politicians in a legislature that is not sitting?

James Brokenshire: I will quickly run through some of the points the hon. Lady makes. There is no intent to trigger article 50 late—that remains absolutely on course—but her point about engaging people across Northern Ireland in the process is an important one. I have been talking to businesses and communities to ensure that that voice is recognised and understood. That will continue, but it will be much more powerful to have that Executive in place, articulating those views and making the case for Northern Ireland.

On the point the hon. Lady made at the outset of her question, I recognise the contribution of those who went before. In looking to the future, we need to reflect on the progress that has been made.

The hon. Lady spoke about an election. Options remain open, but there is no public appetite, and I do not discern any broader appetite, for another election, given that we had one just over three weeks ago. Therefore, the focus needs to be on getting agreement and that positive outcome, and getting devolved government back on its feet. That is the focus of work ahead.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): None of us in this House should underestimate how incredibly difficult it is for Northern Ireland's leaders to find common ground on issues such as legacy and identity, which have been the cause of tension and division for decades, but does the Secretary of State agree that, if they can find a way to bridge those last divisions, they will have the gratitude and support of the vast majority in Northern Ireland, who want devolution to work and play its part in moving Northern Ireland forward towards a brighter and better future?

James Brokenshire: I absolutely agree, and I recognise and commend my right hon. Friend for the contribution she has made in that process. Yes, there are issues of legacy and identity, which have been hugely challenging over so many years, but I strongly discern that the will and commitment are there to find the way forward. As she rightly said, that would have such an impact on generations to come.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Yesterday, the Democratic Unionist party was at Stormont, ready and willing, along with other parties, to set up the Executive. Neither during the election, previously nor now have we set preconditions or set down red lines. We made the Executive work until November, and we are determined to continue to try to make devolution work, because we need a budget and functioning devolution. When Sinn Féin walked away and collapsed the Executive in January, it left us without that budget and a functioning Executive at a very challenging time. It did the same yesterday. While we are determined to create the conditions for devolution and we want to make it work in partnership with Sinn Féin and others, we need a willing partner that will work realistically within the parameters of a Northern Ireland with devolved government, within the United Kingdom but within the institutions as agreed, and with Brexit a reality. Some of us fear that Sinn Féin has now decided that the time for devolution is over and that it is moving on to a different phase, where its main ambitions lie southwards.

James Brokenshire: I welcome the statement the right hon. Gentleman has just made of his party's commitment to continue to engage and work to see devolved government get back on its feet, and that is an important point to underline as we look to the days ahead. Yes, there is a real challenge with the budget, and that is why I made the comments that I did in my statement. We need to continue the dialogue to give effect to what the right hon. Gentleman has said, and I would certainly encourage him to maintain that focus and that progress. A positive outcome is absolutely attainable, and we all feel a duty to ensure that we reach that positive outcome and create an Executive that deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his measured and balanced statement and for the manner in which he has conducted the negotiations so far—we all know this is not easy. He is absolutely right to say that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, and the vast majority of Members of this House, want to see these institutions up and running and the Executive formed from the elected Members. Does he agree that one measure that could put pressure on the parties to come back to the talks and that might crystallise minds would be to make it clear that, should the elected Members not form the Executive after a lengthy period of negotiation, their salaries and expenses will not be paid from the public purse?

James Brokenshire: I welcome my right hon. Friend's contribution and his work. We will be keeping all options under consideration, but the focus has to be on looking to the positive—looking to the outcome that sees parties

coming together and getting devolved government back on its feet at the earliest opportunity, because that is what people voted for.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I share the frustration at the lack of progress in forming an Administration, but, as my noble Friend Lord Alderdice has observed, the absence of an Administration should not be a barrier to having a functioning Assembly, which is more important now than ever. If the renewable heat incentive issue remains a barrier to progress, will the Secretary of State use his best offices to ensure that Judge Coghlin's inquiry comes to the earliest possible conclusion and that we do not have to wait six months to see its outcome?

James Brokenshire: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the RHI inquiry is now up and running and starting to take effect, and everyone wants to see the answers and conclusions from it at the earliest opportunity. It obviously crystallises a lot of the situation we find ourselves in at the moment, and it is important that it reports as soon as possible. Obviously, public inquiries set their own timeline, procedures and processes, but the right hon. Gentleman powerfully makes his point about the need to see the inquiry's conclusions and to ensure we move things on and are demonstrably seen to do so.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Because of its bloody recent history, Northern Ireland has earned the absolute right to have a decent future. Does my right hon. Friend agree that a solution to the current impasse is crucial to the economic and social, as well as the political, welfare of the children of Northern Ireland, most, if not all, of whom never knew the dark days of the last third of the 20th century?

James Brokenshire: Yes, I do agree on the positive outcome we should be looking for for young people growing up in Northern Ireland at the moment. That is what the Government should be delivering on—fulfilling those young people's hopes, dreams and aspirations. We have seen increases in employment and prosperity in Northern Ireland, and that is at the heart of what everyone would want to see continuing.

Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He says progress was made on how the parties might come together to represent Northern Ireland in negotiations to leave the EU. Does he accept that the impact on Northern Ireland of leaving the EU was a key issue in creating instability and in the election but a peripheral issue in the talks, and it must be addressed directly and urgently? Can he tell us exactly what progress was made in the talks, and where progress sits today? Will he immediately convene the first roundtable talks—my understanding is that there has not been a roundtable of all the parties—to establish a common approach and a strategy for Northern Ireland, as many of us see the country plunging over the cliff of sanity on the European issue?

James Brokenshire: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's assessment in relation to the European Union and the steps that lie ahead. Again, I underline my sense of continued engagement and focus in ensuring

[James Brokenshire]

that the voice of Northern Ireland continues to be heard and helps to shape the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland as we look to our departure from the EU. The hon. Gentleman speaks about the process moving forward, and I can assure him of the focus on intensification and on seeing that we get a more inclusive approach to the talks ahead, because that will provide the strongest possible foundations in getting that positive outcome and getting the Executive back on their feet again.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): With article 50 to be triggered in the next 24 hours, and the impact of that on Northern Ireland being quite significant, will the Secretary of State outline what representations have been made on behalf of Northern Ireland at the Joint Ministerial Council so that the people of Northern Ireland are not left behind in the Brexit negotiations?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend properly highlights the role the Executive have played to date, and I would again point to the joint letter signed by the then First and Deputy First Ministers about the priorities for Northern Ireland, which has helped to shape our response and thoughts on this issue. Yes, there are significant issues in respect of the border, and there are other issues, such as the single electricity market and agrifoods. There is a range of issues that the Executive have underlined, and those have been very much in our thoughts as we prepare for the days ahead.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): How will the talks to come be different from the talks we have had so far? What fresh initiatives is the Secretary of State proposing, and will one of them be to get the Prime Minister to Belfast as soon as possible and to involve the Taoiseach as well?

James Brokenshire: I outlined the fact that the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have been involved in this process. The two have mandated Charlie Flanagan and me to lead the work on their behalf. When we look at the issues that are relevant to the parties coming together in that devolved space, we see it is about how we support them to get a positive outcome. I have already spoken about the intensification and the inclusive nature of the talks, and that is precisely the approach I will be taking alongside the Irish Government and Charlie Flanagan, the Irish Foreign Minister, to achieve that outcome. The Government have the absolute intent to do all we can to get devolved government back on its feet again, and we will do our utmost to achieve that which can be done.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give a commitment to ignore the siren song we are hearing from the Opposition about dragging the Prime Minister to Northern Ireland? It would be perverse, would it not, to reward intransigence on the part of some political parties in Northern Ireland by having the Prime Minister pulled across to the Province on a tight leash?

James Brokenshire: It is important that we keep focused on the issues at hand, which are about the parties coming together and finding a resolution to the issues

that sit very firmly within the devolved space, and the work that we can do as the UK Government to support them alongside, appropriately, the Irish Government too. That remains our absolute focus. I believe that a positive outcome can be achieved with good will and with good spirit, and that is the environment we are determined to secure.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): It is good to hear the Secretary of State speaking of an inclusive devolved Government. However, since the St Andrews agreement we have had a bit for one side, a bit for the other, and it has been polarisation all the way through. We need to go back to the spirit of the Belfast agreement whereby people worked together to find the way forward on health and education. Will he look at a new way forward that gets all of us working together on a voluntary foundation—something different from doing the same thing again and again?

James Brokenshire: I know that the hon. Gentleman has raised on a number of occasions this point about the nature of the devolved settlement and the legal structures that are in place. There may well be the scope, in due time, to have that wider debate, but at the moment we are about the here and now—about getting the devolved Government back up on their feet again and seeing parties engaging in such a way that an Executive can be formed under the current structure. That needs to be where our focus lies.

Sir Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): In supporting and sharing the vision that my right hon. Friend so passionately advocates, may I bring him back to the previous question and suggest that if intransigence continues for long enough, there may come a point for some fresh thinking, and that local government in Northern Ireland, to which he briefly alluded at the end of his statement, might play a larger role?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point about the role of local government, which has continued to make progress and is fulfilling increasing responsibilities. I am sure that over time that should be encouraged further. However, it is now about getting the Executive in place to be able to support this work, and that is where all our efforts must lie in the short term.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Political engagement, power sharing and partnership government, working on an all-Ireland basis, are vital for the future of Northern Ireland in order to deal with the issues presented to us by Brexit. What steps are being taken to secure the presence of the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach at such talks? What is the format and timescale for such talks, which will hopefully break the logjam and bring people together in a spirit of power-sharing government?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady is talking about Brexit and the EU. There have been discussions between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister in relation to those very issues, recognising that Brexit will have an impact across the island of Ireland. We can point to various different areas where we have shared commitments with the Irish Government in that regard. This is about

getting the parties back around the table and looking at ways of bridging the gaps. We are determined to support that in every way we can to get a positive response.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the solution to this latest impasse is not more money from Westminster?

James Brokenshire: I would point to the fact that in the last Budget the Chancellor announced an extra £120 million for Northern Ireland's priorities, and obviously we will want to see an Executive in place to be able to use that money effectively.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the people of Northern Ireland deserve better from their political leaders? The institutions have teetered on the brink for years, and now they have collapsed. The formula to prevent that from happening was clear: it was for the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, the Taoiseach and representatives of the United States Administration to work hand in glove with Northern Ireland's politicians to prevent the collapse of these institutions. Why does the Secretary of State not understand that he alone does not have the necessary authority to resolve these issues?

James Brokenshire: I simply do not accept the hon. Gentleman's analysis. Again, I underline the issues that are at stake in relation to the parties and the devolved elements. I can assure him of the seriousness and significance that we attach to the position we now find ourselves in, with the whole issue of getting devolved government back on its feet and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland—all the things that so many have mentioned in this Chamber this afternoon about the future and what that means for real people and for public services. It is therefore with renewed intent that we approach the short period ahead in order to get the consensus and build the bridges that need to be built to get a positive outcome. That is the resolve that this Government have shown and will continue to show to deliver for Northern Ireland.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that England, Wales and Scotland have limits on expenditure for political purposes but that there are little or none for Northern Ireland? Could these limits be extended to Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that we can look to a range of measures for elections. One of the issues is having greater transparency in political donations—something that has been at the forefront of some of the discussions that have taken place over the past three weeks. I earnestly want to see progress made in that regard.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): As a party, we have found the Prime Minister to be very engaged in this progress. I do not know what others are complaining about. I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment on legacy, but it is essential that he does not take a partial approach. We do not want to see money given over for legacy inquests and no progress made on the historical investigations unit. If that happens, we will withdraw our support for his proposals.

James Brokenshire: It is important that we deliver for all victims. That has been the consistent approach of this Government in wanting to see, yes, reform of legacy inquests, but also progress made on establishing the Stormont House institutions, because there are families, survivors and victims who are still living this, day in, day out, and we have a duty to them to have a comprehensive approach that provides a way forward for all of them. That earnestly remains my intent.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend has already said several times that there is very little appetite on the doorstep for another election so soon after the last one. Will he therefore explain to the residents of Northern Ireland what other tools in his arsenal he may be considering to get agreement without the need to call a second election?

James Brokenshire: As I indicated in my statement, we are obviously focused on getting a positive outcome through a renewed talks process and legislating as necessary to enable an Executive to be put in place. As I have already said, I will keep all options under consideration, and therefore how we address some of the immediate short-term issues in relation to the budget and the regional rate is at the forefront of my mind.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): As one of the last direct rule Ministers for Northern Ireland, may I remind the Secretary of State that managing five Departments from Westminster is not a good form of government? History shows that when the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach engage with matters of crisis—when they clear their diaries and spend four or five days engaged with those issues—crises are solved. Will he reflect on that as he determines not to have direct rule?

James Brokenshire: As I have already indicated, the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach are actively involved. I share the right hon. Gentleman's view of direct rule. We do not want to contemplate this, because I see it as a step backwards, not a step forward. That is why we must all redouble our efforts to get the positive outcome, get the agreement between the parties, and see an Executive formed.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What processes have been put in place with the head of the Northern Ireland civil service to ensure that local public services have the funding that they need in the weeks ahead?

James Brokenshire: We have been working very closely with the head of the Northern Ireland civil service, Sir Malcolm McKibbin, as he works with his own Departments to ensure that the appropriate resources are in place. As I indicated in my statement, the reserve statutory provisions will be used to ensure that Departments have the money to maintain public services, but that can only be in place for a relatively short period, and the need to have political direction in place to set the priorities remains urgent. That is why the work ahead is such a significant priority for all of us.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Sitting as an independent Member, I am a very interested participant in, and bystander to, these talks. From my experience of past negotiations, I think it could be really important,

[Lady Hermon]

at this crucial stage, for the Government to try to change the dynamics of the talks. There is no point in heading into them with the same repeated arguments.

Will the Secretary of State give serious consideration to bringing back to Northern Ireland a senior American diplomat, who is well known to all the parties, so that she can chair the talks? Her name is Barbara Stephenson. I have not spoken to her about this—she is being volunteered without her knowledge—but it strikes me that she was the American consul in Belfast for a long time, and she is well known to the parties and highly regarded in Northern Ireland.

James Brokenshire: I have met Barbara Stephenson. The issues in question relate primarily to strand 1 of the Good Friday agreement structure. In previous discussions and talks, outside parties have never been directly engaged in those strand 1 issues. Although obviously we will maintain contact with all interested parties, that is where the focus lies and where the UK Government have primacy and priority. Of course we will engage in all sorts of different ways, but this is about how we build bridges between the parties. I look forward to discussing some of the issues with the hon. Lady, perhaps outside the House, where she may be able to share more of her thoughts.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the lasting image of the funeral of Martin McGuinness was that of Arlene Foster in a Roman Catholic church, with a coffin draped in the flag of the Republic, paying tribute to the body of the leader of the IRA who had attempted to kill her father? Will my right hon. Friend urge all parties in Northern Ireland to show similar acts of bravery—personal bravery—to restart the peace process?

James Brokenshire: That event was a powerful way for so many people to demonstrate a sense of reaching out and the need for all of us to reflect on some of the bigger issues at stake in Northern Ireland. Equally, Sinn Féin has shown symbolism in different ways over the years, too. Looking at the bigger picture and to the future—the shared, inclusive future—of Northern Ireland is at the heart of the solution. I hope that that spirit will be maintained and strengthened in the days ahead, such that we are able to get a positive conclusion.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Opposition Members only ever want to support the Government in their efforts to bring a resolution to these matters. In that spirit I gently say to the Secretary of State that the perceived *laissez-faire* approach of the Prime Minister does him no favours. The Prime Minister was in Wales last week and in Scotland this week. She should go to Northern Ireland with the Taoiseach, convene these talks and find a resolution sooner rather than later.

James Brokenshire: I respect the way in which the hon. Gentleman made his point, but I do not accept his characterisation of a *laissez-faire* approach. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach have been actively engaged in this and will continue to be so. As a Government we will do all we can to get the positive outcome that I know the hon. Gentleman earnestly wants to see, in the best interests of Northern Ireland.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure that the Secretary of State shares my view that if the solution needed were as simplistic as the Prime Minister getting on a plane, that would already have happened. Will he reassure me that what we will not allow is for one party, in particular Sinn Féin, to use elements of the UK security forces and historical inquiries as bargaining chips and hold them hostage in the negotiation process?

James Brokenshire: As a Government we have a primary responsibility in relation to national security, and that is a responsibility that I feel very keenly. We need to achieve a way forward for the investigations of the past. We have made comprehensive proposals that I want to see emerging into a broader public debate. That is my earnest intention and I believe it can be achieved in the weeks ahead.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State confirm that Sinn Féin's refusal to accept his legitimate role in these negotiations has led to a protracted process; that its refusal to have roundtable meetings with all the parties has meant that only its agenda is being pursued; and that its demand that, when dealing with the past, the focus should be on the security forces, rather than on the murders for which it has been responsible in Northern Ireland, illustrates that it had no intention of reaching an agreement or coming to any compromise? It simply wishes to pursue its own agenda, to the cost of people in Northern Ireland, who are being denied devolution.

James Brokenshire: I am clear that we need a fair, balanced, proportionate and comprehensive approach to those issues of the past, and I think that the Stormont House agreement allows us to find the way to achieve that, as well as other reforms. I have spoken about that to the Victims' Commissioner and others over many weeks, and we will continue to re-energise that process. What we need is that intensification of the talks, that sense of good will and a real intent to see devolved government back up on its feet again. All the parties have publicly stated their intent to seek that outcome, and we must do all that we can to create the environment where that can succeed and where we can get the inclusive, devolved Government that will serve the people of Northern Ireland and for which they voted.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): We all want a bright future for Northern Ireland, and I wish all parties well in the continuing talks to achieve a fully functioning Executive. Can more be done to ensure that there is representation for Northern Ireland in the Brexit process, given the current circumstances?

James Brokenshire: The obvious answer is that we can achieve that by getting an Executive in place who can advocate for Northern Ireland and ensure that its voice is heard not only by the UK Government, but in Europe directly. I will continue to do my work by going out into communities, listening to business, to the community and to the voluntary sector, and doing my absolute utmost to ensure that, in my role and responsibilities, we get the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland in the Brexit talks ahead. I certainly believe that that is eminently achievable, and that is the work that I will continue to do.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I was a special adviser to the last Labour Government when direct rule was last introduced, and it took us four years to try to resolve that. The Secretary of State has said that he wants to intensify the talks, but he has failed to tell the House what he means by that. History shows that the engagement of the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister is the way to intensify those talks and bring about resolution. Will he explain why the Government are so resistant to taking that step?

James Brokenshire: The Government are focused on getting the best outcome from this, which is the return of devolved government. The hon. Gentleman makes his point powerfully about issues and risks relating to direct rule, which is why I have already said that they are profoundly not what we want to see, but obviously we are keeping all options under review. There is a sense of the work that the parties themselves can do. The two Governments can play a part in that, which is what Charlie Flanagan, the Irish Foreign Minister, and I have been doing. We will continue to play an intensive part, but as I said in my statement, we need to move to a new phase and see the work of the parties come together in a more inclusive way. I have been talking to the parties already as to how we achieve that, and we will see that progress in the days ahead.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Legacy has been mentioned, as has history, but will the Secretary of State confirm that he will stand firm on the attempts by republicans to rewrite the past and the history of Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: It is important that we get a fair, balanced, proportionate and equitable outcome from the systems that we put in place, and that we recognise what happened in the past. That is why we proposed the setting up of, for example, an oral history archive, for people to be able to give their testimony and share their experiences. It is through that comprehensive approach that I believe progress will be made and that Northern Ireland will look to its future rather than its past.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As someone who grew up on the Leitrim-Fermanagh border for large periods during the 1970s and '80s, I worry that a generation is growing up who have forgotten what political violence and a hard border look like. Most change has come about when Prime Ministers have invested sufficient political capital in the process, but we have not seen any Prime Minister do that since Major and Blair. We need to get the Prime Minister over there as soon as possible to negotiate with all the parties.

James Brokenshire: I simply do not accept the hon. Gentleman's analysis or the approach that he advocates. The Prime Minister has been, and will continue to be, actively engaged in the process. The UK and Irish Governments feel that they have a shared responsibility on the matter, and that informs our approach. We desire to see a devolved Government back up on their feet again, delivering for Northern Ireland, because that is what people want. It is our absolute intention to ensure that that is brought about.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Notwithstanding your stress on the constraints of brevity, Mr Speaker, I want to take this opportunity, as MP for Foyle, to pay proper

tribute to the late Martin McGuinness, with whom and against whom I worked for well over three decades in all sorts of contexts and roles. As his predecessor as Deputy First Minister, as a former colleague in the Government and as a counterpart in the negotiations, I would say that he was someone who went from opposing the very concept of the institutions in which he went on to serve to demonstrating a remarkable capacity for outreach and acknowledgment using those shared offices. He proved not just his own better character, in the democratic context, but the transformative value of the institutions that we are talking about.

The Secretary of State has indicated that legislation may be introduced after the Easter recess. Is he deliberately precluding the possibility of such legislation rectifying the defects in how the First and Deputy First Ministers are appointed—that process no longer conforms to what was laid down in the Good Friday agreement—or, indeed, rectifying the problems with the petition of concern, which has never operated consistently with what was laid down in paragraphs 11 to 13 of the Good Friday Agreement?

James Brokenshire: Questions about governance have formed part of the talks that have taken place over recent weeks. The hon. Gentleman highlights the petition of concern, and other issues were also discussed. With the legislation, my focus is on serving the people of Northern Ireland, where public services are challenged as a consequence of the budgetary issues that they face. I intend to deal with that in the legislation that will have to be introduced after the Easter recess. Fundamentally, this is about ensuring that the parties achieve an agreement, and the legislation will give us the opportunity to effect any legislative changes that may flow from the requirements of that agreement. That is why we need to use the few short weeks ahead to get an agreement such that an Executive can be returned to Northern Ireland, to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks of a new phase, yet he appears very reluctant to consider a more direct and active role for the Prime Minister in moving things to a conclusion. Will he set out why there is such reluctance to involve the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach directly in the talks to try to bring things to a conclusion? Surely, their involvement would make agreement more likely.

James Brokenshire: Dealing with the current situation is a question of resolving the outstanding obstacles that have led to this impasse. Ultimately, the two parties need to come together to achieve the outcome that we all earnestly want to see, and I do not believe that the escalation that the hon. Lady suggests is the appropriate way to achieve that. We will continue to keep matters under review, but there are other ways in which we can provide intensification and encourage an inclusive approach. That is why I will continue to hold discussions with the parties and support them to bring that about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Secretary of State for his strength of character and his leadership in the talks. Sinn Féin's irresponsible actions have left Northern Ireland without an agreed budget, and staff of Departments and the Northern Ireland Assembly are in a precarious predicament when it comes

[*Jim Shannon*]

to job security. There are also concerns in the community and voluntary sectors. If Sinn Féin continues to block the formation of the Executive, will the Secretary of State undertake to consult closely Members of this House who attend and participate in the Assembly about such decisions, and will he ensure that adequate funding is in place to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I earnestly want to see a positive outcome from the current situation—the return of an inclusive devolved Executive, in which the principal parties deliver for Northern Ireland. I still believe that that outcome can be achieved but, as I indicated in my statement, the UK Government take their responsibility for governance and political stability hugely seriously. We will take all necessary actions, and we will continue to consult colleagues here and elsewhere about how that work is taken forward.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Attention has rightly been focused on the attacks in Westminster last Wednesday, but Members of the House will not forget the fact that police officers could have been murdered in Strabane; nor will they forget the attack and murder in Carrickfergus in recent weeks. What plans does the Secretary of State have to ensure that funding for the Police Service of Northern Ireland continues, whatever the outcome of the negotiations between the different parties in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: The UK Government have committed additional funding, over and above the core funding provided to the PSNI from the Executive, in

respect of national security and combating terrorism. The hon. Gentleman underlines the real challenges and risks that officers from the PSNI have faced over recent weeks and years in doing their duty to serve the public and provide safety and security. Events here have brought into stark focus the risks, challenges and personal issues involved, and I commend the security service and all agencies that do their utmost—sometimes quietly and sometimes out of sight—to deliver safety and security for the public in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Sinn Féin selfishly brought down the Executive for Northern Ireland at the start of the year, and on Sunday it selfishly blocked the restoration of the Executive, but the consequences of and penalty for that decision rest on the shoulders of everyone in Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, in looking at all the options open to him, he will consider proceeding with a voluntary coalition of the willing in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I still earnestly believe that an agreement between the parties can be achieved, and we must approach the days ahead with the intention of securing that positive outcome. The important thing is to build bridges and enable the DUP and Sinn Féin to create an Executive, and the UK Government approach the days ahead with that earnest endeavour and intent.

As I indicated in my statement, I feel very keenly our responsibility to serve the people of Northern Ireland and to ensure that they have public services that deliver for them. That underlying intent is firmly in my mind and it is why I believe that legislation will be necessary after the Easter recess to secure that outcome for the people of Northern Ireland.

Personal Independence Payments: Regulations

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: I now call Debbie Abrahams to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes.

1.38 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely, changes to personal independence payment regulations. As you are aware, Mr Speaker, on 23 February the Government issued new regulations to change the way in which disabled people or people with a chronic mental health condition would be assessed for eligibility for personal independence payments.

The Government's own analysis estimates that the change will affect more than 160,000 people, the majority of whom have mental health conditions, who will not be able to access the full support that they would have been entitled to under the tribunals' rulings—an effective cut of £3.7 billion. The regulations were laid before the House without any consultation with the Social Security Advisory Committee and, despite repeated efforts, without any debate in this Chamber.

In a letter to me dated 24 March 2017, the Secretary of State wrote that his Department became aware of the decision by the upper tribunal on 8 December, a whole two and a half months before the Government laid their emergency legislation before the House. The move to undermine and subvert independent tribunal judgments is unprecedented, and in my view marks very troubling behaviour by the Government on cases they lose that could weaken such social security tribunal judgments' reach, influence and effectiveness in making independent decisions.

Since 8 December, the Social Security Advisory Committee and Parliament could have properly scrutinised any proposed changes. Instead, although the Leader of the House has belatedly committed to a debate at a date still to be determined, the Government have deliberately chosen not to have a debate before the 40-day praying against period comes to an end on 3 April. According to advice received from the Journal Office, if the regulations are not debated and voted on before 3 April, they will not automatically be revoked should the House vote against them. By delaying the debate, the Government are hoping that the objections to the regulations will be kicked into the long grass.

It is highly unusual for such a fundamental change to be introduced by a statutory instrument under the negative procedure in this way, bypassing debate and scrutiny in this House. This is a troubling subversion of democracy under this Government. Yesterday, the other place passed a regret motion, tabled by my noble Friend Baroness Sherlock, asking the Government to reconsider the regulations urgently. However, this elected House of Commons has not had the opportunity to do so, and I therefore believe that we owe it to those who will be affected, primarily people with mental health conditions, to hold this Government to account.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application from the hon. Lady, and I am satisfied that the matter raised by her is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Does the hon. Lady have the leave of the House?

Application agreed to.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to hon. Members for their voluntary stand-up, but it is in fact superfluous. That is required only in the event of indications of opposition, but the position is extremely clear: the hon. Lady has obtained the leave of the House.

The debate will be held tomorrow, Wednesday 29 March, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for 90 minutes, and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Lady's application.

Family Justice

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

1.42 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for the enforcement of Child Arrangement Orders, including times within which enforcement action must take place; to establish a presumption in favour of shared parenting under Child Arrangement Orders; and to make provision for a commission to review and make recommendations on the operation of family justice; and for connected purposes.

David and Sally separated after 10 years of marriage in September 2014. They had two children, aged eight and five at the time. David was a good father, who did not want to stop being a dad just because his marriage had ended. However, nearly three years later, with more than £200,000 paid in legal fees, David is still fighting through the complex and bureaucratic family courts to see his children eight nights a month, instead of the six nights originally offered by Sally. Sadly, this is not a fictional story. It is one of the many sad cases of high-conflict divorces. Family breakdown is painful for all involved, and it is the state's duty to support those going through this difficult experience. However, as in the case of David and Sally, not only have those two extra nights per month been financially and emotionally expensive for them, but on several occasions Sally has unlawfully stopped the children seeing David, breaking the court order and undermining the father-child relationship.

Child arrangement orders are made by the court to regulate the contact and residence of children on divorce. In the majority of divorces, the orders are complied with, but in many cases a defaulting parent—that may be the mother or the father—can generally act with impunity. The courts are slow to respond and reluctant to penalise, sending the damaging message that court orders are optional, not mandatory; that the relationship with the non-resident parent is meaningless, rather than crucial; and that the system is inherently inequitable, rather than robust. In the worst cases, a non-resident parent, usually the father, can be denied contact with their child for several years. If they do not have a spare £10,000 to spend on legal fees, they are essentially erased out of their child's life, with no remedy whatsoever. How can this be humane for a child, and how can it be fair to the parent?

The welfare of the child is paramount—that is an abiding and unassailable principle of family law—and children are less likely to experience depression, teenage pregnancy and delinquency when relationships with both parents are safeguarded, while children without a father in their life often struggle to reach their full potential academically, socially and professionally, but the law does not reflect this because of the failure to crack down on intransigent parents, and because judges and social workers turn a blind eye to parental alienation.

Family courts make huge and life-changing decisions for parents and children, often on thresholds of proof that are far lower than those required to achieve enforcement, so it is no wonder that the criminal threshold for contempt is rarely met and that judges fail to assert their authority swiftly under the Children Act 1989, or

subsequent legislation in 2006 and 2014, and attempts to bolster enforcement have not worked. Data from the Ministry of Justice reveal that a mere 1.2% of the 4,654 enforcement applications were successful in 2015. Although the letter of the law sets out discretionary penalties for breach, they are rarely applied in practice, and the rise in the number of unfounded allegations of domestic violence as a defence against enforcement is worrying.

A new approach is needed: a tougher three strikes approach is long overdue, under which residence should be transferred, if that is safe, and community service should actually, not theoretically, be imposed on parents who are in breach. The confiscation of driving licences or passports should seriously be considered by Parliament. Legislation that emphasises the importance of both parents in children's lives, other than in cases of violence, is needed in England and Wales. Real enforcement is one way of doing this, and shared parenting is another.

A rebuttable presumption of shared parenting should be a key principle when determining the contact and residence of the children. To be clear, this would not be an explicit statement of an equal 50:50 time division, and it does not mean shared care. As Professor Patrick Parkinson, a former president of the International Society of Family Law has made clear, it should, as a minimum, mean the child has a right to a meaningful relationship with both parents as far as practicable, and as long as the safety of the child is not put at risk.

Such a principle is commonplace elsewhere around the world, and it operates without difficulty. It could assure the child of an opportunity for the maximum continuing physical and emotional contact with both parents, and encourage the parents to share the rights and responsibilities of raising the child, as the law states in Iowa. It could provide for frequent and continuing contact with both parents, as in California. It could go even further to

“encourage the love, affection, and contact between the children and the parents”,

as in Colorado. Any of these examples would be a more appropriate starting point for judges when setting child arrangement orders than the weaker form of

“parental involvement...direct or indirect”,

which has been on the statute book since 2014. Although that was an improvement on the previous position, parental involvement can amount to a birthday card or a Christmas card in the worst cases, and non-resident parents, mainly fathers, can be airbrushed out of the lives of their children by the current system. We cannot keep telling fathers that they have equal responsibilities, and then not give them equal opportunity to carry them out.

Shared parenting and robust enforcement form part of the package of reforms that is needed if we are to bring our family law into the 21st century. Our antiquated system reflects the norms of the 1950s and 1960s, rather than relationships of today, and many issues remain unresolved, leaving gaps for Parliament to fill. A commission, to last no more than one year, should be launched by the Government to inquire into the following issues and to report back with recommendations for reform.

First, as last week's Court of Appeal case of Owens depressingly highlighted, England's fault-based divorce law results in absurd outcomes. Despite being in a

loveless marriage, the petitioner was unable to divorce her husband because of the archaic rules requiring her to prove fault on his part. The reality is that not all marriages end because of fault. We therefore have a law that promotes the farce of allocating blame, setting parties on a needless confrontational path that fuels animosity and costs. A commission should report on whether it is now time for no-fault divorce.

Secondly, financial remedies and maintenance are rooted in a bygone era where women were entirely financially dependent on their husbands. The reality today is that many women are able to support themselves, so divorce should not mean an automatic entitlement to lifetime support from an ex-husband. Scotland and North America limit payments, so why don't we? Unless Baroness Deech's Bill on this subject secures Royal Assent, a commission should make recommendations on how to strike a better balance so that England can shed its reputation as the divorce capital of the world.

Thirdly, cohabiting couples with children are the fastest-growing type of family in the UK. Between 1996 and 2016, the number of couples in this position increased from 1.5 million to 3.3 million, yet they have no rights in the event of a split. Inquiry into what basic protections are justified would be valuable.

Fourthly, the enforceability of prenuptial agreements should be set out by Parliament. If we are to support marriage, we need to accept that people are getting married later in life, with assets earned before and during their union. They should be protected, if the parties agree, not put at risk, and a commission should look into this.

Fifthly, reform of the opaque way in which the family courts operate in public law needs wholesale review. Far too many children are taken into care for wholly inadequate and poorly argued reasons, according to Sir James Munby, president of the Family Division. Only the glare of publicity will enable this to stop, so we need to remove the cloak of secrecy and to open up our family courts.

Lastly, most family disputes need not see the inside of a courtroom. Instead, we need better incentives to use mediation or solicitor negotiation, for example by virtue of a costs penalty for parties who draw out the process. Saving costs, time and heartache should be priorities.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am not married. It will not surprise you, therefore, when I say that I do not have the battle scars of having lived through a nasty divorce. My views are informed by my previous work as a barrister in the civil justice system for 10 years. Moreover, I speak today as an objective onlooker moved by stories of injustice, hopelessness and deep sorrow. Yes, divorce is traumatic, but it need not be a tragedy that befalls thousands of non-resident parents. I hope the Government will take the opportunity to begin the work of creating a family law system fit for the 21st century.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Suella Fernandes, Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Andrew Selous, Tim Loughton, Robert Neill, Frank Field, Caroline Ansell, Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Lucy Allan, Mr David Burrowes, Kate Hoey and Mr David Lammy present the Bill.

Suella Fernandes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 May, and to be printed (Bill 162).

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Neighbourhood Planning Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 10 October 2016 (Neighbourhood Planning Bill (Programme)) and 13 December 2016 (Neighbourhood Planning Bill (Programme) (No.2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

- (1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after their commencement at today's Sitting.
- (2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: Nos. 22, 12, 10, 11, 13 to 21, 85 to 90, 1 to 9 and 23 to 84.

Subsequent stages

- (3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.
- (4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Gavin Barwell.*)

Question agreed to.

Neighbourhood Planning Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 4, 5, 23, 40, 44, 48 to 50 and 84. I also remind the House that certain motions relating to the Lords amendments will be certified as relating exclusively to England, or to England and Wales, as set out on the selection list. If the House divides on any certified motion, a double majority will be required for the motion to be passed.

After Clause 12

CHANGE OF USE OF DRINKING ESTABLISHMENTS

1.54 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 22.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to take Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 22.

Gavin Barwell: Before I get into the detail of the amendments, I would like to put on record my thanks to my noble Friend and ministerial colleague Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth, who ably steered the Bill through the Lords. I would also like to thank one of my distinguished predecessors as Housing Minister, Lord Young of Cookham, who led on the compulsory purchase provisions, which we will touch on in the third of the three groups we are discussing this afternoon. Finally, I thank all peers who contributed positively to the debate in the other place. The Bill has benefited from their constructive challenge and scrutiny. For my part, I am pleased that the Bill received a warmer reception than the Housing and Planning Bill did a year ago.

I wish to turn to permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of pubs, and to update the House on the steps we are taking in respect of the permitted development rights for the change of use from office to residential. First, I will speak to the Government amendment in respect of permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of pubs. Let me start by assuring hon. Members that we have listened to both Houses and to the support that Members have expressed for valued community pubs. They will see that we have accepted the principle of the amendment introduced into the Bill in the other place. Our amendments in lieu therefore set out the detail of how we will take that principle forward.

The amendment commits us to update the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 to remove the permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of drinking establishments, including pubs. In tabling the amendments in lieu, I reassure hon. Members that we have continued to engage through the passage of the Bill with interested Members and bodies, such as the Campaign for Real Ale and the British Beer and Pub Association. I can confirm that we will remove the permitted development rights to change to a restaurant or cafe, financial or professional service, or a shop. We will also remove the

permitted development rights to change to an office for up to two years and to a school for a single academic year.

In making these changes, the Government are keen to avoid any potential unintended consequences. As such, we are clear that the best way to support pubs is to retain the A4 "drinking establishments" use class for pubs, wine bars and other types of bars. Doing so will allow pubs to innovate and intensify their use, for example by opening a pub garden or starting to provide live music, without facing a risk that this will be a change of use that requires a full planning application. Our intention in retaining the A4 use class is to allow pubs to develop within this use class without having to seek planning permission, thus avoiding unintended consequences, and unnecessary cost and bureaucracy.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): CAMRA campaigners in my constituency have campaigned for the removal of permitted development rights for 10 years, so I welcome the Government's new clause that will implement Labour's amendment in the other place. However, the question of timing is crucial. If the time window before the regulations come in is too large, developers will simply bring forward their plans and pubs will continue to become car parks, retail or housing. Will the Minister make clear when the regulations will be implemented?

Gavin Barwell: If the hon. Lady bears with me for a few minutes, I will make that crystal clear and, I hope, provide the reassurance she is looking for.

The changes in respect of permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of pubs mean that in future a planning application will be required in all cases. This will also be the case for premises in mixed use, for example as a pub and a restaurant. This addresses the long-standing call that there should be local consideration and an opportunity for the community to comment on the future of their local pub. It is important that local planning authorities have relevant planning policies in place to support this decision taking. Once we have made the changes, the current provisions, which remove permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of pubs that are listed as assets of community value, are no longer necessary and will fall away.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will there be any provision or requirement with regard to the viability of the pub in that premise, so there will be some kind of case that those who wish to change could mount?

Gavin Barwell: Clearly, those are arguments that could be made by an applicant in respect of a particular planning application, but the Government are not proposing to allow any permitted development rights in that regard. It would require the local authority to consider the planning application and to reach a decision. I am sure that in respect of what my right hon. Friend and others have said, those arguments will be considered when planning applications are being made.

2 pm

Importantly, we have listened to the points made about the need for pubs to be able to expand their food offer in order to meet changing market need and support their continued viability—the issue that my right hon.

Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is concerned about. Therefore, at the same time as getting rid of the permitted development rights that allow for demolition or change of use, we will introduce a new permitted development right to allow drinking establishments to extend their food offering so as to become a mixed A4 pub and A3 restaurant. The Government believe that this will ensure that pubs have nothing to fear when it comes to requiring planning permission or enforcement against the change of use where a pub is extending its food offer. This will give them vital additional flexibility.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and to the Government for listening to the powerful case that was made by CAMRA and many other organisations. The new mixed A3/A4 class is an elegant solution to the issue raised in respect of the amendment in the other place. Will the Minister nevertheless clarify on the record that, in keeping with his proposals, the same removal of permitted development rights that is now going to operate in the A3 and A4 classes will also operate in the mixed use A3/A4 class, which has not been specifically clarified?

Gavin Barwell: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, I think he will get exactly the clarification that he is looking for—but the simple answer is yes. I shall come on to it again later in my speech. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. The Government's intent is very much to honour the principle behind the Lords amendment, but we believe we have a better solution that will provide pubs with more flexibility and do a better job of ensuring their viability in the long term.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on his flexible approach to the Bill. Given that he has previously agreed to visit my Bassetlaw constituency, will he offer a date very soon, so that I can consider whether to include a pub in his itinerary?

Gavin Barwell: That has got to be one of the kindest invitations that I have received so far in my ministerial career. I have already given an undertaking and I very much look forward to visiting the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I am trying to combine it with an event in the Sheffield city region, looking at housing. The hon. Gentleman served on the Public Bill Committee and he is a passionate advocate of neighbourhood planning. I know that he has worked hard in own constituency to encourage neighbourhood planning. I am very much looking forward to meeting some of the community groups with him. Members of my private office are in the Box and will have heard that commitment. I hope that we can get the hon. Gentleman a date as soon as possible—with or without the benefit of a visit to a local pub.

At the same time as making these changes, we also want to protect local planning authorities from any compensation liability arising from the removal of national permitted development rights. We will do this by amending the compensation regulations to limit to 12 months the period of any potential liability on local planning authorities when the rights are removed.

Let me now take the opportunity to update hon. Members on the outcome of the debate in the other place in respect of the permitted development right for the change of use from office to residential. This was an

issue debated at some length in Committee, and I know that there are differences of opinion in the House. Hon. Members will know that the permitted development right is making an important contribution to housing delivery, with over 12,800 homes delivered—thanks to this right—in the year ending March 2016. The Government have always recognised that in certain areas there have been concerns about the local impact of this right, so we have outlined an approach that provides flexibility for those areas that are meeting their housing requirements to have a greater say over where the permitted development right for the change of use from office to residential should apply.

For those areas that are delivering 100% or more of their housing requirement—the figure identified in their local plan—that can continue to do so after removal of the right, and that are able to demonstrate that it is necessary to remove the right to protect the amenity and wellbeing of their area, the Secretary of State will not seek to limit article 4 directions applying to that area. We intend to publish the first housing delivery test data in November. For those who are not familiar with it, this was one of the key reforms set out in the housing White Paper. We will now hold local authorities to account not just for producing a glossy plan, but for delivering the houses set out in the plan on an annual basis. This will indicate to local authorities in November whether this additional article 4 flexibility would apply to directions brought forward after that date. For those interested in further information about this change, it can be found in House of Lords Library in a letter from my ministerial colleague Lord Bourne, dated 18 March. We shall provide detailed guidance before November.

We are making a further change by bringing forward regulation to enable local planning authorities to charge planning application fees when permitted development rights have been removed by an article 4 direction. This recognises the resource commitments in those areas that have removed the permitted development right for sound policy reasons. The Government's position remains that although the permitted development right makes an important contribution to delivering the homes that we desperately need, we have with these two small changes demonstrated a degree of flexibility to allow those local authorities that are delivering the homes that are needed in their area to apply an article 4 direction if they wish, and then to be able to charge planning application fees in the relevant areas.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): St Albans has lost 157,000 square feet of office space recently, a lot of that because demand in St Albans is so high. Does the Minister share my concern that this may provide a perverse incentive not to deliver on housing? If the area does not mind losing office space—I am not saying that this is the case—it seems a quick and easy win to allow offices to shrivel on the vine. I am very concerned to ensure that that does not happen in St Albans.

Gavin Barwell: I think my hon. Friend shares my concern that we need to ensure that St Albans gets an up-to-date local plan in place as quickly as possible to provide the housing that is so desperately needed in that part of the world. My hon. Friend has spoken to me about it several times, and I know that other Members who represent the local authority area share her concern. We need to avoid perverse incentives, and my reassurance

[Gavin Barwell]

to my hon. Friend is that the Government will be doing plenty of other things to make sure that local authorities deliver the housing that is required in their areas. Where people have legitimate concerns about the impact of permitted development rights on the level of office space in their area—my hon. Friend is clearly one of them—provided that the council is delivering the required housing, we want to allow some flexibility. I know that she will work closely with me to try to make sure that St Albans makes progress on that issue.

To conclude, and returning to planning for pubs, I hope that hon. Members will accept the assurances I have given today—indeed, that seems to be the case—and agree that we have reflected the will of Parliament. I have met the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) who is in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie), who is not in her place but who has lobbied me extensively on this issue. Indeed, Members of both Houses have spoken with great passion about the need to allow for local consideration of the change of use or demolition of all pubs. Our amendments in lieu set out how we will ensure the successful delivery of these changes, and I can commit today to laying the secondary regulation by July—essentially as soon as we can after the Bill hopefully receives Royal Assent. On that basis, I hope that all hon. Members will support this amendment.

Toby Perkins: I am pleased to speak in support of Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 22. I think they will make a material difference to the fortunes of many of Britain's 48,000 pubs; give certainty to investors in the pub trade; and, crucially, put communities back in control of decisions that have a real bearing on their community. I speak as chairman of the renamed all-party parliamentary pub group, and as a real pub enthusiast.

I would like to record my appreciation of many people and groups in securing this important victory, including Lord Kennedy who tabled the amendment in the House of Lords and was very successful in ensuring such overwhelming cross-party support that the Government were persuaded to adopt the amendment in lieu. I also thank the pub-supporting campaign groups such as CAMRA and the British Pub Confederation, and my fellow members of the all-party parliamentary group on pubs, who held a really informative round table last week on the many different approaches across the country to using the planning system to save pubs.

I would also like to acknowledge, as did the Minister, the important work done by my predecessor as chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), who proposed the motion in Committee that was subsequently supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon).

I also think it right to acknowledge that the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) originated the process with an amendment to a different Bill. Although the case she made was unsuccessful, it has proved important in bringing about this change.

As I said a moment ago, I am grateful to the Government for broadly adopting a motion to which there had been some hostility. It takes courage to change one's mind.

The Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), came to the CAMRA reception and assured us that the Government were listening, and the Government's actions on this occasion suggest that he was as good as his word. All due credit should be paid to him.

There is nothing quite like the first visit to any British pub. I know that I am not alone in feeling that little frisson of excitement when I step through the door of a pub for the first time—pushing open that creaking door, and wondering what will be waiting for me behind it. It is, one might say, an adult and real-life version of an Advent calendar: behind every door is a different surprise.

As one of those doors creaks open, we wonder how the pub will be laid out. Will we be able to get a table? Who will be in there, and how many people will be in there? What will be on the walls, and what will the bar look like? Each pub is different. Will the bar steward's face be a picture of welcoming joy—or maybe not? Will there be a log fire in the winter? Will there be a garden in the summer? Will there be a dartboard, a pool table, a pub dog or cat? Will a loudmouth be propping up the bar, commenting on topics on which he has assumed a level of expertise from a programme that he once saw on television? Will someone be commenting on the performance of his Member of Parliament and asking, inevitably, whether that Member of Parliament will be claiming his pint back on expenses? That one never really grows old.

Finally, of course, there is the question of what the pub will be serving. There is so much more to visiting a pub than having a drink, and that is the magic of it. I know my own favourite beers, and I can pop into Morrisons just down the road and buy as much as I like, far more cheaply than I can in many pubs. However, the drinks are just a fraction of the experience; the magic comes from the entire ensemble. Just as there is a magic to visiting any pub for the first time, there is a joy in having a local where you really feel at home, and where the characters, the beers, the landlord or landlady and the décor seem almost as familiar as if you were indeed in your own home.

We live in different times, and—let us be candid—in difficult times for the pub trade. The days when a single publican, running a single pub for decades at a time, was a staple of every high street are long gone. The long-standing publican is now becoming a rarity, and our communities are the poorer for it. However, many of those communities still have long-standing connections and relationships with their local pubs. Whether they are regular attenders or occasional visitors, the pub is a part of their community—one that we all too often take for granted, and a feature that is only really missed when it is under threat or gone.

Let me assure the House that none of us is suggesting that unpopular or poorly run pubs have a right to exist. Communities that do not back their local pub cannot assume that it will always be there. When I bought my house back in 1998 the Terminus was my local, but after a string of landlords within just a few years, it is gone. The only reminders of it are a plaque on the wall that reminds us where it once stood and the local bowling

green, which is still called the Terminus Bowling Club although the pub from which it took its name is long gone.

In a small town like Chesterfield, I have to walk a mile to reach what you would call my local, and that, I think, is a comment on the times in which we live. If we do not get out and support our pubs, it is no good complaining when they are gone. Similarly, the industry knows that it is living in an ever more competitive world. The competition for the leisure pound has never been fiercer. From satellite television and a bottle at home to an array of takeaways and restaurants to suit every palate, the alternatives to a pint in the local are multitudinous.

Pubs will continue to close on occasion, but I think that it really sticks in the craw of communities when popular and well-used pubs—or even pubs that play a central role in a community—which may well be under poor management at a particular time are lost for good without the community having any say. The tenant in a pub is not just a business owner but the guardian of something precious in that community, and the duty of the pub-owning business to ensure that the guardians it appoints have the wherewithal to protect the precious assets that they are responsible for running is very important.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words earlier. The main purpose of the amendment that we are all supporting today is to tackle the scourge of predatory purchasing, especially by supermarkets. The Co-op is the worst in that regard. Does the hon. Gentleman think that it is time for CAMRA to look again at its agreement with the Co-op, and to say, “This must stop, because it has not worked”—as, hopefully, the amendment will?

2.15 pm

Toby Perkins: I certainly support the amendment, and I agree that it is necessary because previous measures were not working. I met representatives of the Co-op recently, and their approach was pretty constructive. They said that they would be making a planning application in every case.

Greg Mulholland: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman met those Co-op representatives recently. As he knows, last year the Save the Pub group was misled by the Co-op, which gave a clear assurance that it would not take pubcos’ view of viability as fact, but, as has been made clear by local CAMRA branches and the British Pub Confederation, it has continued to do so. The Co-op speaks with forked tongue, as the Save the Pub group has proved before, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will stick with holding it to account.

Toby Perkins: We certainly will stick with holding it to account. If the hon. Gentleman has evidence that, since those reassurances were given, the Co-op is going down that road without seeking planning permission, I will definitely support him in what he has said.

In Chesterfield, we organised a huge public campaign which, although it does not relate specifically to the Co-op, is relevant to the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. We campaigned to save the Crispin Inn in Ashgate Road when EI Group, previously known as

Enterprise Inns, wanted to sell it to Tesco. The campaign was won and Tesco pulled out, only for a new developer to come along and demolish the pub, and then start consulting on what should happen on the land where it had stood. Eventually, housing was built there.

In my previous role as shadow pubs Minister, I met so many groups all over the country who were fighting so hard to save the pubs that they loved and on which communities depended. It was wrong that a developer could turn a pub into a supermarket without planning permission, but could not do it the other way round. It was wrong that a building that was potentially a precious community asset could be knocked down before the community was even able to have a say. The coalition Government did take steps to reinforce the right of communities to have a say, but, although well intentioned, their efforts were a bit like trying to catch a flood in a cup.

The great attribute of the amendment proposed by Lord Kennedy and subsequently adopted, with further amendments, by the Government is that it gives certainty to everyone involved in the industry. We must never forget that Britain’s pubs are a business, an industry with investors who need certainty. The danger of going too far down the localism route was that when a business was considering an investment decision, it was faced with potentially dozens of different legislative approaches and hurdles across its portfolio. That approach also left councils at the mercy of aggressive legislation, and they were expected to incur the legal expense of defending the measures that they had introduced to protect their pubs.

The “asset of community value” approach has given some communities a precious opportunity to fight for the pub that they love, but it did mean that often the only way to save a pub was to agree to become its owner. There is some value in that sort of community activism, but it should not be necessary to be willing to buy a pub in order to have a view on it.

Last week, the APPG heard from the community team that had successfully bought the Antwerp Arms in Tottenham, having used the ACV legislation to save their pub. We also heard from Wandsworth Council, which had placed a requirement for article 4 directions on about 220 of its locals. It deserves credit for its efforts, but the danger of using article 4 directions is that the landscape is different in each local authority. That led to some publicans having to obtain planning permission just to paint or decorate their pubs, which is a positive disincentive to improving or investing in the pub estate. The approach that is being advocated today will bring the certainty and clarity that everyone connected with the industry needs, and it will not prevent the owners of buildings from adopting the needs of their buildings to maximise new opportunities.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): While we commend local authorities for taking the trouble to exercise the procedure that my hon. Friend has outlined, it was difficult for a number of authorities in other parts of the country that did not have the necessary capacity or the ability to meet the potential costs that would have enabled them to build up the case for doing so. This measure will be enormously helpful in ensuring that local authorities need not embark on that potentially expensive route.

Toby Perkins: I could not agree more; it meant that different authorities with different priorities brought forward measures at different times, and some of them never regarded this as a priority, even though they might have had sympathy with the intentions of the legislation. What this measure does is ensure that, rather than local authorities having in effect to use legislation for an entirely different purpose than intended and place blanket conditions on all their pubs, there is a simple and clear method whereby developers will know that, quite simply, if they want to make a change to the use of a pub, they will have to get planning permission.

We know that pubs will open and pubs will close, and this Bill will ensure that all the evidence is considered before such decisions are made. As I have said, it is sensible of the Government to create the new A3/A4 mixed use class, and I am glad they have made it clear that it is their intention that the mixed use class should enjoy the same protections as the A3 and A4 classes.

I would be interested to hear the Minister's response to the question of what might happen until the Bill is passed. He has set out the Government's wish to have secondary legislation in place by July, which is a sensible timescale. However, there is a worry that this is going to lead to a rush of businesses or developers buying pubs and levelling them before the regulations are in place, so everyone must take all the steps they can to prevent a rush of conversions or demolitions. I shall be interested to hear the Minister suggest steps that the Government or local authorities and communities may take to prevent that from coming to pass.

I am very pleased to have been able to take a few moments to reflect on the value of the 48,000 British pubs to our communities. When visitors come to the United Kingdom, one of the first things they want to do is have their first pint in a British pub. The British pub is a tremendously important asset to our country, and I will be very pleased to welcome the Government's adoption of this amendment. I am pleased that this important step will be taken to help communities save and preserve the great British pub for many, many years to come.

Mrs Main: It is a delight to speak at this point in the debate, because I want to say to the Minister that the whole point of the other place is to make us think again, and he has thought again and he has listened. This is a wonderful solution that will protect areas such as mine.

I have the most beautiful constituency, and it is rumoured that I have the most pubs per square mile, although other areas dispute that. St Albans is an historical pilgrimage city and a coaching town, and we have pubs on just about every corner—if you can't find a pub in St Albans, you're not trying.

We have many historical pubs that have found it incredibly difficult to make their living in today's hard times. I went to see the Chancellor about the effect of business rates on pubs. I am hugely glad that he listened, because many of the pubs in my constituency are incredibly small—almost the size of people's front rooms—as they came along in a different era, and many are listed as well, which adds another dimension to the problem of making them viable. The owner of The Boot pub spent five years working with the planning system to try to get various alterations to his kitchen, because the pub's

listing made it very difficult for him to get that work done. I therefore welcome enormously anything that can make our pubs more viable and give them a sounder footing for the future.

The headquarters of CAMRA is in Hatfield road in St Albans, and it has been wonderful in this matter. I pay tribute to CAMRA and all those who have worked with it to ensure that the Minister listened to the thoughts expressed in the Lords and the representations of Members of Parliament, and came up with a solution that is pragmatic and elegant, as I think the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) described it. It now builds on the intentions expressed in the Lords, which is hugely important.

May I point out to any Members who have not visited my constituency that we are having a big tourism week from 31 March? One of my jobs that day will be to visit Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, an immensely historical pub. It is one of the pubs that claims to be the oldest pub, and they all contribute to the tourism offering. Not knowing that this elegant solution was going to come through today—which I am pleased to welcome and support—I wanted to make sure I went along and gave all my support to my pubs, which contribute enormously to our tourism offering. One of the pubs in St Albans, the White Hart immediately opposite the entrance to the cathedral, featured on “Most Haunted Live!”; another part of our tourism offering is that we have a very good ghost run, as St Albans is so historical.

I encourage people to go and visit their pubs. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) said, they are so much more than a place to buy a particular beer; they offer a huge historical pattern, and if they were removed it would in some regards be the death of my constituency. I can honestly say that people come to my constituency and say they cannot get over what a marvellous impression the pubs give, and I pay tribute to the many operating in St Albans to the highest possible standards.

I also want to make a few comments on what the Minister said about the permitted development rights on office space. I am concerned that we are losing so much office space. In an area such as mine, where the average house price is £550,000, there is nothing more lucrative than turning pubs—which we are now protecting—and offices into housing, and there was a rush to do so under the permitted development rights. I acknowledge that there were lots of areas of the country where offices were lying idle and it was difficult to convert them, but I do not have that problem in St Albans. We have lost 150,000 square feet of office space already, with another 50,000 or 60,000 square feet of office space in the offing to go, and businesses are telling me that they cannot find alternative premises. When businesses' leases are running out, they find that they cannot have certainty about renewing them, and there is a worry that offices will disappear.

We in St Albans do have a lot of work being done online, and I also have a lot of small businesses, but AECOM in Victoria street has 70,000 square feet of office space with the lease coming up for renewal, and if such companies cannot secure an article 4 direction because they in any way become rationed, that will be a worry to me. I understand why the Minister says a local authority needs to show that it has its housing allocation sorted before it can put on an article 4 direction, but, sadly, we in St Albans, with a 1994 district plan, have

the worst of all possible worlds: I do not have my housing allocation sorted and I have offices disappearing. When I addressed the chamber of commerce about two months ago, business after business told me that they would have to consider their future position in St Albans if this hollowing out and selling off of the family silver, as it were, continued.

I therefore make a plea to the Minister. In areas such as St Albans, the most lucrative thing anyone can ever do is close a business and make it into a house or a block of flats. I do not want to have a city that is devoid of the vibrancy of businesses or office space. I have made representations to the Minister about this before, and I thank him for listening about the pubs, and I thank the Chancellor for giving an additional £300 million to help support pubs, but I do not want my constituency to fall in the gap between the new thought processes under the article 4 direction and the permitted development rights removal on offices.

I welcome the new drift from the Government towards supporting pubs. Too often they have been seen as not important parts of our heritage, but they are vital to places such as St Albans. I am delighted that the Government have been listening all around—well done to the Minister for that.

2.30 pm

Greg Mulholland: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). She does indeed represent one of the great pub cities—I think it is a city, not a town. It is a wonderful area for pubs—I live in another one, in Otley in Yorkshire—and this is a wonderful piece of good news to have so near the beginning of English tourism week, when we will celebrate all that England has to offer, including our wonderful pubs. I believe I have visited every pub in the town centre of her constituency—she might like to test me later to see if that is indeed the case. I have certainly been to The Farriers Arms, where those wonderful pioneers set up CAMRA all those years ago. I have also had a pint with Roger Protz, a real hero, who has supported this campaign.

Mrs Main: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman's party has found my constituency incredibly attractive and that its members have visited many of my pubs. I am sure that that was just in support of the pubs and the beer, and I am pleased that they visited none the less.

Greg Mulholland: I did not see the hon. Lady in any of the pubs when I visited, but I assure her that those visits were partly personal and partly due to the work of my all-party group. None of them were political or part of my work as an MP. However, it is great to have support from Government Members. Many Members on both sides of the House have campaigned and persuaded the Minister in this case.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his campaign—he has been trying to get this measure through for years—and the Minister on accepting the amendment. My only concern is that the new business rates system could affect pubs and must be looked into. We also cannot forget working men's clubs.

Greg Mulholland: I warmly thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is quite right. Rates have been mentioned, and while we have had some positive news,

more needs to be done about some of the extraordinary and damaging rises. Indeed, we need another system of taxing pubs altogether.

I thank the Minister for allowing us to get there in the end. Finally, we have been listened to. He has shown what an excellent Minister and gentleman he is. I thank him for his approach. He has engaged consistently on this issue, as has his colleague the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy)—the community pubs Minister and a good Yorkshire MP. He genuinely listened to me and—I have to call her an hon. Lady, but I can also call her a friend—the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie). There is something about MPs with “North West” in their constituencies when it comes to this issue. Her campaigning has been dogged over many years and also deserves commendation.

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): While we are having this cross-party pubs love-in, I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), who has been a staunch campaigner on this measure for many years. Back in January 2015, I made what I thought at the time was a distinctly career-limiting decision to table a similar amendment with him, and I want to put on the record my thanks for his work. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), who has been an outstanding Minister. Many pints will be raised in his name and in the name of his colleague the community pubs Minister this weekend.

Greg Mulholland: I thank the hon. Lady for her support and echo her comments. The Minister has genuinely listened and was interested in looking for solutions when the hon. Lady and I met him on 30 January. He offered that meeting and we were delighted to have it. He actually went to the trouble of inviting me into his office last Thursday to hand me a copy of the amendment and to say exactly what the Government were going to do. That is an example of how Ministers can work with MPs from across the House to achieve things, and I warmly thank him for that.

Following my tabling of a similar amendment on 7 December, I thank Lord Kennedy of Southwark for taking up the baton excellently, ably and enthusiastically, and for showing his support by taking it through the House of Lords, which presented us with this great opportunity. I thank Protect Pubs, which is now the pre-eminent organisation campaigning for better protection for this country's pubs. It is a member of the British Pub Confederation, which I also congratulate. I must declare an interest as I am the chair of the British Pub Confederation, and I am delighted to continue to work with all publicans and pub representative organisations within the confederation. I also thank the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), because he introduced a private Member's Bill with the same aim back in 2010. That is sometimes forgotten, but I told him that I would mention him and thank him in the Chamber today.

Although I tabled a similar amendment back in December, it was also tabled during the passage of the Localism Act 2011. My point then was that localism is phony if we continue to allow valued pubs to be demolished or turned into supermarkets or offices without the community having any say. That is all that we are changing today—no more, no less. We are not getting

[Greg Mulholland]

into pub protection in great detail. The amendment simply gives communities the right to have a say through a planning process, just as with anything else. It should have happened a long time ago—it is common sense—but I am delighted that it is happening now.

Echoing the comments of another pubs campaigner—the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey)—I thank the brave pro-pub councils that have brought forward article 4 directions and other pub-protection policies. They have shown that they can do certain things, but we needed this change from the Government. I also thank the Otley Pub Club from my constituency. Again, I have to declare an interest in that I am the club's honorary president. When Ministers wrongly rejected this change back in 2015 by not accepting the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Bristol North West, the club took Ministers at their word when they said, "If you value your local pubs and if you want protection against predatory purchasing by supermarkets, list them as assets of community value," and listed all 19 pubs in the centre of Otley to show that that was the only way communities could protect them. Communities no longer have to list all their pubs simply to remove permitted development rights. If Otley Pub Club had not had the courage to go ahead and do that, and prove that Ministers were wrong in rejecting that amendment, we may not have been here discussing this today. Asset of community value status remains important, but it no longer needs to be used in all cases for all pubs simply to end permitted development rights.

I thank the wonderful CAMRA branches and members that have engaged in the campaign over many years. It was disappointing that CAMRA headquarters did not support the amendment in December. The reasons for doing so were rather strange—perhaps there had been a particularly good Christmas party—but we are delighted that the change has finally come through after many years of campaigning. It was slightly bizarre that CAMRA was still sending messages yesterday to its members, myself included, urging us to contact our MP about a vote when there was no vote. Several MPs have said to me, "Don't worry. We're going to vote with you," but I have had to tell them not to. I even had one MP say that they were going to vote against me because of the email from CAMRA, so luckily there will be no vote. However, it is rather odd that CAMRA carried on lobbying after the event. I have mentioned the Co-op issue, but CAMRA really needs to look at the failed agreement with the Co-op, which has been an appalling predatory purchaser and destroyer of pubs up and down the country. CAMRA needs to disassociate itself from the Co-op in the interests of its members and of pubs.

I must put on the record and draw attention to a significant and brave decision by the Minister. When my amendment was considered in December, a false briefing was circulated by the representatives of the large pub companies. The reason they were lobbying so hard to stop communities having the simple right to have a say was that they wanted their large pubco members to continue to be able to sell pubs to supermarkets, who can demolish them without the community having a say. People have been losing viable pubs as a result. I raised that matter on the Floor of the House and wrote to the Minister, and that was when I realised the kind of

Minister he was. Rather than the usual response from civil servants, he wrote back to me, and I want to quote from the letter because it was so nice and refreshing to have an acknowledgment from a Minister. It said:

"I recognise that in doing so I referenced briefing that was made available more generally by the British Beer and Pub Association in relation to existing permitted development rights for pubs. You are right to point out that their briefing contained inaccuracies, and therefore I am pleased to confirm for the record that it is the case that the removal of permitted development rights for the change of use or demolition of pubs, as a result of the nomination or listing as an Asset of Community Value, has no effect on a pub's ability to make internal changes."

It was great to have that confirmation, but it is a serious matter that a clearly interested party was sending false information to hon. Members, misleading them about something that was extremely simple.

The Government have clearly decided not to accept my original amendment of 7 December, nor Lord Kennedy's of 28 February, but I understand their reasons for doing so and have made it clear to the Minister that he has my full support for the new amendment and that I am delighted with the outcome.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) raised the concern that the Government decided to include the mixed use category of A3/A4 because they did not want to stop publicans serving food. In actual fact, there is no need for the category because we know that food is served in many pubs in category A4 but not in others, and sometimes that changes from week to week. There is no need for the change, but the first concern that has been raised is whether the same permitted development rights will be in place for the mixed category. The Minister has made it clear that that will be the case, which is fairly clear in the Bill.

However, I flag up the genuine and very serious concern about article 4 directions because, to use the Minister's words, there is an unintended consequence whereby many councils have decided to introduce important and impressive article 4 directions to bring in strong protections for pubs—stronger than will be offered by the amendment, as he knows—including stopping the predatory developers that the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) mentioned, but those protections apply only to A4. There is a real danger that it could create a loophole whereby unscrupulous owners or developers can seek a mixed use designation to get out of the strong pub protection that exists in some areas.

Now that is on the public record, and now it is understood in a way that perhaps it has not been by some organisations, I urge the Minister to consider introducing a statutory instrument, in addition to this amendment, to ensure that the new mixed use A4/A3 category, which is for pub restaurants that should clearly have the same protection, does not fall foul of another loophole by no longer being covered by existing pub protection policies. That should be easy to address with a statutory instrument, and then everyone will be happy with the amendment as a whole. In a sense, he has done something remarkable because, despite their opposition and misleading briefings, both the British Beer and Pub Association and one of its large pubco members, Punch Taverns, have said that they are perfectly happy with the amendment. He has done something significant but, now that it has been spotted, he needs to plug the potential loophole with a statutory instrument to ensure that it does not become a problem.

Finally, I thank the Minister and all hon. and right hon. Members who have taken part in this campaign over many years. I raised the issue as far back as 2008, and it was one of the key aims when we set up the all-party Save the Pub group. It has taken longer than expected and hoped for, but we have got there now, with the caveat of closing the loophole that has been identified.

John Mann: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that organising such an open, accessible and cross-party campaign that has allowed all of us to be involved, with him taking the lead throughout, is a good model for securing change in this place?

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman is kind, and it is nice of him to say so. It has been a pleasure working with him, and with Members on both sides of the House, because that is how, as parliamentarians with an interest and a zeal for campaigning, we can change things. We can all do it in different ways, and I look forward to doing so in the future. The changes we have had, including on pub companies, show that we can succeed and that all-party groups and campaigning in this place, when done well, can be successful. I have been nearly 20,000 feet up a mountain with the hon. Gentleman, but I have never been to a pub in Bassetlaw with him, which we might have to put right. If he would like to do that, I would be delighted to join him.

There is a real threat from unscrupulous developers, owners, pub companies and supermarkets that seek to offload pubs, demolish them and get supermarkets in place before planning permission is needed, and I remind the House of the utter absurdity that communities currently have no right to object to the imposition of a supermarket and the loss of a viable pub, but have the right in the planning process to complain about the supermarket's signage. The amendment is finally reversing that nonsense, but it will continue to happen until the amendment is enacted. Now that the Government have made clear their intent, which has the full support of both Houses—that is very unusual—and of all major parties, the Minister should seriously consider a moratorium on any demolitions or conversions. A moratorium would be extremely useful in stopping the continued loss of pubs.

2.45 pm

Toby Perkins: Will the hon. Gentleman expand on his suggestion? Many of us share the concern, which I raised a moment ago, about a rush towards demolition. He proposes a moratorium, but is he proposing that the industry commits to such a thing or that the House passes something to bring it about?

Greg Mulholland: I am asking the Minister and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The Secretary of State's name is on the amendment, so I take this opportunity to thank him because he has clearly listened and accepted the proposal. As he knows, I also go to pubs in his constituency because I have family in Bromsgrove.

It is for the experts in the Department to consider the possibility of introducing a moratorium, because there is no possibility of it being done externally. This is not a matter simply for the industry. The Co-op is probably the worst pub killer of all the supermarket chains,

others of which have been pretty bad. The supermarket chains are not part of the pub sector, and they see pubs as fodder for imposing their unwanted stores on communities. The supermarket chains will clearly not jump to do this, and nor will developers that are seeking to exploit high land values in London, St Albans and other parts of the country. From that point of view, it would be great if the Minister said that there should be a moratorium and, in the spirit of this change, called on people not to pursue such conversions now that they are deemed by Parliament to be wrong.

This is not the end of the matter. Ultimately, it has not been about securing great protection for pubs; that is one of the things that has been rather misunderstood and misrepresented, sometimes by both sides of the argument. It is simply about giving communities a say and about removing absurd permitted development rights that created a loophole that has been exploited by large pub-owning companies and large supermarkets for too long. There will still be predatory developers, and pub companies will still seek to undermine pubs to secure development or to go through the planning process for building a supermarket.

As I have said, the assets of community value scheme remains important, but it is now time to consider strengthening it. Giving communities a genuine right to buy, as communities in Scotland have, is long overdue and would represent genuine localism. I have had a conversation with the Minister, and it is now time to consider a separate category in the planning and tax system for community pubs, which are the ones that we really care about. They are the ones that have the community value, which many Members have mentioned, in a way that other licensed drinking establishments do not.

CAMRA has so far said that it does not want to engage in this, but it is now time to crack the nut of defining a genuine community pub that does the things we have talked about and that has value to the community. The British Pub Confederation and Protect Pubs certainly wish to do so. If we do that, in addition to creating the extra layer of genuine planning protection for those pubs, and only those pubs, against predatory development, and only when the pubs are viable, we can crack the nut of having a different system of taxation, and we will never again see the disastrous headlines for the Treasury such as of one pub in York facing a 600% increase in its rateable value. I was in that very small pub, the wonderful Slip Inn, a couple of weeks ago during the Liberal Democrat conference. As I did at the meeting with the hon. Member for Bristol North West, I offer to work with the Minister to find a way of doing that, which could offer the security we need for our hugely important, viable community pubs.

This wonderful news is the start of a conversation, and I thank the Minister and all those involved. This is a hugely significant day in pub campaigning. As this is English Tourism Week, I know that every Member here today, and many more who are not, will want to raise a glass to this win for pubs and to the Minister for listening to all the campaigners who have helped to make it happen. They will want to toast this victory and the importance of the great English and great British pub.

John Redwood: I, too, am happy to support the Minister on his amendments. Like other Members, I have been lobbied by constituents who think that they should have the right to intervene, with a proper planning

[John Redwood]

process, in the unique case of a pub. It will be a great pleasure to write back to them to say that we have a listening Minister who has heard their representations and the strong lobbying by colleagues here who have been campaigning on this issue for a long time. However, when we make this legislative change, we must also remind people that it does not save every pub. As the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) made clear, those who are keenest to save their local pub need to make sure that enough people use it. The only ultimate guarantee that it can continue to serve is that people like and support it, or that they in a friendly way influence the owner or manager so that it provides the service and range that they wish and it will thereby attract sufficient community support. This is a welcome legislative change but we need to remind people that local government will be no more able to save a pub than national Government if there is not that strong body of support in the local community and an offer that people want.

The Minister is right to give the pubs the maximum flexibility to change what they do. If pubs are to serve the evolving communities of our country, they sometimes need to move on what they offer by way of the balance between food and drinks, the ambience and the surroundings, because people's tastes and people change, community by community. I therefore welcome the extra flexibility he is giving.

The main point I wish to make relates to the wider issue of changes from offices to homes and other changes of use class. The Minister is right to say that he needs to preserve flexibility. Any Member visiting a high street or centre in their own or another community knows that an avalanche of change is taking place. The internet, digitisation, robotics and automation are making a huge difference to the way business is conducted and services are delivered. A lot of change to the shape of the high street and the adjacent streets, and some of the office areas, will be required to make sure that the property there is updated and flexible so that it can meet the requirements of these evolving businesses.

We need flexibility, as in some cases we will have too many shops or offices, and it would be much better if they were converted to housing, because there is considerable need in town and city centres, as well as elsewhere, for additional housing. If some of that could be at prices that young people can afford, that would be an excellent bonus, as we still face a huge problem, with a new generation of potential homeowners priced out of many parts of the country by the very high prices. We need to understand that many of the new businesses and the new service offers will be internet-based and will come from new service centres that do not have to be in the town centres, and that the kind of things that people do need physical property for in the town or city centre will be different from the more traditional uses to which we have been accustomed.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think that the transformation of shops and offices into homes can regenerate town centres?

John Redwood: Yes, it can, with the right mixture. Some offices may need to be transformed into homes and a broader retail offer, with a higher proportion of coffee shops, restaurants and so on, may need to be made.

If more people are living in flats or smaller properties that they can afford in the town centre, they may well then make more use of the town in the evening, and the range of services and the life of the town is thus extended beyond the traditional shopping hours during the day. I am sure the Minister understands all that. I hope he will see how he can develop other ways to ensure that our planning system for commercial property is sufficiently flexible to allow residential use where that is the best answer and to ensure flexible use patterns in the commercial property that we have, as massive change will be needed.

The planning system of course has to protect the things that the community legitimately wants to protect, so we do not want non-conforming uses in certain areas and we certainly do not want bad or noisy neighbours, who may be regulated by planning or by other general laws on nuisance. Within that, we need maximum flexibility so that commercial owners and managers can adapt or change the use of their premises, or swap them for a more appropriate property for their use. If the planning system can facilitate that, it will greatly improve our flexibility as an economy, meaning that we can modernise more rapidly and move on to a more productive world, which is the main feature of the Chancellor's policies for our economy.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): First, may I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a shareholder of a small family business which for the past 40 years has included a single pub? Today, there has been a huge amount of agreement on the appropriateness of the Government's amendments to Lords amendment 22, and I pay tribute to a lot of people who have been involved in that process. I pay particular tribute to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland), who is also, in effect, the Member for CAMRA in this House. I know how seriously he takes his duties in that respect. He rightly highlighted English Tourism Week, but even more importantly this weekend we have the Gloucester beer festival. It runs from 31 March to 1 April, which, appropriately, some may say, happens to be my wedding anniversary, and takes place in the historic setting of Blackfriars, the world's best-preserved Dominican priory. So I invite all Members to come to Gloucester this weekend, as there will be 100 beers, 30 ciders and perries, and an unbelievable atmosphere, in a great and noble old setting.

That deals with the preamble, so I come on to what I really want to say. I seek to strike a slightly different note, mild caution, and ask the Minister whether he has thought carefully about the possible unintended consequences of his amendment—I am sure he has. It would be a cruel irony if, in trying to protect pubs, this addition to the Bill triggered sales of pubs by small owners and increased the stranglehold on pubs of the large pubcos and very large brewers.

The Minister will know that there is a long history of unintended consequences in the brewing and pub sector. If we go back in time, we find that this House legislated against individual brewers owning more than 2,000 pubs, which inadvertently created large pubcos. The wheel has now almost come full circle, with Heineken proposing to buy back 2,000 pubs from a pubco. So there are times when, by trying to manage too finely what happens to our pubs, we end up with unintended consequences.

My concern, which I have also heard expressed by one or two small owners of pubs in my constituency, is that this sort of change could threaten the covenant with the banks that finance them. Lenders may lend more willingly on the understanding that in the unfortunate event of the pub failing there will always be value in the buildings for other uses, as that then underpins the security on which they lend to small owners. As in our pub, it is the small owners of pubs who tend to develop their own brewhouse and produce the real ale that CAMRA is all about. On the whole, the large pubcos and large brewers, who have their own entirely tied arrangements, are not going to produce the creative, small beers and the brewhouses which have regenerated this whole sector so effectively over the past 10 or 15 years.

Therefore, my question to the Minister is: has he thought carefully about the possible unintended consequences? Has he had any discussions with some of the individual owners of pubs or with their bankers and lenders? Will he reassure us that he believes that these changes are a compromise that do give enough flexibility to retain the support of those who lend to small owners of pubs and to provide that variety—what the hon. Member for Leeds North West was calling the “community pubs”? That is hard to define, but it is often when a pub is family-owned.

3 pm

All of us present for this debate are huge fans of pubs—probably of beer, too—and want to see them continue. We want to know that the listing of assets of community value matters, and we certainly do not want to see large supermarkets preying on pubs at the cost of the community. In my community, there is currently an issue with the future of the former Ridge and Furrow pub, which is on a site owned by Morrisons, the supermarket, but tenanted to Trust Inns. There has been an effective stand-off between Morrisons and Trust Inns, meaning that the building has been abandoned for some years and is a very unsightly contribution to the Abbey ward community in Gloucester. Situations such as that one cannot be resolved entirely through legislation and need heads to be knocked together and people to come to pragmatic solutions.

Generally speaking, I absolutely support all the intentions of this House and the campaigns led by CAMRA to ensure that our community pubs thrive and that we have lots of pubs offering all sorts of different real ales. The individual family owners of pubs have a crucial role to play. I just hope that the amendment will not inadvertently threaten that part of the sector.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): This is a topic very close to my heart, as it evidently is for Members from both sides of the Chamber. We know how important pubs are to the fabric of our communities. They are more than just a place that sells alcohol; they are a meeting place and a community heart. In many areas, they are the one bit of heritage of historical value in the local area in terms of architecture. In my own town, Oldham, where terraced streets were thrown up to house the millworkers, very little attention was paid to the architectural quality of the buildings. The architectural quality generally stands out in the local church and the local pub.

I sometimes drive round my town with a very heavy heart as I see some really inappropriate conversions, not only in terms of use but because the fact that they do

not require planning permission often means that the important conversation about retaining heritage value in a building just has not taken place. Quite often, beautiful stained glass windows will be completely ripped out in favour of cheap, white, UPVC plastic windows. That might seem like a minor issue, but if that is the focal point of a community and it has had its heart ripped out, it affects how people feel about the place where they live.

I am pleased that the Government are acknowledging the role that pubs play in the local community, not only in the way I just described but through their economic value. Pubs are worth £22 billion a year to the economy, and £13 billion is raised from them in taxes and duties which, of course, funds our vital public services. They support nearly 1 million jobs. Just in the time I have been on this planet, since 1980, 21,000 pubs have closed, and 21 pubs close every week. It is urgent that we get the changes we are discussing, and quickly, because we do not want developers to try to move fast and aggressively in the knowledge that change is coming, looking to demolish or change use in the meantime. While we are having this debate, three pubs will close—every day, three pubs close in this country—so there is a sense of urgency about ensuring that community rights are protected.

I listened with great interest to my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins). I give him credit for the work he has done on the all-party parliamentary pub group to expose the importance of local pubs in giving a community a voice. I must admit that I had a smile on my face listening to his romantic description of that first experience of walking through a pub door. Depending on the pub's proprietor, we do not always get a welcome—sometimes we feel as though we have walked into somebody's living room—but at their best pubs are open and welcoming and they make us feel like part of the family, even if we are perfect strangers. That is why it is so important that they are maintained. We live in a time when people are becoming more socially disconnected and when families spend very little time together, so places where people come together are important.

This Friday and Saturday, I am sure Members will have the time on their hands to come up to Oldham, where we will be celebrating the Oldham beer festival, at which more than 60 real ales and ciders, many from the north-west, will be on display for people to test. There will be a fantastic example of local British produce. That is one way the community comes together.

The debate has been very positive, but if I may be slightly critical—though this probably goes beyond the current Government—we have not seen a compelling vision of what the British pub will be for this country and how the Government will offer support to the pub industry across different policy areas.

Greg Mulholland: The hon. Gentleman made an enormously important point about architecture and heritage. On the point that he has just made, I could not agree with him more. He has considerable expertise in local government, which he showed in a recent meeting on business rates, so we need him to contribute to this debate and it is great that he is doing so. Will he consider seriously the idea put forward by me, the British Pub Confederation and Protect Pubs, which is

[*Greg Mulholland*]

that we should find a way to identify genuine community pubs, separate from bars, so that we can give them extra planning protection? We need to be clear that these changes to the Bill will not give them that protection. We should also look for a better way to tax pubs appropriately with regard to their community function. I would love to work with the hon. Gentleman and everyone to try to do that.

Jim McMahon: That is an important point. In the debates on the Local Government Finance Bill and business rates revaluation, Labour was clear in pressing for the need to recognise properly the role and value of community pubs and how they are often affected by a range of taxation, whether that is duties, business rates or rises in national insurance contributions, or by the increase in the national living wage. All those will affect a pub's viability. It is important that we have one review to look to protect pubs. In many places, quite often when a pub provides that essential community facility, it is the only facility left in the area. Perhaps the church, post office and butcher have closed, along with other facilities, so it may well be that the pub is the only place where the community can come together. Residents will be rightly fearful that the response so far does not go across the whole of Government and they will want to see a plan.

We heard an announcement about permitted development rights and the change from office use to residential. The Opposition have been forceful in our view that the extension of permitted development rights should be reversed. There have been some extremely inappropriate developments, often against local community interests and against what the local community says it wants for the area. Developers are often looking for short-term gain at the expense of a community's long-term sustainability. Will the Minister look seriously at the genuine impact of the policy change? There is no doubt that it has increased the number of units brought to market, but I would question the quality of those units, not only in terms of their size—many of them are very small indeed—but in terms of the attention to detail, the finish and the quality of life for people who live in converted office accommodation. Developers will quite often squeeze as many units into a premises as possible, bypassing the planning regime that any residential development would have to follow. The loophole needs to be closed at some point.

Mrs Main: The other matter that I am concerned about in areas such as mine is the lack of outside amenity space associated with offices. Like London, there are many families with children living in flats in St Albans, and there is very limited access to family friendly facilities in city centres.

Jim McMahon: That is a very important point. We recognise that many town and city centres have suffered from a decline in office accommodation, but as those towns and cities look to the future and to regenerate their centres, they will want to know that they can have a basic level of office provision in a redeveloped town centre. It is essential for footfall, which then means support for a range of ancillary services such as coffee shops, sandwich shops and retail units as well.

John Redwood: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the most prosperous and dynamic town and city centres in our country have a phenomenal rate of change, with constant re-use, modernisation and updating of the properties.

Jim McMahon: I entirely accept that point, but I have a rather simplistic view—perhaps it is a naive view—that local communities should have a voice in that development. It is really important that local people have some sense of ownership and direction over their town, village or city. Many people feel completely excluded from that process. There is an issue with the extension of permitted development rights to cover office conversions. It could be that the local community has decided that such a move is right for their area and that it should therefore be supported, but that can be dealt with through a normal planning application. If the community is supportive of it and if the right accommodation has been chosen for the outdoor play area, for waste collection, for parking and for all the other amenities that are required, that will be facilitated through the normal planning process. I shall press the Minister to look again at that matter.

A compelling vision of what the British pub can be, and of what it can expect from our Government would be welcomed not just by the pub industry but, more broadly, by the whole community. I say to the Minister that, rather than waiting for someone else to come forward with such a vision or for Cabinet approval, he could pull the whole thing together himself. There are plenty of all-party groups that would absolutely be willing to contribute to that conversation. On the Labour Benches, I and others would want to play our part in doing that, because it is so important. When these pubs are gone, they are gone forever and they will never come back. For many areas, once that happens, it is development that has gone too far.

It would be remiss of me not to reflect on the fact that we are considering this amendment because of the fantastic work of Lord Kennedy in the other place in recognising how important this matter is and in bringing it forward. I am pleased with the Government's approach to this amendment, but of course the amendment would not be here for debate had it not been for the work of the Members in the other place. I thank Lord Kennedy and the others who contributed to that debate for the work that they have done. Members who are involved in all-party groups should continue with their work. From the Labour Benches I say to the Minister that if there is anything we can do in policy development terms to support this work that is so critical to the fabric of our communities, he has our time, support and energy in seeing it through.

Gavin Barwell: This has been a very positive and productive debate. Let me respond briefly to a few of the points that have been mentioned. I must pay tribute to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) for the role that he plays in leading the pubs all-party group and for the lobbying that he has done on this issue. In referring to his numerous visits to pubs, he said that behind every door is a different surprise. That rather put me in mind of inspecting my children's bedrooms after they have been told to clear them up.

The hon. Gentleman rightly paid tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole

(Andrew Percy), for the work that he has done on pubs. In particular, he expressed concern about the time between this announcement and the regulations being put in place. I will just reiterate what I said, which is that we intend to get them in place before July. We will do it as soon as possible. Clearly, it depends on when this Bill gets Royal Assent and when the regulations are drafted. We recognise the importance of moving quickly here. In the interim, there is the option of using assets of community value as a means of protection, and I will certainly look at whether we can make any other transitional arrangements. Clearly, those arrangements may have the same problem in terms of the time involved in drafting secondary legislation.

Toby Perkins: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is right that there are existing protections available. The hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) suggested some kind of moratorium. I am not clear how, legislatively, that might be performed. May I invite the Minister to join me in calling on all the organisations that might be tempted to show the worst of values and rush things through in advance of legislation instead to show the best of values and treat this as legislation that already exists, and to go through the proper planning processes for any decisions that they make between now and July?

3.15 pm

Gavin Barwell: I am happy to say that it is quite clear, both from the debate in the other place and this debate today, that Parliament has expressed a very clear will on this issue. Obviously, I hope that everybody in the industry will, in the intervening period, respect that the clear will of Parliament has been expressed in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) made the very important point that the Government have listened not just on this issue, but on the issue of business rates in the Budget. I note that she was one of those who was lobbying in that regard. She raised some concerns in relation to offices and residential permitted development rights. I cannot add a great deal more than what I said in my speech, but I can clarify one point, which is that her council is free now to look at an article 4 direction for a specific area of the city if there is a problem. What we are looking at here is our willingness to allow an article 4 direction over the whole of a local authority area. It is right that we allow that only where local authorities are delivering the housing that their communities need.

The hon. Member for Leeds North West tweeted me shortly after we tabled the amendment saying that everyone knows that he is uncompromising and robust, but that he is also fair. He demonstrated that in his kind words today. Obviously, I am the Minister standing at the Dispatch Box, but he was right to pay tribute to the Secretary of State, who played an important role in agreeing this policy change. It was good of the hon. Gentleman to put that on the record. I was going to do so myself. I also pay tribute to the excellent officials who have worked on the Bill team and in the relevant policy areas. The “elegance of the solution”—if I can use the hon. Gentleman’s phrase—is all theirs and not mine.

The hon. Gentleman raised two specific issues. The first was whether we can look over time at extra protection for community pubs. We can certainly discuss that with

those who are interested. Some of those issues may be to do with planning, but they may spill over into other areas of Government policy. He also raised particular concerns about some of the planning policies of authorities that have put protections in place. Clearly, if there are local plan policies that explicitly refer to A4 drinking establishments, they can be updated to reflect the policy change that we are making today to cover the mixed A4-A3 use.

The hon. Gentleman raised a particular point about A4, which I did not entirely understand. He might want to explain that now, but it might be better if he wrote to me, because I can write back to him and give him the assurance that he needs.

Greg Mulholland: This is a really important point. As the Minister knows, he has had a letter about it from a leading pubs planning consultant. It is about article 4 directions. The concern is that the only way that article 4 will be anything but worthless for the new mixed use category is for the council to come up with an entire new article 4. The Minister says that local planning policies can be updated, but article 4 directions have to go through a certain process, so he will have to take responsibility for drawing up a statutory instrument in which, clearly, the intention is to protect all developments within the category which is now A4 and some A4/A3. They all need to be covered. He will need to look at that.

Gavin Barwell: I will certainly look at that issue and come back to the hon. Gentleman, as he raises a fair point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), perhaps predictably for those who know him well, made the very important point that, ultimately, the way in which we protect pubs in the country is through customers—through people using and supporting those local facilities. I was very grateful to him for his support on the issue of office to residential conversion. He is quite right to say that we need to ensure that our planning system is sufficiently flexible to ensure that local economies can adapt quickly to the changes that we are seeing in our society and in economic activity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) issued a warning about the potential downsides to this policy. He asked me whether we have considered them, and we certainly have. One reason why the Government initially resisted this change was the view that, clearly, where institutions have a permitted development right, it is reflected in the value of those institutions and that will affect decisions that lenders make. It will also reflect the values that people have on their books. There seems to be a clear will in both Houses of Parliament that, given the value of pubs as community institutions, we do not want people to be able to convert pubs for other uses or to demolish them without going through the planning process. We take this decision knowing that there is always another side to these issues, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, but the Government have looked at the matter and come to the view that there is a clear will in Parliament to take a different approach to the issue.

The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton made a good point about the low quality over the years of some conversions or replacement buildings after

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demolitions. I can think of examples in my constituency. We lost the Blacksmith's Arms, which has been replaced by an unsightly building in a key district centre. Conversely, the Swan and Sugarloaf, which was a very recognisable building right on the edge of my constituency in south Croydon, has been converted to a Tesco Express. There was actually a renovation of the building's architecture, significantly improving its appearance. Those examples can work either way, but the hon. Gentleman raised a valid point.

The hon. Gentleman talked more generally about the need for a vision for pubs. That vision has to come primarily from the industry, although the Government can clearly play a supporting role. He invited me to come forward, but I think that is the responsibility of the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole. I know that he has engaged extensively with the all-party parliamentary group and with others in the House who have a passion for those issues. There is clearly a real wish on both sides of the House to see these vital community assets thrive and succeed in the modern economy. The Government have shown willing to look at these issues and see what we can do to support them.

The two sides of the House differ on the issue of office to residential conversion. I have been very clear since the Prime Minister gave me this job that there is a desperate need for more housing. Therefore, it is incumbent on the Government to support policies that drive a step change in housing supply. There is clear evidence, for anyone who wants to look at the statistics that are published in November each year on net additions, that this policy is adding about 13,000 extra units of housing. I accept that it is a blunt tool, and that not all of those homes are of the quality we would want. I would not necessarily agree with the hon. Gentleman's view that they are universally of poor quality. There are some very good schemes in my constituency that have come about through permitted development conversions. None the less, in the situation we face—which was 30 or 40 years in the making, with Governments not ensuring that we built sufficient homes—the main focus has to be on getting supply up.

With the changes that we have announced in the other place and that I have run through today, we have sought to say that where local authorities are delivering the required level of housing and can prove that they can do so without this permitted development right, the Secretary of State will look kindly on authority-wide article 4 directions and will not seek to block them. For those who do not like this policy, there is a very clear message: if they have other policies through which they can deliver the housing that their local area needs, the Government are quite willing to be flexible. What we will not do is rescind this policy nationally when so many parts of the country are failing to build the homes we need.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the noble Lord Kennedy and the role he has played in bringing forward this amendment. I also pay tribute to him. In the past couple of months of doing this job, the response from the Labour Front Bench in the other House, and from Labour local authority leaders around the country, to

the strategy set out in the Government's housing White Paper has been noticeably encouraging. I am grateful for the constructive way in which the other place looked at the measures in the Bill.

Lords amendment 22 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendment 22.

Clause 12

RESTRICTIONS ON POWER TO IMPOSE PLANNING CONDITIONS

Gavin Barwell: I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 12.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following: Lords amendments 10 and 11, 13 50 21 and 85 to 90.

Gavin Barwell: In contrast to the debate on pubs, which was really an issue that arose on Report thanks to the hon. Member for Leeds North West tabling his amendment, there have been extensive debates on the planning conditions clause during the passage of the Bill through both Houses. The Government have tabled a number of amendments seeking to address the concerns that have been raised in both Houses and in response to our consultation on the measures.

In particular, the Government have tabled two amendments to clause 12 that take forward recommendations in the 15th report of the House of Lords Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. The first of these is Lords amendment 21, which would apply the affirmative parliamentary procedure to any regulations made under subsection (1). The Government accept the Committee's view that the negative procedure is not an adequate level of parliamentary scrutiny for the exercise of the power, and have amended the Bill accordingly.

The second is amendment 14, which also responds to a recommendation from the Committee—namely, that the Secretary of State should be required to consult before making regulations under subsection (6). Provided this requirement to consult is put into place, the Committee said that it would regard the negative procedure as an adequate level of parliamentary scrutiny for this particular power. The Government agree with this recommendation, as it is important that consideration is given to the views of developers, local planning authorities and other interested parties before making regulations under subsection (6). Amendment 14 therefore places a duty on the Secretary of State to carry out such consultation before making regulations.

Lords amendment 18 responds to views expressed in response to the Government's consultation on improving the use of planning conditions. A number of respondents across a range of sectors, including local authorities, developers and interest groups, called for guidance. They asked that, if the Government's proposed powers under this clause come into force, updated planning guidance should be issued on the operation of the provisions. The Government agree with that view. We made a commitment in our response to the consultation to publish updated guidance to support the changes, if they are brought forward. In order to give assurance to

all parties, amendment 18 would place a duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance to planning authorities on the operation of this clause, and any regulations made under it. This guidance will set out advice that may be useful and of interest to applicants, local authorities and other interested parties.

Amendment 12, which is not a Government amendment, seeks further to constrain the use of the proposed power in subsection (1). It is right that the Government do not intend to use the power to prevent local authorities from imposing planning conditions that accord with the national planning policy framework. However, section 100ZA already has this effect. Any regulations made under subsection (1) must be consistent with the test for planning conditions in the national planning policy framework. Subsection (2) provides that the Secretary of State must make provision under subsection (1) only if it is appropriate to ensure that conditions meet the policy tests in paragraph 206 of the national planning policy framework. For the benefit of the House, those are that planning conditions should be imposed only when they are necessary; when they are relevant to planning and to the development being permitted; when they are enforceable and precise; and when they are reasonable in all other respects.

The Government's case is very simple: Lords amendment 12 is unnecessary. More than that, by placing the policy test on the face of the Bill as we have done, rather than referring to the framework by name, the Government are making it clear in the legislation that the purpose of the power is to ensure compliance with those tests. Further constraints on the Secretary of State's power in subsection (1) will be applied by Lords amendments 14 and 21, which I have covered—they require public consultation and the affirmative parliamentary procedure to any regulations made under the power.

On Lords amendments 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19 and 20, and 85 to 90, clause 12 provides the Secretary of State with a power to make regulations about what kind of conditions may or may not be imposed on a grant of planning permission, and in what circumstances. The proposed power will apply in respect of any grant of planning permission. It had included permission granted by order of the Secretary of State, the Mayor of London, local authorities or neighbourhood planning groups. In the light of the responses we received to the consultation on the proposed new power, we have decided that it is not appropriate to apply the power to the making of orders, as opposed to applying it to the granting of planning permission. We have therefore sought to amend the clause to that effect.

3.30 pm

It is important that the order-making body can set conditions that frame the type of development that would be acceptable. That could include a condition that a development including a change of use is completed within three years. Such a condition may be unreasonable when imposed following the consideration of a planning application, but we do not believe it would be unreasonable in the very different exercise of granting permission by order. Consequently, we propose that the power will not apply to the grants of planning permissions by development orders, simplified planning zones, enterprise zones and development control procedures, meaning when the Government's authorisation is required.

With those arguments in mind, I commend amendments 10, 11, 13 to 21, and 85 to 90. I also ask the House to disagree with Lords amendment 12 which, as I have said, is unnecessary given the clear safeguards in the Bill.

Lords amendment 12 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 10, 11, 13 to 21 and 85 to 90 agreed to.

Clause 1

DUTY TO HAVE REGARD TO POST-EXAMINATION NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Gavin Barwell: I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendments 2 and 3.

Lords amendment 4, and amendment (a) thereto.

Lords amendments 5 to 9.

Lords amendment 23, and amendment (a) thereto.

Lords amendment 24 to 84.

Gavin Barwell: The shadow Minister has caused confusion by not objecting to proposals that some anticipated he might object to. That is fine by the Government, and I will happily proceed. I am probably also right in saying that Members who wish to speak on this group of amendments might have anticipated the debate on the second group lasting longer. I will try to talk at a little more length to give my hon. Friends time to arrive in the Chamber to take part.

This is the third group of amendments and I want to provide the House with an update on the other amendments made to the Bill in the House of Lords—*[Interruption.]* My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) is here. There we are.

First, on the amendments relating to neighbourhood planning, I thank all hon. Members and peers who contributed to the debate as the Bill has progressed through Parliament. It is clear that there is strong cross-party support for this important reform, which was introduced by the coalition Government. I very much welcome the positive and constructive debate we have had on the clauses. We are all seeking to ensure that neighbourhood planning—the quiet revolution, as described by my ministerial colleague Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth—continues to go from strength to strength. In that regard, I point the House not only to the important clauses in the Bill, but to my written ministerial statement, which we talked about on Report, and the further clarification provided by the housing White Paper.

The definition of a post-examination neighbourhood plan in clause 1 is clarified by Lords amendments 1, 2 and 3 to ensure that decision makers are in no doubt as to when they must have regard to them.

On Lords amendment 4, I committed on Report in the Commons to return to an important issue raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs and others on the voice of communities in planning decisions. The Government have therefore brought forward Lords amendment 4, which will require local planning authorities automatically to notify parish councils and designated neighbourhood forums of any future planning applications in the relevant neighbourhood area. Automatic notification would apply once parish

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councils and designated neighbourhood forums had in place a post-examination neighbourhood plan, as defined by clause 1. Parish councils and designated neighbourhood forums will be able to opt out of automatic notification or request that they are notified only of applications of a particular type. However, they will have the automatic right to be notified, exactly as requested by my right hon. Friend, and that is now on the face of the Bill. Rather than respond at this stage to the amendment that he has tabled, I might allow him to speak, if he intends to do so, and respond at that point.

Lords amendment 5 will allow the Secretary of State, through regulations, to prescribe further requirements that an examiner of a neighbourhood plan or a neighbourhood development order must follow in engaging with those with an interest in the examination. Subject to consideration of the outcome of the housing White Paper, which is still out for consultation, the amendment will allow the Secretary of State to make regulations that place a duty on the person appointed to examine a neighbourhood plan or a neighbourhood development order to provide information to, and hold meetings with, parish councils, designated neighbourhood forums, local planning authorities and others, and to publish their draft recommendations.

I thank all hon. Members and peers who have helped to shape these amendments, and I particularly thank Baroness Cumberlege, who was heavily involved in shaping this amendment in the other place. The concern is that people often put a huge amount of work into producing a neighbourhood plan, which is then examined and the examiner requires amendments to be made without people having any opportunity to discuss those proposals or to understand the logic behind them. That is why we have introduced these amendments. We want to ensure that this process helps people who give up their spare time and put effort into producing neighbourhood plans to get the result they want in terms of how their local community develops. As I said, I am really grateful to Baroness Cumberlege and others in the other place for the time and effort they have put into these amendments and for the meetings they have had with me and my ministerial colleague Lord Bourne to try to get the detail right.

On Report in the Commons, my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who is not in her place, raised the vital issue of planning for the housing needs of older people and the disabled. All hon. Members will appreciate the importance of this issue not only in ensuring that this group of people, which will grow over the coming years, has a range of housing provision suitable to its needs—many of us will have seen in our constituencies that that range of provision is not there at the moment—but in helping with some of the wider housing problems I am trying to deal with. Clearly, if greater alternative provision is made available, and people can downsize from their existing accommodation, that releases vital family housing on to the market. This is therefore a really important issue, and I made it clear that I was grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it. I committed to look at it carefully, and the Government subsequently brought forward amendment 6 in Committee in the Lords.

There was considerable cross-party support for the amendment in the other place. It amends section 34 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 to

require the Secretary of State to produce guidance for local planning authorities about how their local development documents, taken as a whole, should address the housing needs of older and disabled people. Page 62 of the housing White Paper sets out some of our key ambitions for this new guidance. In essence, without going into all the detail, the White Paper has two main areas that are focused in this direction. First, we are looking at our planning policies and how we can make sure that our local authorities are planning for a suitable range of alternative provision. There is definitely a partial solution to this problem in relation to planning reform. Secondly, we are asking whether people have thoughts or ideas about whether other measures are needed to incentivise people to downsize. In other words, is the problem just a lack of suitable provision in the area, or are there other barriers that we need to try to find a way to overcome to enable people to access accommodation that is more suitable to their needs? We are very much looking forward to seeing the responses to the White Paper as they come in so that we can consider these issues in more depth.

It is probably worth touching briefly on supported housing, which is clearly crucial in this regard. Hon. Members will be aware that we recently consulted on the new funding model that we have in mind for supported housing. We received a huge response to that consultation. We are analysing that at the moment, and we will come forward with a Green Paper later this year. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire, whose initiative ultimately lies behind Lords amendment 6.

Lords amendments 7, 8 and 9 to clause 11 will encourage early conversations between the local planning authority and its community about the future local growth and development needs of their area by allowing the Secretary of State to make regulations that set out the matters that local planning authorities must address in their statements of community involvement. We talked about this in Committee. For example, the regulations might require local planning authorities to set out the advice they would provide on the relationship between their local plan and neighbourhood plans in the area, and ensure that communities, including parishes and designated neighbourhood forums, are left in no doubt about when and how they will be able to get involved in the planning of their area.

Jim McMahon: On community involvement, there can be a conflict when mayoral plans—the strategic development plans for combined areas—are being developed in areas where no neighbourhood plan is in place, and local people at times feel that their voice is not being heard. In my area of Greater Manchester, there is a significant tension because the combined authority is proposing to build on green-belt land without an accurate or full brownfield register being in place. Where areas do not have a neighbourhood plan in place, and the local plan has been stalled pending the strategic plan, people feel frustrated that they do not have a voice in the process. Will the Minister give a bit of detail on how they might have a voice?

Gavin Barwell: I am obviously aware of the Greater Manchester spatial strategy. I need to be a little careful, for reasons I am sure the hon. Gentleman will understand, not to comment on the detail of that, because it may

well end up on my desk. However, he raises a really important point. The Government are very interested in the wider application of the process that is happening in Greater Manchester. As he says, a number of individual local authorities have decided that rather than produce their own plans they will produce a strategy for the wider area. There is much to commend that in principle. However, if that plan is slightly more distant from individual local communities, it is important that there are mechanisms by which people can engage in the process and do not feel that planning is being done to them rather than their having an involvement.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gavin Barwell: I will in a second, because I suspect that my hon. Friend has a very similar issue—potentially—in his area.

I will certainly reflect, in any regulations that we might bring forward, on what the issues might be when there is a wider strategic plan. If the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) wishes to talk to me informally about some of the things he has experienced, I would be very happy to have that conversation.

Mr Jackson: For once my hon. Friend is wrong, because I do not have a problem with my own devolution settlement. In fact, I am a sinner repenting: I was quite hostile to it, but now I think it is going to work out for my constituents in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

May I take the Minister back to the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen)? Will he ensure that any guidance on the neighbourhood planning regime also takes into account strategic housing issues relating to projections of housing need and the strategic housing market assessment to which local authorities have to refer before they put together their own local plan? That is an important document and it needs to be robust.

3.45 pm

Gavin Barwell: The Government and the Whips Office in particular always welcome a sinner who repenteth. My hon. Friend makes two very good points. The White Paper proposes moving to a standard methodology for the assessment of need, and we will incentivise all local authorities to use it. None the less, it remains the case that that methodology will provide a number of the total amount of housing need, but local authorities will still need to think about the mix of housing and of tenures relevant to their local community, and the demographic profile of the need for housing in their area. He makes a very important point and we will certainly ensure that the guidance covers those issues.

John Mann: If a local authority is making progress with its local development plan but waiting for the Secretary of State's approval, and if a new city region or combined authority that it joins during that period decides to take a different overall strategic approach to housing, what effect would all that work and decision making have on that scenario? Will that be part of the guidance, to ensure that communities that have been

fully consulted and that have made decisions are not sent back to the drawing board, which would delay rather than promote future housing, because of that possible crossover?

Gavin Barwell: That is not an easy question to answer in the abstract. Generally speaking—I am not an expert on this; I am sure the hon. Gentleman will correct me if I am wrong—in most of the devolution agreements that have set up a requirement to produce a spatial strategy, each of the individual constituent authorities in the combined authority has a veto. That is certainly the case in Greater Manchester, and I believe it is the case everywhere other than in relation to the London plan, the key difference being that that plan cannot allocate specific sites in the same way as the Greater Manchester spatial strategy. In that situation, I believe that the hon. Gentleman's own local authority would have a veto over any wider strategic plan.

I think that the hon. Gentleman was also driving at the issue of transitional arrangements. In other words, if an authority is nearing completion of its own plan and work is about to get under way on a wider strategic plan, would that authority still be able to complete its work on its own plan? I am happy to reflect on that, but my instinct is that it should be able to do that, because there are clear advantages in getting a plan in place, in terms of protection from speculative development.

John Mann *rose*—

Gavin Barwell: If I allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene, that will give me more time to think, so I will happily take another intervention.

John Mann: The Minister's instinct is very good, in my judgment. I hope that he will think through, perhaps not at this very moment, a scenario whereby a district council that is on the verge of getting its development plan agreed and endorsed in law is not put in the position of having to use its veto against a wider authority that it has joined, because that veto might undo the work that has already been done. In other words, is there potential for hybrids that allow housing developments to proceed, rather than an absurd structure that, in essence, allows different processes to collide? It strikes me that that may be a possibility somewhat near to my home in future.

Gavin Barwell: I will find out from my officials when I leave the Chamber whether my instincts about that were good. I will happily discuss the matter further with the hon. Gentleman, perhaps when I have the opportunity to visit his constituency.

We have been thinking about the question of transition in relation to the new standard methodology, and we will consult on that shortly. I have no doubt that, when it comes into place, a number of authorities at various stages of their plan making will ask whether the Government are suggesting that they should stop and start again using the new methodology, or whether they should complete the plan they have nearly finished and do a fairly quick review. We have given thought to that question. The hon. Gentleman has just asked a related question about the situation in which a strategic plan is in the early stages of preparation and a local plan is nearly complete. I will reflect on that, and perhaps we

[Gavin Barwell]

can have a discussion about it outside the Chamber when I have had a chance to talk to my officials, but I have given him a steer on my instincts.

We have digressed a bit—with your forbearance, Madam Deputy Speaker—but we were discussing Lords amendments 7, 8 and 9, which, as I said, are about giving the Secretary of State the power to produce regulations about the matters that local authorities should cover in their statements of community involvement. Hon. Members will recall that my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—I do not believe he is in his place today—highlighted this matter on Report. I am pleased that, as I promised, we have been able to table an amendment that reflects the intention behind his amendments.

I turn to Lords amendment 23. The White Paper highlighted the Government's commitment to legislating to enable the creation of locally accountable new town development corporations. The existing institutions report to the Secretary of State, but there is a strong desire for locally accountable institutions. Lords amendment 23, which was tabled by Lord Taylor of Goss Moor and Lord Best, was entirely consistent with the White Paper and the Bill's aim of further empowering local areas, and I am pleased that the Government were able to accept it. Several pieces of planning legislation have been introduced in recent years, and the White Paper left open the possibility for further legislation to follow. It is good that, by accepting Lord Taylor's amendment to the Bill, we have been able to get into statute one of the measures that we set out in the White Paper.

In summary, the amendment would support the creation of locally led garden towns and villages by allowing the responsibility for any development corporation created under the New Towns Act 1981 to be transferred to a local authority or authorities covering all or part of the area designated for the new town. My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs has tabled amendments on the issue, and I think it might be best if I allow him to speak to his amendments before I tell him how the Government intend to respond to them, to give him the opportunity to persuade me of his case.

I turn to compulsory purchase. In the other place, the Government tabled a number of primarily technical amendments based on further engagement with expert practitioners to ensure that the compulsory purchase provisions will make the process clearer, faster and fairer. Lords amendments 24 to 62, together with amendments 76 and 78, deal with temporary possession to refine the new system so that it will work as intended.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con) *rose*—

Gavin Barwell: I was just looking around to see whether my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), was there, and he is. I will happily give way to him.

Robert Neill: On behalf of those who have engaged with the Minister on this matter, may I say how much we appreciate his time and courtesy? The expert practitioners in the sector whom he and I have talked to regard the amendments as valuable. They are not necessarily the sexiest amendments we will ever see, but they clarify a

number of important pieces of procedure. I hope that, in that spirit, those of us who take an interest in such matters may be able to come back to the Minister in due course with further refinements, which may not require primary legislation. I am grateful to him for the way in which he has approached this aspect of the Bill.

Gavin Barwell: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words, and I have tried to approach the entire Bill in the same spirit. It is fair to say that the Housing and Planning Act 2016 had a rather difficult passage through Parliament, and with this Bill we wanted to build the broadest possible coalition behind the changes that the Government are making to try to drive up the amount of housing that we build. It has been pleasing to see, both in the other place and here today, the fairly widespread support for the way in which the Government are trying to take forward this agenda.

I will briefly describe, for those who do not have my hon. Friend's expertise in such matters, Lords amendments 63 to 68. They deal with the no-scheme principle; that is the key principle that defines the world in which compensation is assessed when compulsory purchase powers are used. The amendments basically refine the provisions so that they will work as intended.

Lords amendments 69 to 73 extend the ability of the Greater London Authority and Transport for London to make a joint compulsory purchase order for a combined housing or regeneration and transport project. I think I am right in saying that both the GLA and TfL have these powers at the moment, but they are not allowed to use them together on a combined project, which is what we are seeking to allow. In particular, Lords amendment 72 would allow TfL to work with a mayoral development corporation as an alternative to the Greater London Authority.

I thank the experts at the Compulsory Purchase Association and Transport for London for their advice, and Members of this House and of the other place for their constructive contributions to the debate on a very technical area of law. As I said on the first group of amendments, when not so many Members were in the House, I thank one of my most distinguished predecessors as Housing Minister, Lord Young of Cookham, who ably steered these provisions through the other place.

Responding to concerns raised in the other place, the Government tabled Lords amendments 74, 75, 77, 79, 80 and 83, which replace the power within the consequential clause of the Bill so that the Secretary of State's power to make consequential changes—in essence, when something is spotted after the legislation has gone through that has a knock-on effect on other legislation—is limited to part 2, or in other words only to the CPO provisions. We made those changes because of concerns in the other place about the broad scope of the consequential provisions. The possibility of things being spotted really arises in relation only to the CPO provisions, which is why we have limited this power to part 2.

Lords amendment 81 commences the regulation-making power in Lords amendment 4, and Lords amendment 82 commences the regulation-making power in Lords amendment 9. Lords amendment 84 will apply the same changes proposed by Lords amendment 5 to examinations that take place under the new streamlined procedure to modify a neighbourhood plan that is in force, as introduced by clause 3 and schedule 1.

I commend the Lords amendments in this group, and I will come back in later when I have had a chance to listen to the arguments of my right hon. Friend—and my very good friend—the Member for Arundel and South Downs.

John Mann: I will comment on three aspects of the amendments in this group and what the Minister has said on them. The first, briefly, is about changes to housing for the elderly. It is a question of whether a local community or a local council can actually designate specific pieces of land explicitly for accommodation for the elderly, which would open up the potential for planning gain, particularly on service sites. For example, saying that a specific piece of land within a larger development should be allocated for a few bungalows would precisely address rental need and possibly purchase need.

The other added key value that arises from the Minister's comments about having an effective approach to accommodation for the elderly is equity release. There would be a boost to the local economy from large numbers of people wanting to downsize—both those who want to purchase smaller accommodation and those who want to move to social renting but are in essence excluded from doing so at the moment—by releasing the modest equity in the house they have spent their lifetime purchasing. They want to do so to be able to live in more comfort and more cheaply, but also to be able to assist their grandchildren to get on to the housing ladder. Spending that equity would be a huge boost to the economy in a community such as mine. Is the possibility of creating zones that could be serviced or, through planning gain, developed, a greater option as a result of the amendments?

4 pm

Secondly, on neighbourhood planning, the Minister has taken the right approach in listening to considerations. It is worth highlighting that there is often a myth that neighbourhood plans are designed purely in leafy, well-to-do areas, and that they are a way of stopping housing. However, in the authority with the highest proportion of the population who have agreed, or are in the process of agreeing, neighbourhood plans, the reality is the exact opposite. The first and quickest to do so have been communities in Elkesley and in Harworth and Bircotes, which are both primarily former mining communities. Every single proposal for a neighbourhood plan has been for housing growth, including in communities that had previously objected to proposals for housing growth. In other words, the supremacy of power to the very local level is bringing forward significant amounts of extra housing, not restricting housing. I commend the Minister and hope for guarantees that his direction of travel will not in any way undermine the local democracy that has been crucial in areas such as mine to bringing forward new areas for housing.

Finally, it would be useful if the Minister let us know in passing the progress of those requesting Government money to get housing on the move. With the Bill and the Government putting significant amounts of money into housing development, there is a potential win-win for communities if all the ducks are lined up effectively in a row, whereby local people see huge benefits from planning, as opposed to seeing planning as a problem if they ever want to change anything or as an afterthought

if they are ever consulted. That is why I think the Minister's approach is in exactly the right area, but further reassurance would be very welcome.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I am grateful to Madam Deputy Speaker and to my hon. Friend the Minister for giving me the opportunity to speak to two amendments that my right hon. and hon. Friends and I have tabled: an amendment to Lords amendment 4 on neighbourhood plan notification, and an amendment to Lords amendment 23 in relation to the powers that may be given to local authorities to set up new towns. I have two sets of concerns in relation to those amendments.

First, on neighbourhood plans, may I echo what the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) just said about the value of neighbourhood plans in often producing more housing than anticipated? That is the case nationally and that was recognised in the Government's White Paper. In my constituency, neighbourhood plans have, quite often unexpectedly, produced more houses than local villages were required to produce, because the incentives are turned around and people start to ask themselves what they want in their villages rather than what they do not want. The development of neighbourhood plans, giving local communities control over their own area, has been a very important and welcome localist reform introduced under this Government.

However, the last time we debated the Bill, I said, as I have on many previous occasions, that it is important for the neighbourhood planning process not to be undermined by speculative development applications which are then upheld either by the local authority or on appeal by the planning inspector. That has the effect of demoralising those who subscribe to the neighbourhood plan: those who are either in the process of drawing up plans but are at a late stage, or those whose plans have actually been made and are subjected to a referendum. There is then real local anger when it turns out that a neighbourhood plan which they thought would give protection to certain areas of their local community while allowing for housing in others does not give that protection at all when, because there is not a five-year land supply or for some other reasons, the development application is allowed. There is a real danger—I stress this to the Minister—of confidence in neighbourhood planning being undermined if the widespread perception is that the plans are not worth the paper they are written on. I believe that this is an important issue that the Government still need to address.

I recognise the considerable steps forward taken when the Minister agreed in Committee to measures that would give protection to made neighbourhood plans in relation to the five-year land supply issue. I was very grateful, but he will understand that I was utterly dismayed when, last Friday, I received a letter from the planning inspector informing me that a speculative application in the village of Hassocks in my constituency had been upheld against the wishes of the emerging neighbourhood plan. For whatever reason—the Minister might be able to explain why this happened—the welcome measures that he announced when we last debated this issue were of no help in that situation.

The parish council, which has worked very hard on its neighbourhood plan, is now demoralised and is seriously considering whether to bother going ahead

[Nick Herbert]

with its neighbourhood plan. Why should it bother if this plan can simply be wrecked by developers and, worse, those speculative applications are then actually upheld by the planning inspector, who of course sits in the Minister's shoes? I take at face value and accept the Minister's assurance that the Government are serious about protecting neighbourhood plans, but I tell him that the measures that he has announced so far do not go far enough to achieve that. Villages all over my constituency are now saying that they wonder whether the neighbourhood planning process is one they wish to continue with. We must stop that message getting abroad.

Greg Mulholland: I praise the right hon. Gentleman for the work and leadership he has provided to many right hon. and hon. Members who have had exactly the same experience as in Aireborough, for example, on this issue. We hear this nonsense that we are not even allowed to go through the neighbourhood planning process unless we entirely agree with the decisions that we have campaigned on and objected to for many years. Does he agree that, working with organisations such as Community Voice on Planning and others, the Minister and his officials now need to sit down and do this properly so that we get the kind of localism that we all thought we were voting for and that he and I supported in 2011?

Nick Herbert: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I know that the Government have to square the circle in that they want to see a considerable increase in housing, which is the right ambition so that we can spread opportunity in a country in which house prices are out of the reach of so many young people now and rents are correspondingly high. As I say, the Government are right to seek to address that, but the whole point about neighbourhood planning is that it delivers more houses than was expected. This is not a measure to stop house building; it is a way to ensure that we have a system that is planning-led and not developer-led, so that we do not have a return to the unwelcome days of planning by appeal.

I tabled my amendment with the support of many right hon. and hon. Friends who are equally concerned about this issue, as the Minister will know. It states not just that the neighbourhood forum is entitled to give its views to the planning authority about a planning permission that will have an impact on its emerging or actual neighbourhood plan, but—this is the crucial wording—that the authority must “take into account” the views of the neighbourhood forum. It is very important that that happens.

Frankly, I would personally rather go much further. It is not within the scope of the amendment or the Bill to do so at this point, but I would give much more weight to emerging neighbourhood plans and I would make it very hard for neighbourhood plans to be overturned. The Minister will find that unless that happens in the future, the neighbourhood planning policy will start to be eroded. I hope that the Minister will nevertheless go as far as he can at this point to give the required reassurance to local communities that it is worth pursuing a neighbourhood planning process, that neighbourhood plans will be respected and that speculative

developments will not normally be allowed. I would like to understand what I should say to the people of Hassocks about the decision that the Minister made, which has so dismayed them.

Let me deal with the proposed delegation of powers to local authorities to create new towns. I have no objection in principle, speaking as someone who has always advocated localism, to the delegation of these powers, but I want to talk about one possible practical effect that this House should consider when it comes to the making of the future regulations that would allow this to happen.

At the moment, the powers of compulsory purchase that are needed for the creation of new towns under the New Towns Act 1981 rest with the Minister, which I think is right because the compulsory purchase of land is a serious step. Essentially, the state is confiscating land from private ownership, and I think that that should be authorised by Ministers, after very careful consideration. If the power is handed to local authorities, we will risk the creation of serious blight all over the country when authorities, working with developers, consider that they may have designs on land that was previously not available for development or where developers have no options.

In my constituency, a proposal for a new town has been strongly rejected by the two district councils concerned, Horsham and Mid Sussex. Both councils are planning for the right number of houses to be built elsewhere in their districts, but this is an inappropriate location for a new town. The developer, Mayfield, owns very little of the land concerned, and has options on very little of it. A huge number of landowners, responsible for some 4,000 acres of the area, are saying that they do not want their land to be developed. The new town, therefore, could only be built in future in the event of compulsory purchase of the land.

The developer has sought to disrupt the planning process at every stage, arguing against the plans of Horsham and Mid Sussex district councils in an attempt to get its own way. I should point out that an adviser—a paid adviser—to this new town promoter is Lord Taylor of Goss Moor, who was the promoter of the amendment. He declared his interest properly, but it is nevertheless important for us to understand that. Lord Taylor gave the game away when he moved his amendment. He said that what he wanted was a device whereby it would be possible

“to capture the value of land in order to create supplements.”—*[Official Report, House of Lords, 15 March 2017; Vol. 779, c. 1894.]*

I want the House to understand what Lord Taylor meant. He meant that he wanted to give powers of compulsory purchase to local authorities so that local authorities could purchase land at below the market rate.

Huge blight has already been created in that part of my constituency because of the predatory activities of a developer that does not have sufficient options on the land for a new town in an area where it will never be built. Can the House imagine what would happen were we to give these powers to local authorities which, all over the country, could start to consider where, using powers of compulsory purchase, they might acquire at below the market rate land on which they simply had designs to build?

John Mann: Under the code of conduct on standards in public life, someone who has declared an interest—certainly in this House—is prohibited from moving an amendment in which that person has a pecuniary interest in relation to any organisation, as has been the case ever since the Nolan Committee reported in 1996. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that the House should reflect on that?

Nick Herbert: I should emphasise that Lord Taylor made his interest clear when he moved the amendment. As for the rules in the other place, I am not aware of them, but it is the case that Lord Taylor has had in the past, if not currently, a commercial interest with one of the developers that would stand to gain from the transfer of powers that may be effected by the permissive legislation that the Government wish the House to accept.

I believe that this raises a question of principle, namely whether the powers of, specifically, compulsory purchase should ever be delegated to local authorities. I suggest to Members on both sides of the House that we should not allow that. While it might be appropriate to delegate other powers to make it easier for new towns to be established by local consent, I think it would be a grave mistake to delegate powers of compulsory purchase in a way that would cause Ministers to lose control altogether of the process whereby land may be compulsorily purchased. It would have the effects I have described in this area all across the country. The amendment would forbid such a transfer of power in this specific instance in relation to powers of compulsory purchase, and I seek reassurance from my hon. Friend the Minister that the Government have no intention of allowing such a transfer of powers of compulsory purchase. He will know that this is also of huge concern to my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who is unable to be here today but shares my concern about the impact of the Mayfields new town, which crosses both our constituencies.

4.15 pm

My hon. Friend is an excellent, conscientious and assiduous Minister, who is always willing to listen to concerns of hon. Members on both sides of the House; I know that from personal experience and the way he has responded to me before. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the decision he took on Friday and about this proposed transfer of powers, and would be very grateful if he reassured me on both counts.

Gavin Barwell: Let me briefly respond to the points made by the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert).

The hon. Gentleman asked whether a council can designate particular sites for housing for the elderly, and the simple answer is yes, it can. They have powers to do that already, and in the guidance we issue we might want to look at the extent to which we allow that to be a matter for local decision making, or whether it is something we wish to promote.

The hon. Gentleman made two vital points in relation to neighbourhood planning. First, neighbourhood planning is not just for affluent rural communities. This is an opportunity for communities right across the country to have more of a say about how they develop in the future and how we make the tough and difficult choices

that must be made in order to provide the housing we so desperately need and the land for employment and other community uses. The Government are very much committed to ensuring that neighbourhood planning is not just for affluent communities and that we see it adopted right across the country. I have said before that I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the role he personally has played as an advocate of this policy. He will know that we make additional financial support available to groups in deprived areas, recognising that they need capacity support to produce the plans, and we recently confirmed that that support will be going forward over the next few years. He made a crucial point, however.

The hon. Gentleman's second point was picked up by my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs, but it is worth reiterating from the Dispatch Box. Although at the moment the sample size is relatively small, there is clear evidence that neighbourhood plans that allocate sites for housing have actually provided for more housing than their relevant local authority was going to propose. I do not wish to make a party political point, because I am trying to encourage consensus, but I believe in passing power down to people, and it is a very powerful argument for doing so when we trust people to make decisions about their area and they respond in exactly the way we would want.

John Mann: That is a good socialist principle.

Gavin Barwell: Both sides of the House can lay claim to that good localist principle. The evidence is clear, and that is why the Government are keen to see neighbourhood planning turbocharged around the country. I will say a little more about that shortly, but first I want to respond to the points my right hon. Friend made, because the overall argument is relevant to both aspects.

I will deal with my right hon. Friend's two amendments first, and then come on to the particular planning application he refers to. On amendment (a) to Lords amendment 4, the Government absolutely agree with him about the importance of neighbourhood forums and parish councils having sufficient time to consider planning applications when notified by local planning authorities, and, crucially, about the importance of their views being taken into account when local planning authorities make decisions. I can assure him and the House as a whole that we intend to update the secondary legislation to provide requirements for where forums and parish councils are automatically notified of planning applications under the new provisions.

The provisions will be consistent with the existing provisions in the development management procedure order relating to consultation on planning applications. They will include providing that a local planning authority must not determine any planning application where a parish council or designated neighbourhood forum has been notified and wishes to make representations before a minimum of 21 days has elapsed. It is already the case that a local planning authority must consider the representations received and whether considerations are raised that may be material to the application, but detailed requirements relating to the operation of the planning application process best sit in secondary rather than primary legislation, to ensure that we have the flexibility to keep procedures up to date. It would not surprise me if my right hon. Friend wanted to come back with further suggestions, and it is much easier to

[Gavin Barwell]

make suggestions if the matters are in secondary legislation. Having provided him with all the reassurances he wanted, I respectfully request that he does not press his amendment.

It is not necessarily for me to defend amendment (a) to Lords amendment 23, but let me say what I think Lord Taylor was driving at and then reassure my right hon. Friend on his particular points. At the moment, when somebody owns a piece of land that is not designated as suitable for housing or any other use and then, through a local plan process, the council changes that designation, the landowner sees a significant uplift in value. If a company or individual then acquires rights over that land and secures planning permission, there is a further uplift, and that planning permission may be traded several times. At the end of the process, several organisations or individuals have made a great deal of money and there is not a great deal of value in the land for providing the infrastructure that all our constituents tell us is vital to go along with housing. I think Lord Taylor is considering the extent to which, when changing the designation of land, the public sector can try to secure that land early in the process, avoiding the long chain I described and ensuring that more value is available to provide the required infrastructure.

Having said that, it is important that I provide my right hon. Friend with clarification about the regulations that will be made. I reassure him that the functions that could be transferred would not include functions that are the prerogative of the Secretary of State. Under the New Towns Act 1981, any compulsory purchase order sought by a new town development corporation must be submitted to and confirmed by the Secretary of State. That is the case for compulsory purchase orders sought by all bodies, and there will be no change to that position. That will be clear from the regulations, which will, subject to the enactment of this Bill, come to this House for approval. On that basis, I hope that my right hon. Friend will withdraw amendment (a) to Lords amendment 23.

Jim McMahon: An important point that needs addressing relates to the conflict of interest of the Member in the other place. It is perhaps not something for now if the Minister does not have the information, but we need a commitment that it will be looked into seriously.

Gavin Barwell: It is not an easy question for me to answer, because I am not aware of the nature of Lord Taylor's interest in this matter, so I cannot really respond to it at the Dispatch Box. However, I am sure that his attention will be drawn to the concerns raised on the Floor of the House and that he will make the record clear.

I want to say a few words about neighbourhood planning in general and address the specific point about the application mentioned by my right hon. Friend. He will understand that I must be careful about not saying too much about particular applications, even after a decision has been made, because the decision letter is the record of the decision, but the key point to draw the House's attention to was that a relevant neighbourhood plan was not in place. Work was under way to prepare one, but that work was at a sufficiently early place to mean that I was unable to give the plan a great deal of weight in making my decision.

A clear lesson for when such decisions have to be made—if it is possible to spread this out to the generality—is the importance of two things. The first is that the relevant local council has a five-year land supply in place so that the presumption does not apply. The second is ensuring that the processes for producing neighbourhood plans are as streamlined as possible from the point at which people start work on them to when they receive examination. It is worth putting on the record that the Bill will give plans weight at an earlier stage in the process—as soon as they have gone through examination. We want to make that process as quick as possible, so that planning decisions that undermine what a community is trying to achieve are not being made during the preparation of plans.

I have a couple of general observations that will allow me to give my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs the clear assurance he wants. I am a real advocate of neighbourhood planning, in which I strongly believe. There are tensions in public policy, and it is important that Ministers are honest about that. If the Government were to give complete protection to all neighbourhood plans in all circumstances, there would be a danger that in areas with a large level of neighbourhood plan coverage but where a local authority does not have an adequate five-year land supply in place and is not delivering homes, we would have no mechanism for getting homes delivered. There has to be a balance, and I tried to strike the right balance in the written ministerial statement we published before Christmas, but the Bill will bring plans into force quicker, will make it easier to simplify plans and to change the areas covered by plans, and will put more pressure on councils to engage with neighbourhoods that want to produce a plan. We are taking a significant step forward from the written ministerial statement.

More widely, my main reflection having been in the job for eight or nine months is that it is a great privilege to serve in this position, but the thing I like least about my job is having to take decisions on planning applications for places I do not know. One of my main objectives is therefore to ensure that, across the country, we get local plans in place that are up to date, that have a five-year land supply and that are delivered by local authorities. I say clearly and categorically to my right hon. Friend from the Dispatch Box that if a council has an up-to-date plan, has a five-year land supply and is delivering the required number of homes each year, I do not expect my inspectors to be overturning the planning decisions of local communities in anything other than the most exceptional circumstances—I have to add that last caveat because all Members will know that sometimes councils take decisions on individual applications that are contrary to their plan because in a particular case there are pressing reasons for it being the right thing to do. If councils are doing the right things, the Government should generally leave the decisions to local authorities. That is where I am trying to get housing and planning policy to, and I know the Secretary of State shares that view.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I share the Minister's view that decisions should be taken locally. It is costing Lancashire constabulary an absolute fortune to police the fracking protests in Lancashire. Can he explain why that decision was taken by Lancashire County Council and then overturned by the Secretary of State, who

approved the planning application, which is now costing £14,000 a day to police? If local people know best, why was it not the case then?

Gavin Barwell: There are exceptions to every rule. Although I cannot get drawn into discussing that case, perhaps I can give some hypothetical examples. Certain types of application raise issues of key pieces of national infrastructure that have relevance beyond an individual local community. I invite hon. Members to imagine that a neighbouring local authority to their own were considering an application for a large out-of-town retail centre, which would clearly have implications for local high streets not just in that authority's area but in neighbouring areas, too. There might therefore be an interest in ensuring that all those wider communities have a say, rather than in the decision being taken by a specific local authority.

Graham Jones *rose*—

Gavin Barwell: I will happily talk to the hon. Gentleman outside the Chamber, but there is a difficulty. I cannot discuss individual applications, so I will not take a further intervention. I am happy to have a separate discussion.

There have been no votes on the two areas on which the Government disagree with the Lords amendments, which I hope sends a clear message to the other place about the unanimity in this House on pubs and planning conditions. I hope this will be the last time I speak on this Bill.

I shall end my contribution by saying that the Bill, on its own, is not the answer to the housing problems we face in this country, but it makes an important contribution: by supporting neighbourhood planning, which is delivering more housing in those communities that adopt it; by speeding up our system, through the reform of planning conditions and compulsory purchase; and, vitally, by ensuring that we do a better job of getting up-to-date planning policies in place right across this country.

Finally, on my behalf and that of the Secretary of State, I wish to thank the outstanding officials in our Department for their work on this legislation. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), one of the stars of the Government Whips Office—given my background, that is a very high compliment—and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) for their support during these proceedings.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 9, and 23 to 84 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 4, 5, 23, 40, 44, 48 to 50 and 84.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendment 12.

That Gavin Barwell, Jackie Doyle-Price, Vicky Foxcroft, Chris Green, Jim McMahon and Rebecca Pow be members of the Committee;

That Gavin Barwell be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Steve Brine.*)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Backbench Business

Yemen

4.32 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen; and calls upon the Government to take a lead in passing a resolution at the UN Security Council that would give effect to an immediate ceasefire in Yemen.

I am most grateful to all members of the Backbench Business Committee for granting this vital debate. I also thank my fellow officers of the all-party group on Yemen, the hon. Members for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), for leading this debate with me. I commend the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the right hon. and gallant Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), for the work he has undertaken on Yemen. He demonstrated to all of us last week what a brave, honourable and decent man he is. I am also pleased to see the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), and the shadow International Development Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), in their places.

We meet today at a time when Yemen, one of the poorest countries on earth, stands on the precipice of an unprecedented tragedy. Two years ago this week, a Saudi-led coalition launched an intervention after the legitimately elected Government of the President of Yemen, Mansur Hadi, had been ousted in a coup by Houthis rebels. We welcomed the action of the coalition, which was mandated by the Security Council in resolution 2216. Earlier today in another part of this House, and thanks to the chairing of the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie), we heard from Major General Asiri, the spokesman for the Saudi coalition, on the coalition action so far and its aspirations for the future. The meeting was extremely useful.

This afternoon, we stand in a very different world from the one of two years ago. The latest figures from the humanitarian crisis in Yemen are unbelievable: 10,000 people have died; more than 1,500 of the dead were children; 47,000 people have been injured, many crippled for life; and 7 million are at immediate risk of starvation, including 2 million children. The United Nations has just announced that Yemen is only one step away from outright famine. In total, 21.2 million people require urgent humanitarian assistance—80% of the country's population. We have become frighteningly numb to the figures. It should shock us to our very core: 21 million people is more than double the entire population of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a strong and appropriate speech, setting out the scale of the tragedy that Yemen is experiencing and what it potentially faces. Does he share my great concern that both sides in the conflict continue to frustrate humanitarian access? For example, at the port of Hudaydah, cranes that were supposed to unload crucial medical and humanitarian cargoes are not yet in place.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are very concerned about the blockades by both sides and the inability to get humanitarian aid into the country. I know that other right hon. and hon. Members will, along with me, want to draw attention to the problem of access.

According to a recent YouGov poll, less than half the UK's population even knows that there is a war in Yemen, a former British colony. It is the forgotten war, which is why the motion has only one objective: to secure an all-important, long-lasting ceasefire. I hope that in this debate we can show solidarity and unity in support of the people of Yemen. Members may of course wish to raise many issues, and rightly so, but the motion is clear, and its focus is on bringing peace to Yemen.

How did we arrive at this point? In the Arab spring of 2011, Yemen and Tunisia stood apart in the region as the sites of the only peaceful transitions to democracy. Particular praise for that goes to the current Minister for Europe and the Americas, who became the Prime Minister's envoy to Yemen. The UK has maintained stronger links with Yemen than any other western country. Three Members of this House were born there: myself, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth South. Members such as the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who is the vice-chair of the all-party group, have visited the country, and Members including the hon. Members for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) have served there in the armed forces.

The past two years have chipped away at the Yemeni people's historical good will for the United Kingdom. Last Friday, I met members of the Yemeni diaspora in Sheffield, with another officer of the all-party group, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). At that meeting, the community's message was one of disbelief that the United Kingdom had not acted more strongly to end the fighting. We continue to be one of the largest bilateral aid donors to Yemen, and the Department for International Development is contributing £100 million to the country. I commend the efforts of the Secretary of State for International Development, who has made additional funds available to Yemen as a priority for her Department and taken the lead on Yemen internationally. That work was begun under her predecessor, the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), who is in his place and has recently returned from Sana'a. He has described the "appalling scale" of the crisis there. I hope he will be able to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

So far, we have had three failed opportunities for a sustainable end to the fighting: negotiations in April 2016 ended in failure; a UN-sponsored round of talks in Kuwait ended in failure in August 2016; and John Kerry's initiative last November led to the Saudi-led coalition and Houthis agreeing to the UN special envoy's terms, but the agreement collapsed when President Hadi refused to sign the deal. The intervention of the Foreign Secretary secured a three-day ceasefire in October, which allowed vital aid to reach the most desperate parts of the country, but that was just a drop in an ocean of despair. The political process has now ended. Talks have not been revived. Will the Minister confirm whether a new round of talks has been planned and what

ongoing discussions he has had with the key players in the conflict? Many are now part of a very complicated game of thrones that is the crisis in Yemen, including the Hadi Government, the Houthis, former President Saleh, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Iran, the UK, and the USA. The only winners are Daesh and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Oman has now been invited into the "Quad" of nations seeking to resolve the crisis.

I travelled to Oman in February to meet the Foreign Minister, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah. I thanked the Omani Government for the assistance that they gave me locally. The Minister told me that there is hope. He said that the road map of the UN special envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, was firmly on the table. He was also clear that the political road map can and should begin immediately, implementing a ceasefire while the economic and security issues are resolved. When the Minister replies, can he inform us whether, subject to the immediate obstacles being overcome, he believes the political road map can now be implemented?

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): On the urgency of the need for a ceasefire, is the right hon. Gentleman aware of a report in yesterday's *Washington Post* that the United States Administration are now getting back into a Saudi project to invade and capture Hudaydah port?

Keith Vaz: I am not aware of that report. That would be extremely damaging to the process that I am talking about today, which is the need for all parties, including the United States, to support a ceasefire. I will certainly look at that report. Perhaps the Minister who has heard what the hon. Gentleman said will have an opportunity to reply.

When I was in Oman, I also had the opportunity to speak to President Hadi. The President, speaking to me from Aden, was focused on addressing the humanitarian crisis, but he was no closer to agreeing to the UN special envoy's proposal. If President Hadi signs up to this agreement, he has an opportunity to be remembered as the man who brought peace to Yemen, and who stopped the suffering of his people. He should take it. I am grateful to him for accepting an invitation to address the all-party group in June. Can the Minister confirm whether President Hadi is any closer to agreeing to the terms of the special envoy's road map?

The UK can and must be the honest broker. That means putting pressure on all parties, including those who receive British support. Can the Minister tell us whether the UK is prepared to sanction the Yemeni and Saudi Governments, if they allow the next round of negotiations to fail?

Tomorrow may be one of the most critical days in the history of Yemen. At 10am in New York, the United Nations Security Council will hold a full session on the conflict in Yemen, where they will hear directly from the special envoy. It will be chaired by our excellent ambassador, Matthew Rycroft. The United Kingdom is the current President of the Security Council, as we are, of course, the "pen holder" on Yemen at the United Nations, which means that we lead on all issues relating to Yemen. This is a unique opportunity to make a case to the Security Council, and to secure a new resolution that would enable a ceasefire.

Stephen O'Brien, the outstanding UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Co-ordinator, and a former Member of this House, made a stunning announcement this month that the world faces its worst humanitarian crisis since 1945. He focused on Yemen. The French Government, who previously took a backseat on Yemen, announced last week the need for an immediate ceasefire. I have met both the Chinese and Egyptian ambassadors to London. On behalf of their Governments, they told me that the first priority was the cessation of hostilities. Most importantly, it is very clear that nobody is winning the war on the ground, and that nobody will ever win by military means. The only solution will come from the negotiating table. That point was forcefully made by the UN panel of experts.

I spoke to Matthew Rycroft yesterday, and he explained that the political process needs to begin moving in the right direction. It is clear to me, and I hope that it will be clear to the House, that a resolution adopted tomorrow would commit all sides to guarantee the ceasefire. Will the Minister ensure that the United Kingdom proposes such a resolution at tomorrow's session? That will really help the peace process. If it is not to be tabled tomorrow, what is the timetable for putting forward that motion? Quite simply, these efforts cannot wait.

While we push for peace, Yemen continues to face myriad challenges. Organisations such as Save the Children, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, Médecins sans Frontières, UNICEF, CARE, Christian Aid and the Red Cross are performing wonders on the ground, but there are still chronic humanitarian access issues. Despite the generous contributions to the UN appeal, which is only 50% filled, serious damage to the port of Hudaydah has, as we have heard, created a monumental blockage for aid delivery into Yemen. If Hudaydah cannot function, we cannot stop famine in Yemen. Has the Minister considered proposals by the Yemen Safe Passage Group, led by a former British ambassador to Yemen, that the UN takes over the running of the port to allow aid to flow into the country? I am sure that other officers of the all-party group will speak further on the humanitarian crisis.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con) *rose*—

Keith Vaz: I will take this final intervention.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I apologise for not being here for the right hon. Gentleman's opening remarks, but I did hear him say that he had a meeting with General Asiri this morning, as I also did. The point he made to me was that the Saudis have the capacity to block the port—they are not doing so—and that the port is in the hands of the militia, who are taking their tithe on all the goods coming in. In fact, it is the Houthis militia who are standing between the aid and the people who need it.

Keith Vaz: I was at the same meeting, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. That is why we need a ceasefire, and why we need the UN going in there to monitor the delivery of aid. As we heard, the aid was being hijacked and used for other purposes, which is why the ceasefire is so important.

To conclude, what we do know and what is beyond all doubt is that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and Daesh have exploited the crisis that has grown in Yemen

as a result of this conflict, and that they now de facto control swathes of territory. My interest in Yemen is not political; it is deeply personal. Aden, the city of my birth, was once the jewel of the Arabian sea. It was once a centre of British influence and of global trade, as ships passed through the Suez canal. The people of Yemen do not deserve to be condemned to suffer one of modern history's greatest human catastrophes. I see a crisis that is not intractable. I see that there is a path to peace.

I began by warning that Yemen stood on the precipice of an unprecedented tragedy. This is true, but we have the chance in New York tomorrow morning to save this beautiful country. We are part of this conflict, and the time for waiting, watching and failing to act must end. Nero fiddled as Rome burned. The presidency that we hold tomorrow gives us the opportunity to demonstrate leadership, and leadership is exactly what the Yemeni people need. Let us bring light back to a country that otherwise will be consumed by darkness, starvation and evil.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that this is a very short debate, finishing at 6 o'clock. Therefore, I have to impose an immediate time limit of four minutes.

4.49 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), with his customary eloquence, has put the case extremely well. The last time the House debated Yemen, I was in Yemen, visiting Sana'a and Sa'dah, so I have an opportunity to update the House on what is happening there. I pay tribute to the extraordinary work that the United Nations and its leader there, Jamie McGoldrick, are doing in Yemen, and to Oxfam, which, in the highest traditions of British international non-governmental organisations, is performing extraordinarily well and doing magnificent work.

It is good to see the Minister in his place. My submission to him is that the Government's policy needs tweaking. We are supporting a coalition that is not going to succeed. We need to move towards neutrality, we need to try to engineer a ceasefire and we need to update UN resolution 2216. Because of the deep respect with which Britain is held in that part of the world, and particularly in Yemen, the adversaries, and particularly the Houthis, would be willing to accept British mediation. In my view, it is essential that we engage with all parties inside the structure of the United Nations to secure the ceasefire and Yemeni-Saudi Arabian talks.

The British Government's policy needs tweaking because it is internally inconsistent. One part of the British Government is seeking to get development aid and vital supplies in through the port of Hudaydah, while another part is supporting the coalition that has been bombing the port. The coalition has put the cranes out of action when they are vital for unloading the ships that one part of the British Government is trying to get into the port.

Britain is seeking to help to de-mine ordnance—the British de-mining group up in Sa'dah, which has been heavily bombed, is led by a former British Army officer. We can see the inconsistencies in our position. Britain is supporting a malnutrition ward in a major hospital,

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

from which Médecins sans Frontières has withdrawn, in Sa'dah, yet it is seen as part of the coalition that is causing the problems.

Stephen Doughty: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman speaks with great eloquence and is informed on these matters. Does he agree that, in that inconsistency, there is a particular issue: the continued use of cluster munitions by the coalition? Human Rights Watch reports of an incident just this month. He mentioned landmines. These are instruments of war that predominantly kill civilians and leave problems for many months and years after conflicts have ended.

Mr Mitchell: The Minister will perhaps make this clear, but my understanding is that the Saudis have agreed not to use any of the cluster munitions that were sold by Britain to Saudi Arabia in 1986.

Another inconsistency is that, recently, we have heard that the Americans launched a bombing attack on al-Qaeda in Yemen, but al-Qaeda is fighting on the same side as us against the Houthis. The internal inconsistencies in the policy very much need to be addressed.

We know that the world faces four famines. Many of us had believed that, in the year 2017, it would be inconceivable that that awful biblical experience could be revisited on people, yet four famines are pending—in northern Nigeria, Somalia, southern Sudan and Yemen. However, the Yemenis are not starving: they are being starved by a blockade in which we are complicit. Although Britain has led the way in tackling those four famines, and although the Department for International Development is doing its best to ensure that steps are taken in Yemen to stop that starvation, the people of Yemen are being starved. The UN has made it absolutely clear from first-hand evidence on the ground what that means for the future of children in the country.

In my view, the Government must do everything they can to ensure that the ceasefire takes place, and that British policy is tweaked, using all the many instruments at our disposal, which the Minister knows so well, through the United Nations and elsewhere. We should try to make certain that the blockade is lifted, that the ceasefire takes place, and that there are Saudi-Yemeni talks. We then need the Yemeni-Yemeni talks, for which there is a basis—it has to be from the bottom up through all the different parties, governorates, tribes and so forth in Yemen. Britain has an important role to play in that.

We should bear it in mind that Yemen imports 90% of what it eats, and 80% through the port of Hudaydah. One effect of the blockade and the failure of the banking system is that the four major wheat importers cannot get the credits to put that right. Britain should help to lead in stopping that.

4.54 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the other officers of the all-party group on Yemen on organising a timely debate, as we have just marked the third anniversary of the crisis in Yemen.

It is a particular pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), the former Secretary of State for International Development, who kindly gave evidence to the International Development Committee recently, following his visit to Yemen. Today, he has again provided a thoughtful and important contribution.

This coming Saturday, in Liverpool, we will hold the monthly vigil for peace in Yemen, which is arranged by Liverpool Friends of Yemen, drawing on the large Yemeni community in Liverpool and on other friends. In advance of this afternoon's debate, I contacted members of Liverpool Friends of Yemen to ask what they would like me to address if I were called to speak, and the major focus was the one reflected in the motion before the House: the sheer scale of the humanitarian crisis the people of Yemen face and the need for peace in that country.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend would agree that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who moved the motion, forcefully said, the United Nations decisions tomorrow will be very important, given what previous speakers have said about a ceasefire, and perhaps the blockade will be lifted as well.

Stephen Twigg: I agree absolutely, and let us all hope for progress as a consequence of the United Nations Security Council discussions tomorrow.

The scale of this crisis has been documented by the previous speakers and in previous debates. UNICEF tells us that more than 1,500 children have been killed since the fighting began, with a similar number being recruited to fight by both sides of the conflict. As my right hon. Friend said in his opening speech, the conflict has claimed the lives of at least 10,000 people, and some have put the level of civilian deaths alone as high as 5,000.

The United Nations has given the crisis level 3 status, putting it on a par with similar crises in Syria, Iraq and South Sudan. The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross has said that the intensity and severity of the fighting have left Yemen looking like Syria did after five years of conflict. Some 19 million people are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance—that is 80%, or four in five, of the population. Half a million children are suffering from severe malnutrition. Saleh Saeed, the chief executive of the Disasters Emergency Committee, who is originally from Yemen, has said that families are having to make the “unbearable” decision between buying medicine or food. This simply cannot be allowed to continue.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend mentioned medicine. Does he agree that there is a crucial crisis in the health sector? The health Ministry's workers have not been paid since August last year. There is a lack of medicines in many areas. Despite the amazing work of organisations such as MSF, many people cannot access the help they need.

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He anticipates the next paragraph of my speech, where I point out that there are 15 million people with no access to healthcare. Of course, 70 health centres have been destroyed as part of the conflict.

Today, the International Development Committee publishes its report on UK aid and the allocation of resources. The work DFID is doing in Yemen is a fine example of why the Prime Minister was right yesterday to say that UK aid is a badge of hope. This morning, the Committee took evidence on education, and we heard about the latest plans from DFID, working with other donors, to ensure that children affected by the conflict do not become a lost generation and that there is investment in the capacity of the Government and local communities in Yemen to ensure that children do not lose out on their education.

The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield talked about what many have described as the paradox of aid—the positive record we as a country have on aid, but the fact that our involvement is aligned with one side of the conflict. I am keen to hear from the Minister what the Government are doing to try to get the port at Hudaydah reopened. That issue has been raised by a number of colleagues during the debate.

Those of us on the International Development Committee have said consistently that there should be an independent UN-led inquiry into all alleged violations of international humanitarian law by both sides in the conflict. However, let us unite behind the motion. This important motion marks the third anniversary, but it also says, ahead of tomorrow, that we want to see a ceasefire, peace and justice, and that we commit to rebuilding Yemen once peace comes.

4.59 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) for bringing the forgotten war back to the Chamber again. Sadly, since the last time we all spoke on this, the humanitarian situation has become worse. I will not reiterate the points about the port of Hudaydah, but I look forward to hearing what my right hon. Friend the Minister is doing, with colleagues, to ensure that it is open.

On the appeal for \$2 billion of funds, sadly, although we are a third of the way through 2017, only 6% of that money has been raised. The UK is in a good position on the list—we are third—but many of our European partners have not paid up yet. I ask the Minister to urge his colleague, the Minister for Europe and the Americas, to talk to European partners about how they can do their part as well.

I want to unpick the second part of the motion, which assumes that a UN Security Council resolution would give effect to an immediate ceasefire. Of course, that is what we all want. It is in the best interests of the Yemeni people, who are now suffering greatly through starvation, more poverty and drug addiction, but it is also in the British national interest, because we cannot afford to have this training ground for terrorists that washes up on our shores.

I applaud the efforts that the Government are making on the diplomatic front. We have been able to achieve that through our long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth); through constituents of mine who have lived there for many years; through parliamentary visits; and through meetings of the Quad involving the US, Saudi Arabia and the

United Arab Emirates. I know that the Minister had a very good working relationship with Secretary Kerry, and I would be interested to hear what conversations he has had with Secretary Tillerson, particularly since the raid on al-Ghayil.

We need to think more broadly about the UN's role in peacekeeping in the 21st century, because this war involves non-state actors. We did not have that as much in the 1940s and '50s. On one side, we have the Yemeni Government of Hadi backed by the Saudi-led coalition with nations that are members of the UN; on the other, we have the Houthis. People say they are an Iran-backed Government. Yes, there are arms coming through from Tehran, but there is not the same level of boots on the ground as there is in Syria.

Mr Mitchell: It is hard to believe that many arms are getting through because the country is completely blockaded, by land, sea and air, by the Saudis.

Seema Kennedy: I accept that point.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab) *rose*—

Seema Kennedy: I briefly give way to my Lancashire neighbour.

Graham Jones: In January, the UN panel of experts report reiterated that point. One of the reasons arms cannot get in is the embargo, which obviously has an adverse effect on aid, too.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend make my point for me.

We are dealing not with another state but with the Houthis, who are amorphous and do not play by the same rules. We need to be aware of that when we are looking for peace and a ceasefire, which is what the aim of all of us should be and what this debate is about. We need to have innovative thinking about nation states, about the role of diplomacy and about the role of the United Nations. I applaud the idea, on this anniversary, of having a UN Security Council resolution, but I am interested in how it will actually be enforceable. How do we bring the Houthis to the table? How do we get food through and how do we stop people fighting? What tools can we, as parliamentarians, give to our diplomats? What tools can we give to the Minister and his Foreign Office colleagues? What can we give to our soldiers, if that is what we need to do, in this multi-faceted modern conflict? We need to continue to engage with all parties. We need to be prepared to talk to the Houthis, the Saudis and everybody involved. We need to be able to back up our words with money and with actions, perhaps including military actions.

5.4 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I extend my thanks to my co-sponsors from the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen—the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond)—both of whom are a great credit to the country of their birth.

Along with many emails from my constituents in Glasgow who follow the situation closely, I have received many briefings from organisations for this debate. There are too many to name, but I am extremely grateful for

[*Alison Thewliss*]

those briefings outlining the desperate situation on the ground. I also recently met the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the APPG had a valuable session with Yemen-based non-governmental organisations. Yemeni constituents of mine have also shared their experiences of the situation in Yemen.

There has been a lot of talk about Yemen being on the brink of famine, with the International Committee of the Red Cross saying that there are only three to four months left to save Yemen from starvation. Jamie McGoldrick, the UN humanitarian co-ordinator for Yemen, concurs, saying that there is only about three months' supply of food left in the country.

As I understand it, part of the issue with declaring famine is that there are not enough independent people on the ground to do so. People are starving, though—of that there is no doubt. The aid agencies know what they are seeing and they are all begging the UK Government to help to get food into the country as a matter of the utmost urgency.

Blockades at Yemen's ports by the Saudi-led coalition have contributed to the situation. Hudaydah is strategically important. It used to handle 70% of food imports, as well as humanitarian aid. It has been under sustained attack, leading to the destruction of infrastructure and rendering inoperable the cranes that used to unload the cargo ships. Unloading must now be done by hand, which is an impossible task.

The frustrating thing is that the port could be operating at the moment. The World Food Programme has bought and paid for cranes to replace those destroyed by the air strikes. They are currently sitting in a port in the UAE, after being refused access by the Saudi-led coalition. That is utterly unacceptable.

George Kerevan: Is my hon. Friend also aware that one of the offshoots of the blockade is that the boats carrying refugees from Somalia to Yemen are being attacked and sunk by Saudi Apache helicopters?

Alison Thewliss: Yes, and that incident was absolutely appalling and shocking. Nobody can fail to be upset by the pictures of those Somali people, who have suffered enough without being bombed.

Ministers must make sure that the cranes, which have been bought and paid for, are installed in Hudaydah. That would turn on the taps: it would get aid and commercial operations flowing again, and get things moving.

Hudaydah's strategic importance is recognised by both the Houthis and the Saudis. Aid agencies, including the UN, fear that the conflict in and around Hudaydah is ramping up, which must be prevented at all costs. Half a million people would be displaced and it would make aid efforts all but impossible. Yemen's primary port cannot be a frontline in this conflict, and I seek the assurance of Ministers that they will pursue the matter.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. We have already heard about the ridiculous situation of the UK Government giving aid with one hand while arming the antagonists with the other. Does she agree that famine

relief and a ceasefire can come about only with the immediate suspension of the Government's selling of arms to the Saudi regime, which has already been found to be guilty of breaches of international humanitarian law?

Alison Thewliss: Absolutely. As I said in Foreign Office questions earlier, £3.3 billion has been made from arms licences over the past two years, which dwarfs the £85 million in Government aid, welcome though that is. The arms sales must stop now. Peace will not happen if bombs continue to rain down on the heads of people in Yemen.

The UK Government's role in establishing the UN verification and inspection mechanism at the port of Hudaydah, inspecting the goods entering Yemen's ports while they are still at sea, is welcome, but Save the Children told me yesterday that that has not prevented the Saudi-led coalition from carrying out its own inspections, thereby delaying vital aid shipments. That can mean a delay of up to three months in delivering aid and medical supplies, leaving aid workers making life and death decisions on the ground about who they can help with dwindling resources.

Some shipments have been diverted from Hudaydah and around the coast to the smaller port of Aden, meaning that convoys have instead to complete the dangerous journey overland, via checkpoints and across the frontline, adding at least another three weeks to the time taken for that aid to reach the people it needs to reach and risking the lives of everybody on the convoy.

Moving goods and people across the country also requires confirmation of deconfliction from authorities in Yemen, without which the convoy will become a target in the war, and nobody wants that to happen. Other Members will no doubt outline the grave mistakes and errors that have happened during air strikes. NGOs based in the country tell me that they are fearful for the lives of their workers at every single checkpoint where they get stopped. They become targets, regardless of the assurances given to them by the governing parties and their warm words.

All the organisations I have met have stressed the difficulty of moving around Yemen, the complications with visas and the delays caused by petty bureaucracy. Some agencies have not been able to make field visits to support their operations on the ground and to bring back evidence that will enable funders to encourage more people to donate to their campaigns. They are not being well enough supported by the Government agencies that should be facilitating aid.

There are increasing problems in getting to Yemen, with limitations on travel by land and sea. Sana'a airport is also closed and people cannot leave, including those who seek urgent medical assistance. I ask the Government to speak to the Saudis about removing that blockage so that people can get in and out by air and receive treatment.

All the delays are costing lives and leaving the population with long-term health problems as a result of severe malnutrition. For want of clean water and a suitable diet, people are less able to fight off disease and their immune systems are more susceptible to cholera. There have been a suspected 22,000 cholera cases in 15 governorates in the past six months alone, and at least 100 people have died as a result. Tragically, UNICEF estimates

that 63,000 children died in 2016 from preventable diseases linked to malnutrition. That is 8,500 more children than were born in the whole of Scotland last year. That is a generation. The future of Yemen hangs in the balance, and the Government must do more.

5.10 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to hold this incredibly important debate, and I thank my friend the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) for organising it.

The situation in Yemen really is a forgotten conflict—or perhaps a better term would be an ignored conflict, in the UK. The humanitarian crisis is on a knife edge. Yemen has always been desperately poor, and 90% of its food and goods are imported, but it is surrounded by huge wealth, and there is no reason why it should not be a functioning country with help from its neighbours.

The war has left Yemen unable to make the best of its own resources. It has some reserves of oil and gas, but its inability to export them has crippled its foreign exchange reserves. The Yemeni central bank has no power to sustain the economy, and the move from Sana'a to Aden without its database or bureaucrats has not helped. There are 1.5 million public sector employees who are being paid only sporadically, if at all.

Yemen's GDP has contracted a further 35% since 2015. A war economy is now in place, and tribal leaders are making a fortune while Yemenis starve. As part of any settlement of the conflict, the international community must be ready to rebuild confidence in the country's financial institutions and guarantee the restoration of the Yemeni economy while bringing rural tribes back together.

I can understand why the coalition has fought to keep its own people safe from attacks. There were four Scud attacks this morning into Saudi territory, and the frequency of such attacks is increasing. The continued fighting is storing up problems for the future. There is no doubt in my mind that the country will continue to be used as a base by Daesh and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula if the conflict persists, and there are growing signs that the groups involved in Syria and Iraq see Yemen as a long-term safe haven. Al-Qaeda has claimed 76 attacks this year in southern and eastern Yemen, and 11 Yemeni security forces were killed near Aden only yesterday. I disagree with the suggestion made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) that al-Qaeda is on our side. It could be an immense threat to the stability of the region.

Mr Mitchell: The point I was making is that in attacking al-Qaeda, the Americans attacked an element that was fighting the Houthis. They attacked an element that was, in that instance, on our side of the conflict.

Mrs Drummond: That may be the case, but al-Qaeda is still attacking the Yemeni security forces, and it is a grave danger to the rest of the region.

We are already supplying aid, which is limiting the impact of the humanitarian crisis, but I want to ask the British Government to be an honest broker in ending the political crisis. My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield recently visited as a guest of the

Houthis, and they told him that they were happy to engage with the British Government on a peace process. Let us challenge them to see whether they really mean it, and whether they really understand UN Security Council resolution 2216, which asks them to lay down their arms and withdraw. We have much expertise in peace negotiations and a long history of engaging with everyone in this area, from Governments to tribal leadership.

On the humanitarian front, I urge the Government to continue to work to improve the flow of aid. We have already helped to ease the blockade on Hudaydah port for supplies of humanitarian aid, fuel and food, but the coalition recently refused access for four new mobile cranes, supplied by the World Food Programme, which would vastly improve the port's capacity for unloading essential supplies. This is a UN body, and the coalition must accept the role of the UN as an impartial agent in this crisis. That includes acceptance of the role of the UN inspection and verification mechanism. I know there are doubts about this being in Djibouti, and there is concern that weapons are still being bought in.

Will the Minister report back to this House on whether the UN inspection and verification mechanism is working in a timely fashion. What evidence is there that weapons are being smuggled? Is there any possibility of the mechanism being established in the port of Hudaydah to reassure the coalition that weapons are not being smuggled? The cranes must be got to Hudaydah, and they must be put to work. Other ports, such as Aden and Mukhalla, must be used to bring in more aid. Will the Minister call on the coalition to support the rehabilitation of port infrastructure and get the cranes working? Is there any indication that the coalition, backed by the US, will soon be attacking Hudaydah, which I know is a concern? Most importantly, will the British Government demand an immediate ceasefire, call all sides to negotiations on the basis of the special envoy's proposals and lead the country of Yemen to peace?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I have to reduce the time limit to three minutes, and I remind the House that it is not compulsory to take an intervention and thus increase the time limit for one's speech.

5.15 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your generosity with the time. I am very glad to speak in this place about the current situation in Yemen.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I seek your clarification about this observation, Madam Deputy Speaker. When this debate ends, there will be an Adjournment debate that, if I understand the protocols of the House correctly, will be allowed more than its 30 minutes. Is it not possible for us to use our full allocation and the time up to the period of 30 minutes before Members of the House disperse today?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I have every sympathy—heartfelt sympathy—with what the Minister has said. This is a vital debate, and I will not use up time in fully

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

answering his point of order. The House decided on the timetable. The Backbench Business Committee gave 90 minutes for this debate, and I am powerless to change that. The Minister has, however, made a very good point.

Clive Lewis: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the hon. Members for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for securing today's debate. I pay tribute to them not just as a politeness but because by choosing Yemen as a topic for public debate in the House they have brought into our public arena an urgent discussion that it is clear our Government would much rather not have and that is, or at the very least should be, deeply embarrassing for them. I say that not to score a petty political point, but to highlight the fact that it is the role of all elected Members to speak up when our Government are acting wrongly on the international stage. That is the essence of our democracy.

As Members have said, a famine in Yemen is imminent, which is a disastrous prospect on top of the many children and adults who have already died. This famine is not a consequence of natural disaster, but a result of the civil war. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) memorably said again today, "Yemenis are not starving; they are being starved". It is a famine that is being deliberately used a weapon of war, but one that can be stopped as soon as we find the political will to stop it. That is a huge responsibility for all of us in the House, and we must find the political will to do so as a matter of the utmost urgency.

That is a particular responsibility for us because the UK is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, we hold the presidency this month of the UN Security Council—that will end this week—and we of course have close political ties with neighbouring states. It is clear that we have been gifted an opportunity to set the international agenda, and it is nothing less than our absolute moral duty to do so. Let us begin by acknowledging that, notwithstanding the good intentions in the motion, we cannot pass a resolution that

"would give effect to an immediate ceasefire in Yemen"

however much we might wish we could do so. We must, however, call for an immediate ceasefire, and throw our weight behind that goal.

We can certainly recognise that all major parties to this war must be part of the solution, and that United Nations Security Council resolution 2216 needs to be replaced by a realistic alternative that will bring everyone to the negotiating table. We can and must recognise the importance of independent witnesses on the ground, and the urgent need for reliable data relating to food insecurity so that relief can be well targeted. Binding assurances are clearly needed from both sides on the protection of humanitarian workers. These are credible and achievable political goals.

5.19 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on securing the debate. I think it is the second time in six or eight weeks that we have come to the Chamber

to debate Yemen. I am delighted to do so. I think last time I opened up by saying that the most important point is not armed sales, but the people who are suffering in Yemen. This is about a ceasefire, about peace and about throwing all our weight behind trying to achieve something that will benefit the people on the ground. It is not about token policies bandied around for self-promotion.

The UN panel of experts published a new updated report in January and I would like to pick the bones out of it, even if I will not get to say a great deal in two minutes. The panel stated that

"an outright military victory by any one side is no longer a realistic possibility in the near term".

We have to recognise that there are three sides to this conflict. As well as the misery and suffering of the people on the ground, Islamist terrorists will profit from the conflict for as long as it goes on. It is important to remember that the UN panel of experts continues to support the democratically elected President Hadi and the coalition through UN resolution 2216, which condemns the Houthi-Saleh coup and calls for meaningful peace talks. It praises the Gulf Co-operation Council for its attempts in trying to bring about a ceasefire. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East pointed out that one of the blockages on the Houthi side is that so far they do not seem willing or able to come to the table. Listening to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), it may be that that is going to change. Let us hope that it does. It is important for them to come to the table, because that is the road map to peace.

The UN panel reports that both sides have committed terrible atrocities and that

"some of the coalition attacks may amount to war crimes".

The Saudis, who are involved in coalition operations in Iraq and Syria, operate to NATO standards. They openly admit that they have made mistakes. None the less, some atrocities have occurred and the UN panel recognises that some of them have been committed by the coalition. However, the panel recognises that many atrocities, if not more, have been committed by the Houthis. The panel's report states that

"violations of international humanitarian law and human rights norms were widespread",

including the use of mortar bombs, free flight rockets into densely populated residential areas, attacks on hospitals, forcible disappearance of individuals and detention, torture and murder.

I see that the clock has run down. I ask the Minister to press for a ceasefire and meaningful peace talks.

5.22 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this very important debate on Yemen. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), and the hon. Members for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). I want to pay tribute in particular to my right hon. Friend. Yemen has been called the forgotten conflict. The way he speaks so passionately about his country of birth means that that will never be the case in this House as long as he is here.

The political situation in Yemen, which has led to this point, is obviously very complicated. Once the Houthis captured parts of Yemen and essentially launched a

coup d'état against the new President Hadi, it became evident that the country would descend into civil war. There is a natural instinct and a well-established principle in international law that where there is conflict and a humanitarian situation develops, there is not only a right to intervene but an international responsibility to protect civilians in certain circumstances.

In a single attack in March last year, which involved a Saudi air strike on a crowded village market, 106 civilians, including 24 children, died. We must face up to the fact that there is a very realistic chance that the weapon used to cause so much destruction and grief was sold to Saudi Arabia by the UK. We have heard that the UK has given advice and support to Saudi forces to help them to comply with their obligations under international law, but the message clearly is not getting through. Saudi Arabia has designated the entire Yemeni governorate of Sa'dah a military target. That tramples over protocol I of the Geneva convention which defines legitimate military targets, and to which both the UK and Saudi Arabia have signed up. The definition includes a wide range of infrastructure, military industrial and communications targets, but it does not include hospitals, including those run by aid organisations or village markets. Illegally declaring an entire governorate a military target, and recklessly killing civilians in cities, schools and hospitals as a result, is a clear breach of international law. This is a position supported by the UN humanitarian co-ordinator for Yemen.

Turning war into peace is never easy, but the United Nations can be a fantastic vehicle when properly used. We must take the civil war in Yemen and seriously encourage our counterparts on all sides of the conflict—with the exception of the terrorist groups of Daesh who are taking advantage of the war—to stop the armed conflict and get around the negotiating table. Brokering a ceasefire is the first step towards that, and it is something in which we could and should play a role.

Sir Gerald Howarth: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the Saudis have invited the United Nations to monitor the port movements? Would that not help to relieve the humanitarian problem?

Chris Evans: I fully accept that the Saudis have been invited into the Government, but what I am concerned about is the Saudis using civilians as targets and those civilians being hurt. That is when we have a humanitarian catastrophe on our hands.

Mr Mitchell: To be absolutely clear, the Saudis are preventing the replacement cranes from getting into Hudaydah, in spite of the fact that the Department for International Development urgently needs these cranes in order to unload vessels carrying aid, medicine and food.

Chris Evans: I accept the right hon. Gentleman's point.

Clearly, ceasefires are simply the beginning of a long peace-making process. Any ceasefire needs to be enforced if it is to be successful. Without enforcement, ceasefires have a tendency to fall apart and very quickly become active armed conflicts. This can be seen in Syria and to some extent in Ukraine. UN peacekeepers are specifically intended for this very purpose, and could be deployed in Yemen to enforce a ceasefire agreement.

To conclude, this would clearly be difficult, given the wider geopolitical forces involved and the necessity of agreement among the United Nations Security Council, but it is something we must strive towards, encourage and support. Too many people have died; we cannot oversee another famine such as the one we see in Yemen at the moment.

5.26 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on bringing this debate to the House today. What we are seeing in Yemen is a humanitarian crisis—referred to as one of the worst the world has ever seen. Over the past 18 months, the war and destruction have killed over 10,000 people, with at least 1,200 of them being children. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the majority of those deaths are from coalition air strikes. Some 3 million people have severe malnutrition, with a further 21 million requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.

This is one of the world's worst hunger crises. The Red Cross warned this month that there are only three or four months left to avoid famine. We are used to statistics and figures in this place, but I remind my hon. Friends that each and every one of these people is a mother, a father, a brother or sister, a husband or wife or a child. These are the innocent victims caught up in the forgotten war. The conflict is making this enormous catastrophe worse every day that it continues—and both sides are failing to facilitate the flow of vital humanitarian aid, and failing to conduct any kind of credible investigation in Yemen that meets international standards.

There are many Yemeni people living in my constituency, many of whom have family caught up in the destruction in Yemen. They are absolutely terrified for their relatives. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East joined me at an event in Sheffield with a local Yemeni community. I commend his huge commitment to shedding light on the crisis and his work on the issue.

Over the weekend, we marked the two-year anniversary of the beginning of the conflict in Yemen. I must say, with enormous regret, that if the current political will remains as it is, this conflict will continue. We must take action now. There must be an immediate ceasefire and humanitarian aid must be adroitly brought in and distributed. If the conditions for that are not met, huge numbers of Yemenis will continue to suffer and die. The coalition insists that it has only military targets, but I suggest that the evidence of the Saudi-led coalition attacks on civilians and the resulting civilian catastrophe that has ensued shows either incompetence on the part of the Saudi coalition or, as suggested by human rights organisations, a blatant breach of international humanitarian law.

The United Kingdom's approach to the war in Yemen is a total contradiction, and I urge the Government to do all that they can to adopt a new resolution. We must see some progress towards an immediate ceasefire as soon as possible. Alongside that, humanitarian access must be a priority, and food supplies and aid routes must be established if we are to avoid an even greater catastrophe.

5.30 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The humanitarian situation in Yemen is extremely serious, and continues to spiral out of control. A report released by UNICEF yesterday makes harrowing reading. It states:

“Malnourished children across Yemen are teetering between life and death.... Cemeteries are filling up with small unmarked graves, the deaths of children unreported to authorities, their suffering invisible to the world.”

Some 9.6 million children—80% of all children in the country—are in need of humanitarian assistance. That is a moral outrage.

Citing international development budgets in response to repeated expressions of serious concern about the United Kingdom’s arms trade with Saudi Arabia is also an outrageous way for any supposedly responsible Government to act. As we have heard, the Saudi-led coalition has destroyed much of the infrastructure in Yemen. As a result of air strikes on the port of Hudaydah, only one of the six loading cranes remains functional. That is seriously hampering DFID’s efforts to get aid into the country.

Good intentions count for absolutely nothing. What good is it if we allocate an aid budget but continue to support those who are making it near-impossible to get the aid to those who need it? Nearly 10 million wee ones need assistance, and not only are we not doing enough to help; we are actively preventing ourselves from helping. Why are we ignoring the brutal and realistic prospect of an impending famine, a famine that we will have been utterly and shamefully complicit in creating? The international development line simply will not wash any more.

Why are the UK Government so keen to continue selling weapons that they are unwilling even to try to persuade their Saudi allies to stop the bombing? Why are we not front and centre, leading ceasefire negotiations at the United Nations? There are clear breaches of international humanitarian law on all sides of the conflict, but the Government continue their policy of implausible deniability about their allies, and, worse still, their collusion in those breaches. Their insistence that the Saudis should be allowed to investigate themselves would be laughably absurd if it were not so obscenely improper.

Unfortunately, I do not have much time. Let me end by saying this. The Government appear to be totally incapable of changing direction or doing the right thing. Instead, they stick to their line and ignore the consequences. This is real life. Millions of children are starving, and that simply cannot continue. We must see action if we are to prevent a catastrophe. The Government cannot and must not wait for another moment. Let us show real leadership, and help to bring an end to the widespread suffering of the people of Yemen.

5.33 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Let me put it to the Minister—for whom esteem has never been higher in the House after last week—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]—that tomorrow will be the United Kingdom’s last chance to influence materially the course of events in Yemen. There seems to be a great deal of building up to ensuring that the conflict and the bombing will worsen rather than lessening.

Since the arrival of the Trump regime, the United States has changed its stance significantly. The level of US bombing in Yemen has increased, and is higher than it has been in the last two years. The Trump regime has changed the Obama regime’s position on supplying precision weapons to the Saudi air force, which had almost run out of such weapons. It is feared that the Saudis will now use the resupply to intensify the bombing. Yesterday, the *Washington Post* contained a very reputable report that Defence Secretary Mattis was asking permission from the White House to change the rules of conduct to enable United States forces to intervene more strategically, with the Saudi-led coalition, in order to occupy the port of Hudaydah. The Saudis and the Emirates do not have the matériel to undertake such an invasion; that would have to come from the US Marine carriers in the Gulf. That will only end up with a situation where, far from reducing the conflict, it will increase, and therefore the humanitarian crisis will get even worse.

It has not so far been mentioned in the debate that, despite this conflict, more than 250,000 African refugees have poured into Yemen in the last two years, and over 100,000 in the last year, fleeing famine in Africa. That is making the situation on the ground in Yemen even worse.

What discussions have the Government had with the Trump regime on the intensification of the American military involvement in Yemen, and what steps are the UK Government going to take to intervene now, when they have the chance, in the UN, to try to get a ceasefire before the conflict becomes even more bloody and the humanitarian crisis becomes even worse?

5.35 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Summing up from the Scottish National party Benches is something of a tall order today, and I hope colleagues will forgive me for not mentioning all the excellent contributions. Looking back over my notes, I see that 23 March marked a year almost to the day since the Committees on Arms Export Controls first met to discuss this issue. I am a member of that Committee, and it is with some sadness that I find myself speaking more than a year later with us having achieved very little from our side, while the humanitarian situation in Yemen becomes ever worse. During that time we on the SNP Benches have been consistent in our position that Her Majesty’s Government must suspend all arms sales to Saudi Arabia immediately, until a full, independent and transparent investigation into the alleged breaches of international humanitarian law has taken place.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Douglas Chapman: No, as I want to leave some time for the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) to speak at the end.

We in the SNP have had a very straightforward, honest and consistent position throughout this whole sorry saga: it is simply that this already atrocious humanitarian situation cannot be allowed to get worse through a continued Saudi offensive, and if this Government have any leverage at all, as they claim, with the regime in Riyadh, they must convince it to stop the bombing now and come to the table to bring peace to the people of Yemen.

This debate also provides an opportunity for the London Government to reflect on how their decision to allow arms sales, and how the military and security assistance that they give their Saudi allies, has affected this humanitarian situation. It is a damning indictment of UK foreign policy that we have become so reliant on this one bilateral relationship, not only in terms of the options it gives the UK in the region, but in terms of how important this is to maintain the current level of arms exports.

The stories we have heard today of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen are extremely distressing, and we are hearing ever more harrowing stories from the non-governmental organisations on the ground there trying to help. They come not from just one or two NGOs, but from Save the Children, Oxfam, Amnesty International, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins sans Frontières. They have also come up with plans that all have a similar theme. All these agencies are looking to secure rapid and unimpeded access, to deliver humanitarian aid to the affected populations. They are asking for the current spending and funding commitments to be built upon—a previous speaker talked of the 6% or 7% of funding that has already been given—and for support to be given to the Human Rights Council resolution of September 2016 which calls for an investigation and an international independent inquiry. They are urging all parties to stop the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects on populations, and they are calling for an intensification of efforts to support the UN-led peace talks. Lastly, but most importantly, they are calling for no sales or transfer of arms to any party involved in the Yemeni conflict.

We are also now seeing increasingly desperate tactics employed by Houthi rebels, including the use of unmanned craft to attack Saudi warships in the Red sea, in what is something of a modern warfare first. As I have said, the UK contribution to this is significant, not only in the sense that we have allowed weapons to be exported, but, I believe more significantly, because of the numbers of UK personnel who are advising the Saudi armed forces on a number of issues. What they are doing there is a mystery; it is unclear as the Ministry of Defence refuses to tell us.

When I visited Saudi last year with the Defence Committee, the British embassy was clearly keen to impress upon us that UK personnel were looked on by their Saudi counterparts as playing a vital part—something that gets to the heart of the Government's narrative—so I would appreciate answers to the following questions. In a war being fought largely by mercenaries, how confident can we be that no current or former UK citizens are involved in ways that would put their actions beyond the purview of the Ministry of Defence? Why have the UK Government stopped trying to buy back the Saudi Government's undoubted stockpile of cluster munitions, as per their obligations under international law? The issue of cluster munitions sold legally by the UK to Saudi in the 1980s brings to mind the length of the relationship, and I want to reflect on how we got to where we are today.

The UK Government have been involved with Saudi Arabia from the start. UK engineers extracted oil and built roads and infrastructure in the kingdom. UK nurses have staffed the hospitals, and teachers have staffed the schools. How is it, after all that, that the UK

has so little leverage over the regime? Why must we always hear about the carrot, not the stick? Germany and the Netherlands have banned the sale of matériel to Saudi on international humanitarian law grounds. Indeed, it is the Government's rejection of the Dutch-led UN motion on war crimes in favour of the Saudi one that first called their priorities into question. I only hope that it is not the size of the commercial relationship that has skewed priorities in Whitehall.

I have no doubt that the defence sector is important to our national economy, just as it is to the local economy in Fife, but despite the highly skilled jobs and the civilian applications of defence technology, we must consider the high licensing standards that defence products need to conform to in order to be sold worldwide. No one on the SNP Benches does not understand the complex situation. We are expected to believe, on the one hand, that the role that UK personnel play is significant enough to mean that the UK has substantial leverage over the Saudi regime while, on the other hand, that those personnel are not in the country for anything more than an advisory role. I hope that the Minister will take the time to enlighten us today on where those people stand. What is the UK role in Saudi? If it is significant, we are tired of not being given the proper answers. If it is not, please stop telling us we are able to affect matters in the kingdom.

Colleagues have asked other questions today. The right hon. Member for Leicester East is a doughty fighter on Yemen. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) talked about the 5,000 people who have lost their lives—1,500 of whom were children. The hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) asked about other nations not paying their way, and I am sure that the Minister, with his influence, can bring more pressure to bear on nations that are not putting money into the pot to help Yemen. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) mentioned there not being enough independent people to declare that the famine exists and also the £3.3 billion-worth of arms sales, which dwarfs the figure that we offer in international aid.

The hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), who always speaks on these matters with great distinction, wants Yemen to return to being a successful, functioning country. That is what we all want, but we must stop the arms sales now to allow space for peace to occur. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) highlighted the £500,000 for children who are suffering from malnutrition. We should cease the arms sales, get on a path to peace, and ensure that the people of Yemen have a fighting chance of rebuilding their country in the future.

5.43 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the sponsors of this debate, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), both of whom were born in Yemen and bring a depth of knowledge and passion to such debates, for which we are grateful.

In previous debates, we have tended to see Yemen through the prism of British involvement in the conflict in the form of arms sales and other military support to the Saudi-led coalition. I do not intend to dwell on

[Emily Thornberry]

those issues today, although I am sure that they will be raised again, not least because we await the High Court's judgment in the next few weeks on the legality of the Government's sale of arms to Saudi.

When we look at Yemen today what we see, first and foremost, is a humanitarian catastrophe—the world's worst, according to the United Nations. We should not forget that, even before the start of this war, Yemen was the poorest country in the Arab world, a destitute nation surrounded by wealthy neighbours and with a desolate landscape that meant it relied on imports for 90% of its food.

Now Yemen is engulfed by famine in all but name, and no wonder. It is not just that 90% of the country's food is imported but that most of those imports need to go through the port of Hudaydah, the Red sea port that has been razed by airstrikes—the airstrikes have completely destroyed the port's cranes, making it impossible to unload cargo. Even if supplies could get as far as the port and then through the roadblocks, the paperwork and the searches—some, indeed, call it a blockade—mean it is unlikely that the supplies would be able to get any further because the Saudi airstrikes have also systematically destroyed the roads and bridges that make it possible to get supplies from one place to another.

The other 10%—the small amount of food that the Yemeni people produce themselves—has for the most part gone, too, as bombs have struck factories, food markets, poultry farms and even fishing boats. Jamie McGoldrick, the UN's humanitarian co-ordinator, has said:

“The economic dimension of this war has become a tactic...It is an all-encompassing, applied economic suppression and strangulation that is causing everyone here to feel it”.

However, the UN special envoy for Yemen told the Security Council in January that a viable proposal for peace was on the table and within reach. What happened to that proposal? Where has it gone? Was it connected to the ceasefire resolution that we were told the UK would introduce six months ago? Can the Minister tell us what has happened to the resolution?

The last time we debated this matter, the Minister told us that the British Government were in the process of redrafting the resolution to make it up to date. How is that going? Do we have an up-to-date resolution? When the Security Council meets tomorrow, under British chairmanship, to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Yemen—I understand the Russians pressed for the discussion—we will be the pen holder, we will be chairing the meeting and we should be putting forward a peace resolution. Are we going to? I fear not.

I have been told that the UK is, in fact, increasingly stepping back on the diplomatic front for fear of upsetting the Saudis on the one hand, and the Americans on the other. I am told by my sources on the 38th floor that the new Administration in America are now considering stepping up their support for the coalition military campaign. If that is right, will the Minister confirm that the Saudis have been given the rest of the year to stabilise Yemen—that is the wording—and to reassert the Yemeni Government's authority over the entire country? Surely that cannot be the case, because we all know that a military approach alone will not work.

May I also ask about the role of Stephen O'Brien? He is a former Member of this House whom many Members will know. He is now the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and is obviously important in this regard. He has said that we are facing the worst humanitarian crisis since 1945 and that the crisis is in Yemen. I would appreciate it if the Minister could confirm that Mr O'Brien is not leaving his post and that rumours he is leaving, not out of choice but because of Saudi objections, are wrong.

Is this forgotten war becoming the new Syria? It is a multi-layered civil war being fought by major powerful nations, either directly or through proxies, in which the victims are civilians who suffer unbearable and insufferable torment. People are also being starved. I urge the Minister to ensure that Britain, once again, takes up a proactive role on Yemen because we are a permanent member of the Security Council, because we are currently the president of the Security Council, because we are the pen holder and because we have a close relationship with Saudi Arabia, one of the major parties. What the people of Yemen need more than anything else at the moment is peace. We have some power in the conflict, and we can do something about it tomorrow.

5.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): Let me briefly make the point that I wish there were more time to respond to this very good debate, as I have only eight minutes in which to do my best to do justice to it. It has served as a reminder that the House takes these matters very seriously. I join Members in paying tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and the others who tabled the motion. I will do my best to rattle through the points and, as usual, I will write to right hon. and hon. Members with more details. Again, I make the point that I find it bizarre that we are stopping in order to have an Adjournment debate of an hour and a half, when such debates normally last only 30 minutes.

I will focus on the points made by the right hon. Gentleman, who made a comprehensive speech in summarising the challenges that Yemen faces. The scale of the tragedy is well known to us all, with 70% of the population now needing humanitarian assistance. In answer to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), let me say that Britain continues to play a leading role, unswayed by the prejudice or interest of any other country. As she says, we are the pen holder, and we are determined to do that job without prejudice and without influence from other nations, doing what we see is best. We show leadership at the United Nations and in the new Quint, which involves nations from around the middle east that are looking at this and which met in February, along with UN special envoy Ismail Ahmed. I met him two weeks ago, when we discussed what parameters we need to get in place in order for a ceasefire to work and then for a UN Security Council resolution to be supported.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned the importance of the port of Hudaydah, and that must not be underestimated. Yemen has two critical access points, one being the port of Aden, in the south, and the other, halfway up the Red sea, being Hudaydah, with a population of 3 million. If the civil war moves

into that area, it will devastate that city, probably displacing about half the people who live there—1.5 million people—and causing mayhem. Not only will it further the prospect of famine and lead to a refugee crisis, but it will flatten the port itself. We may be frustrated with the amount of aid getting through the port at the moment, but the situation will be even worse if the battle commences in that populated urban area. We therefore call on the coalition and the Houthis to recognise that the world is watching and that they need to come back to the table. This will be sorted not by a military solution, but by a political one, and it is very important that that is recognised.

A lot has been said about the cranes, but let me make it clear that the old cranes were bombed a number of years ago and the new cranes are sitting in Dubai. They have been moved there to keep them out of harm's way; no one knows exactly what is going to happen to the port of Hudaydah as it is unclear where the battle is going.

I reiterate how unhelpful and wrong it would be for us not to work towards a peaceful solution. The right hon. Member for Leicester East rightly said that this problem is not intractable—there is a path to peace. An awful lot of plates are spinning in the middle east, but I genuinely believe that Yemen is one problem that can be solved—to do that, however, we also need the will of the Yemeni people.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), for whom I have a huge amount of respect, made a helpful visit to Yemen, although such travel is not endorsed. In his own inimitable way, he went there and he has shared his findings. He paid tribute to the UN agencies—I join him in doing so—and spoke about there being perhaps a difference in strategy between different Departments. I make it clear that we have one clear strategy, but I can see the dilemma in that on the one hand the Department for International Development is determined to get aid into the country, whereas on the other we are dealing with this protracted war, which this coalition is pushing, and it is not doing a particularly good job of it. I have been critical about its actions before; it is not used to sustained warfare and it has made mistakes, which we have debated here. We have made it clear to the coalition that, as I have just said, the war will not be ended in this way.

We certainly support Saudi-led efforts to restore stability and check the advance of the Houthis, because that started all this in the first place. Let us not forget that the Houthis pushed through Sana'a and would have taken over the port of Aden had a coalition not answered the call by President Hadi to stand up for his legitimacy.

Emily Thornberry *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I am afraid I do not have time to give way; I do apologise.

Members talked about weapons systems getting into Yemen. I am afraid they are getting in by land and by sea, not so much through the port of Hudaydah. Smaller boats are getting in and providing arms up and down the Red sea, and arms are also getting in through land corridors. The UN verification and inspection mechanism is not working as well as it could because it is not able to capture all the boats that are moving in.

I have to contend with a point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield. We can discuss this after the debate, but I do not agree that because al-Qaeda is fighting the Houthis we should somehow be in some form of alignment with it. Al-Qaeda's track record shows that we cannot entertain any alliance whatsoever. It has brought insecurity and harm to the middle east and, indeed, to Europe.

Mr Mitchell: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Ellwood: I shall give way briefly; I thought my right hon. Friend might wish to respond.

Mr Mitchell: I should make it absolutely clear that no one regards al-Qaeda with greater abhorrence than I do. The point I was making was that in this particular conflict there are some very uneasy alliances against the Houthis.

Mr Ellwood: I apologise to the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury; I know she wanted me to give way earlier, but it is important that my right hon. Friend was able to put that on the record.

Many have called for a ceasefire, which is fully understandable given where we want to go. Nevertheless, for one to work in practice, parameters need to be in place. We need withdrawal lines and the decommissioning of heavy weapons, or agreement on that decommissioning. We need buffer zones ready, in place or agreed, and we need policing mechanisms to manage any violations that take place; otherwise, we will see the situation ratcheting out of control again and the ceasefire being breached.

In my discussions with Ismail Ahmed, the UN envoy, and with other countries, we have talked about what the parameters of a ceasefire would look like and the process that would be needed. The parameters would have to be built around, first, the sequencing of security steps, including withdrawals; secondly, the agreement of roles and appointments—in essence, a transition leadership; thirdly, the resumption of discussions based on resolution 2216 and the Gulf Co-operation Council initiative; fourthly, the signing of a detailed agreement; fifthly, the finalisation of an electoral road map; and, finally, the drafting of a constitution, which would lead to elections. That is a ballpark design that the UN envoy is trying to promote. Unfortunately, it is signing up to the detail that is causing problems for all stakeholders. Nevertheless, we are absolutely committed to pursuing that process at the UN to ensure that a ceasefire eventually comes around.

The role of the United States was mentioned. I will visit it soon to make sure it is committed. Rex Tillerson, the new Secretary of State, worked in Yemen for several years and knows the area very well indeed. I make it clear that the additional military support the US is giving is not designed for more precision munitions; it is designed to enable better intelligence gathering so that fewer mistakes are made. More to the point, it is important that the US works with us and others to deter further military action and to focus on getting that political agreement in place.

UN Security Council resolution 2216 was clear that unblocking the political process required the Houthis and forces loyal to former President Saleh to withdraw

[Mr Ellwood]

from Sana'a and hand over their weapons. Despite consistent demands from the international community, the Houthi-Saleh alliance has refused to discuss these issues with the UN special envoy. It has also taken a series of unilateral steps that have undermined peace efforts, including the establishment of a supreme political council and a shadow Government to rival President Hadi's. This is unacceptable. We do not recognise the rival Government, and the Yemeni parties must engage with the peace process and meet the obligations set out in the UN proposals.

In conclusion, the UK Government are gravely concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. We are taking a leading role in the international response, which means not only providing substantial humanitarian aid but using all diplomatic means available to us to support efforts to reach a political agreement and to press for a solution to the economic crisis. As I have said before, it is ultimately the Yemenis themselves who must reach a compromise. The Yemeni people need and deserve peace, and we continue to work with international partners to secure it.

5.59 pm

Keith Vaz: The House has spoken with one voice today. A total of 45 Members have attended the debate over the past 90 minutes—we could have had another 90 minutes to discuss this war. It may be a forgotten war outside, but it is not forgotten in the House of Commons. The voice of this House is very clear: we want peace in Yemen; an immediate ceasefire; and the aid to get into Yemen to avoid the predicted famine; and we need to start tomorrow. We place that motion in the hands of the Minister. We wish him well, and ask him to come back with better news for us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen; and calls upon the Government to take a lead in passing a resolution at the UN Security Council that would give effect to an immediate ceasefire in Yemen.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 5 to 12 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft West Midlands Combined Authority (Functions and Amendment) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 6 March, be approved.

BETTING, GAMING AND LOTTERIES

That the draft Horserace Betting Levy Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 7 March, be approved.

INSOLVENCY

That the draft Deregulation Act 2015 and Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015 (Consequential Amendments) (Savings) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 2 March, be approved.

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING

That the draft Public Sector Apprenticeship Targets Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 6 March, be approved.

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

That the draft Local Authorities (Public Health Functions and Entry to Premises by Local Healthwatch Representatives) (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 1 March, be approved.

PUBLIC SERVICE PENSIONS

That the draft Judicial Pensions (Fee-Paid Judges) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 27 February, be approved.

That the draft Judicial Pensions (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 27 February, be approved.

That the draft Judicial Pensions (Additional Voluntary Contributions) Regulations 2017, which were laid before this House on 27 February, be approved.—(*Heather Wheeler.*)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the Minister to move motion 13 on regulatory reform, I should inform the House that Mr Speaker has considered the instrument and has not certified it.

REGULATORY REFORM

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 18(1)(a)),

That the draft Legislative Reform (Private Fund Limited Partnerships) Order 2017, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.—(*Heather Wheeler.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Proposed closure of Annesley DWP office

6.1 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I rise to present a petition opposing the closure of the Department for Work and Pensions office in Annesley, which could result in more than 100 job losses, affecting mainly women workers.

The petition states:

The Petition of staff of Annesley DWP office, and their families,

Declares that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are proposing to close Annesley DWP office within the next year (2017/18); further that the DWP are proposing to do this without consideration of the potential loss of 100 plus jobs by compulsory redundancies; further that there has been no consideration of the disproportionate impact on those who work at Annesley by not conducting an Equality Impact Assessment; and further that there has been no consideration of the economic hit on the area because the closure could mean a loss of £1million and this loss will inevitably impact on a number of businesses in the area.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that Annesley DWP office is kept open, so that there are no job losses.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002030]

Mining: Health and Safety

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

6.2 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Seventy years ago, the Burngrange mining disaster happened in my constituency. It was, and still stands as, the worst accident in Scottish shale mining history. Fifty three men went down on shift on 10 January 1947, but only 38 came out alive. One miner's body was brought up with the survivors, but 14 men were trapped behind the debris and the fire. The heat and power of the fire were all consuming. Hopes of any survivors faded fast as the hours passed. A total of 15 men from my constituency died in this tragic accident.

Earlier this year, the towns of West Calder and Seafield paid homage to their lost miners in moving tributes. The names were read aloud and stories told of the events by local schoolchildren who had spent time in class learning about what those men and their families had endured. Standing in West Calder square on that chilly January day hearing the children of Parkhead primary recounting the stories of the men of Burngrange was a powerful and beautiful tribute. I also pay tribute to Alan Tuffs and his team from the local area who had worked so hard to put together tributes and to bring the community together in commemoration.

I am proud to have the opportunity today to read again the names of the men who lost their lives working for their families and communities in an industry that is now marked by the bings of West Lothian that surround my constituency: John McGarty, 30, Limefield Avenue, West Calder, single; John Lightbody, 39, Gloag Place, West Calder, married, two of a family; Anthony Gaughan, 44, Parkhead Crescent, West Calder, married, two of a family; David Muir, 32, Parkhead Crescent, West Calder, single; George Easton, 48, Northfield Cottages, West Calder, married, three of a family; Henry Cowie, 28, Parkhead Crescent, West Calder, single; William Ritchie, 38, Old Rows, Seafield, married, three of a family; William Greenock, 50, Cousland Terrace, Seafield, married, three of a family; John Fairlie, 21, Old Rows, Seafield, single; Thomas Heggie, 27, Cousland Crescent, Seafield, married, two of a family; William Finlay, 56, Polbeth, married, three of a family; James McAulay, 56, Polbeth, West Calder, married with a large family; Samuel Pake, 24, New Breich, married, one of a family; William Carroll, 31, Seafield, married, two of a family; and David Carroll, 37, Old Rows, Seafield, married, five of a family.

I cannot imagine how the local mining community felt when the pit sirens wailed to warn of disaster, with the families running to the pit to wait for news—a wait that lasted for days before the families could claim the bodies of their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. Today I pay tribute to them and their sacrifice. My own grandfather went down the pit as a coalminer just a few miles along the road as a fitter in Easton colliery, Bathgate. He, his father and two brothers all had serious accidents during their time as miners. He told me as I was growing up that accidents were just part of the job. I grew up with stories of him hauling himself through tiny crevices. At 5 feet 5 inches, he was a wee mannie, and was sent down all the nooks and crannies that the bigger men could not fit into.

My grandfather often told me of one accident, when the tow rope broke and a tub loaded full of coal was sent careering down the shaft, knocking him unconscious and leaving a serious gash in the back of his head. The truth was that he should never have been where he was, but it was a path well trodden by the miners around him. He survived fine, but never went that same route again. The scar on his head was an indelible mark that he showed me many times when I was a child. He said that it was a reminder to him that he was one of the lucky ones.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. There is a need for safety. Does she agree that it is essential that the Government work with the representatives of the Mining Industry Safety Leadership Group to provide a forum to develop, lead and implement a strategy for health and safety in the mining industry? Does she also agree that working with these groups is the best way to promote health and safety in mines throughout the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Hannah Bardell: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Working with members who work in that community is vital.

West Lothian Council's local history library collected information about the disaster that became part of a community exhibition developed in conjunction with the Calder history group and Almond Valley Heritage Trust. Many communities across the UK do work like this, and it is vital that the young people in communities around us remember their industrial heritage.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this Adjournment debate. May I take this opportunity to remember the 207 people who lost their lives at the High Blantyre colliery in what is now my constituency, on 22 October 1877? Many local women were suddenly widowed and children were left without a father in the worst mining disaster in Scotland's history. Does my hon. Friend agree that, though historical, the tragedy provides a lesson from the past in why the health and safety of those working in mines should be paramount?

Hannah Bardell: I join my hon. Friend in her tributes. She is a doughty champion for her constituents, and I share in all that she says.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. The keynote in her speech is that we must never forget the sacrifices that people made. It is important that children and others living in these communities in later years understand what happened before them. This year is the 60th anniversary of the Kames colliery disaster in my constituency, in which 17 men lost their lives in an underground explosion. I pay tribute to those guys and their families. It is very important that communities never forget.

Hannah Bardell: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to those lost in his constituency.

I welcome such fitting tributes to men and to the families they leave behind, as they will remain a sober reminder to us all for generations to come of the

[Hannah Bardell]

sacrifices that those men made on that day in January 70 years ago. The five shale bings—or the five sisters, as they are famously known locally in my constituency—and the bings of Broxburn were recently serialised by BBC Scotland, and are the indelible marks on the West Lothian landscape that remind us of our industrial past. In constituencies across the UK there are reminders in museums and galleries, such as Mill Farm in West Lothian and the Lady Victoria colliery in Newtongrange, which I visited as a youngster when my grandfather was terminally ill with a tumour. I remember going home to ask my mum whether she thought he would be well enough to visit. He was not, but the stories that I brought home meant a great deal to him.

There have been thousands of deaths in mines over the centuries, but fortunately safety has improved. It has been 50 years since the last UK mining accident happened at the Cambrian colliery in south Wales on 17 May 1965, where 31 tragically lost their lives. However, as recently as May 2014, the worst mining accident in the 21st century killed 301 people in Soma, Turkey. I am sure many hon. Members remember the 29 men killed underground four years previously at the Pike River mine disaster in New Zealand. In November 2010, just seven months earlier than that, 29 of 31 miners on site at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia, USA, were killed in an explosion. On 30 January 2000, the Baia Mare cyanide spill took place in Romania: 100,000 tonnes of cyanide-contaminated water broke into the River Somes, the River Tisza and the River Danube. Although no human fatalities were reported, the leak killed up to 80% of aquatic life in some of the affected rivers, which meant that the accident was hailed as the worst environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl.

Although our UK mining industry has had health and safety problems, we have learned a huge amount from accidents such as the one in Burngrange in my constituency. From the pit closures and attacks on the trade unions in the Thatcher era, and the year-long miners strike—it was strikes in Lanarkshire that eventually drove my grandmother's family to Glasgow so that her parents could seek other work—we remember the miners today and always. As a direct result of that strike, mining is no longer as much a part of the industrial landscape, but health and safety is crucial for those left working in the industry, wherever they are in the world. We have come a long way in health and safety improvements, but much more needs to be done, not just in mining but in other dangerous industries such as the oil and gas industry.

Many went from our pits into other industrial work such as oil and gas. It is important to remember that men and women in those industries work in some of the most challenging environments in the world. Health and safety is paramount. In fact, one such worker who followed that path was Mike McTighe, the father of my office manager, Stephanie. He worked in the Bilston Glen pit in Edinburgh for many years and was the last of a famous breed of coalminers in Scotland who moved on to work in oil and gas. He retired only a few months ago. He told me recently how he was once caught in a roof fall in a pit. He said that, as terrifying as that was, going down the leg of an oil platform, when he was often alone, responsible for his own air supply

and surrounded by many toxic gases, was possibly the scariest and most hostile environment he had ever been in.

I had my own experience of the importance of health and safety when I became involved in the emergency response to a helicopter going down off the coast of Shetland in 2013. The company I worked for in the oil and gas industry lost a colleague. I spent a lot of time with his family, and working with many people in other companies to review health and safety practices and emergency response, to do our best to ensure that such an accident could never happen again. The work and continued improvement of our Health and Safety Executive is vital. Piper Alpha stands as the worst accident in the North sea and in the oil and gas industry. Many lessons were learned, including by the HSE, which has continued its work.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the men and women, and indeed children, who have worked in the pits, in some of the most challenging environments on earth. Their work and legacy leave a mark on our landscape, in our lives and in our history. We must remember them.

What will the Minister and the Government do to ensure that UK communities blighted by the loss of those industries get greater investment and support to embrace an environmentally friendly and low-carbon future? It is a fact that, despite goals to become a low-carbon economy, our dependence on imported fuels is now at a level not seen since the 1970s. The UK is the only one of Europe's five biggest energy users to be increasing its reliance on imported energy. Britain now imports four times as much coal as it produces. Coal and other solid fuels made up 10% of the UK's energy imports in 2015, from countries such as Colombia, Australia and the USA, with Russia being our biggest import partner. We have to consider some of the health and safety practices in those countries and raise concerns about them. Some of those countries are subject to international sanctions. Ukraine, for example, provides close to half the coal we import, and Colombia has an ugly track record on human rights.

The company responsible for the bulk of our Russian imported coal is the Siberian Coal Energy Company, which exports 31 million tonnes of coal a year, according to its website, and nearly a quarter of that comes to the UK—its biggest single market, well ahead of China. Russia's safety record is not without blemish, and several major mining accidents have happened there. Notably, the Ulyanovskaya—I hope Members will excuse my pronunciation—mine disaster of 2007 killed 106 miners. Just last year, a methane leak triggered two explosions in a mine near Vorkuta, where 26 people ultimately lost their lives. Over 60% of Russian coal is extracted in the Kuzbass region of Siberia, and the human rights of mine workers and villagers are violated daily, according to reports.

In Colombia, the health and safety track record is appalling. An explosion at the La Preciosa mine in Sardinata in January 2011 killed 21 people; another explosion at the same mine in February 2007 killed more than 30 workers. During the decades-long civil war, the Colombian coal industry has grown to the point where it now ranks as the fourth-largest exporter of power station coal in the world, behind Indonesia, Australia and Russia. According to the London Mining Network, the growth of the Colombian coal industry

has come at a terrible cost, including the dispossession of communities and widespread human rights abuses against members of the mining workforce and residents. Coal has polluted not only the air and the water but the country's politics, with credible reports of at least one coal company providing support for militias involved in human rights abuses.

We should not condone the dereliction of duty to the human rights of workers and families living in mining communities. While we still import coal, we should do it from responsible sources, and I ask the Minister to review our coal imports and the human rights and health and safety records of the countries those imports come from.

In addition, we should do much more to develop and support our renewables sector to meet our power needs. The Banks Group in my constituency is a surface mining, renewable energy and property firm. It is truly diverse, and it has a clear vision on the future of renewables. It does pioneering work on reclaiming and redeveloping land that has been used for mining, and it was responsible for the Northumberlandia restoration, which is also known as "The Lady of the North". In partnership with North Lanarkshire Council, the innovative Connect2Renewables project will ensure a minimum of £69 million of local economic benefit for the area, while a £1.74 million jobs and training fund will support 400 to 450 local unemployed people into work, further education or workplace training. This sort of ambitious, forward-thinking and environmentally friendly initiative is essential as we work towards our low-carbon goals.

My final request of the Minister—I know I am asking a lot of her—is that she set up specific funds for communities in former coal and shale mining areas to help them adapt and provide for the future. A specific fund could help with the kind of work that has been done in my constituency to engage with local schools. Economically, a fund could and should support areas that have never recovered from having had their heavy industries taken away or damaged irreparably, and that got little or no support at the time from the then Conservative Government.

These communities have sacrificed more than they should have, and they have provided for the whole country. We owe them our gratitude and support, and I call on the Government to do all they can to make sure that those former mining communities thrive and develop new industries where the old ones once stood so valiantly.

6.18 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I thank the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) for securing this debate and for her passionate speech on an issue that is important to her and her constituents, as well as to the Government and the House. It gives us the opportunity to recognise the bravery of those workers at Burngrange mine, who, in providing for their families and securing resources for our country, made the ultimate sacrifice.

The hon. Lady and her constituents have rightly marked the 70th anniversary of that appalling disaster with honour and dignity for the men who did not come home to their families on 10 January 1947. One of the most moving parts of the tribute she paid was when she read out not only the names but the ages of those who were impacted. We got an impression from that of how

the disaster affected a whole community. Often, people are in such a job for life. The age range of 24 to 50 gives a sense of that, and it was a very moving part of her speech. She has done a tremendous job in paying tribute not only to all those who were killed or affected by the disaster, but to all those who work, and have worked, in the profession and the communities that support them. It is a rare occasion when we read out in this place the names of people killed in such tragedies, but it is very fitting that she has done so. I understand from the Clerks that the hon. Lady tried to get this debate to fall as close as she could to the anniversary of the disaster. Things never work out perfectly, but her constituents and many others will appreciate that.

Before I go on to talk about the UK's safety record and other issues that the hon. Lady raised, I would like to touch on some of the international tragedies that have occurred. She mentioned some; sadly, there are many others. In 1995, 104 miners died after falling down a mine shaft in South Africa. In 2006, 65 coal miners were killed in a gas explosion in northern Mexico. In 2007, at least 90 were killed in Ukraine's worst mining disaster. In 2011, 52 people were killed in south-western Pakistan after a gas explosion in a deep coal mine.

It is important that we remember that this an international issue because of the role of the Health and Safety Executive, which has considerable expertise. Some 50% of the inspectorate that looks after this issue, as well as others, have worked in the mining industry for much of their career, and they have ambitions to export their expertise. The HSE's latest business plan shows that it is clearly trying to do more of that. We have a good record on this, and huge expertise. We can make a real contribution, particularly in developing nations where often when disaster strikes the situation is unimaginable. This is important work, and I encourage the HSE to do it. It is doing a huge amount already. Recently, for example, it has been leading some work on ventilation issues in Australia and on engineering safety in Russia; the hon. Lady particularly referred to that country.

I pay tribute, as the hon. Lady did, to all those others who step in when such disasters strike to provide support and expertise to the rescue and recovery operation. I am particularly proud of this because the combined international rescue services that are contributed to by the UK's blue light services train and drill for such events annually in my constituency. Her debate affords me the opportunity to pay tribute to them as well.

Burngrange and other mine incidents led to the introduction of a great deal of legislation in the latter half of the 20th century. The official report on that explosion and fire contains a number of important recommendations for improving health and safety in mines, including instructions on the use of safety lamps; how explosives should be selected, stored, handled and used safely; and the need for adequate ventilation and sampling of a mine's atmosphere. Health and safety regulation in this country has improved greatly over the past 70 years, learning from previous experiences in order to try to prevent, as far as possible, disasters and other incidents that can lead to loss of life, injury or ill health. At the time when the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 was introduced, there were 651 fatalities to employees; today, the number is 105. That is progress made, but clearly more still needs to be done.

[Penny Mordaunt]

In 2014, following an extensive review, the Mines Regulations 2014 replaced all previous legislation relating to health and safety in underground mines—some 45 sets of regulations and the relevant parts of two Acts of Parliament. Importantly, they provided a comprehensive and simple goal-setting legal framework to ensure that mine operators provide all the necessary protection for mineworkers and others from the inherent hazards in mines. The regulations contain requirements relating to the key organisational aspects of safe management of a mine and to the key physical hazards to underground mining, the principal major hazards of which are unique to that particular sector.

In addition to the industry-specific mines regulations with which mine operators must comply, there is the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, the Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres Regulations 2002 and the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002.

About 2,000 workers are still involved in underground mining and they deserve the highest standards of health and safety. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, often that will mean working in partnership with other organisations. I thank him for his intervention.

The Health and Safety Executive has a regulatory intervention plan for every underground mine in Great Britain, no matter whether it is still active or whether it is there for heritage and tourism purposes. That reflects the specific inherent hazards of mines and their previous health and safety performance. Those that bear the greatest risk and have the poorest record receive the most attention. Inspectors base their regulatory interventions on those plans, which are proactive.

I understand that the Scottish Parliament has tabled a motion to mark Workers' Memorial Day—I do not know whether the hon. Member for Livingston will table a similar motion in this Parliament—on Friday 28 April, which affords us another opportunity to remember all of those who work in these important but dangerous industries, and to pay tribute to what they do and to those who have lost their lives.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I wonder whether at this point the Government representative could try to recall that those same miners that we are talking about, many of them the sons of miners who went down the pit, were the very people that the previous Tory Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, called “the enemy within”. We are talking about all those people who lost their lives, including the 81 in Creswell in my constituency who were consumed by flames and had to be locked in—they could not get them out—and the 18 people who fell down the shaft to their death at Markham colliery in Derbyshire. They were the same people that the previous Tory Prime Minister called “the enemy within”. I think at this moment it would be right and proper for this Government to say that that was not the reality about these people who went down the pit day after day. Surely this is the time to say so.

Penny Mordaunt: I hope that, in what I have said today and what I will go on to say, I have paid tribute to those people. My maternal grandfather was a miner.

I have spoken about the hazards that people face in that and other professions. Without their service the country could not continue its industrial projects. We owe them a great deal. On the politics of these matters, the hon. Gentleman and I would probably disagree, but the purpose of the debate is to pay tribute to those who work in these professions and to remember those who lost their lives at Burngrange, in particular, and in other disasters around the world. I am sure that that will not have satisfied the hon. Gentleman—

Mr Skinner: No, because you won't—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Penny Mordaunt: I will move on to the other points that the hon. Member for Livingston has raised. Quite rightly, she touched on what Departments can do through their policies to encourage good practice, and to encourage other countries to take health and safety as seriously as we do. In my Department, which is responsible for the Health and Safety Executive, considerable opportunities come with the HSE's ambition to export its good practice, and that is important. I will certainly ask my counterparts at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to write to the hon. Lady about specifically how it is developing its energy strategy to take into account the very valid points that she raises.

On the matter of regeneration for affected communities, I may be in danger of agreeing with the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). One thing that was not done well in the past was securing the regeneration of areas where industries on which entire communities had depended were collapsing. Where that happens, swift intervention and investment are required.

One of the privileges of my first ministerial post in the Department for Communities and Local Government was working with local enterprise partnerships on getting particular investment into such areas. Part of the recipe for success in rebuilding those areas was mining heritage. Many projects, whether they were about creating business parks around energy or creating a tourist offer, would come back to an area's mining heritage. That ties in very well with the important points that the hon. Lady has made about heritage. We need to remember that heritage and give it the status that it should have as part of our nation's history. I will also ask the Department for Communities and Local Government to write to the hon. Lady to update her on the specifics of the growth funding that has gone into former coal mining areas.

Alan Brown: Just before the Minister closes, she may be aware that the UK Government pulled funding from the Coalfields Community Trust, although the Scottish Government still provide funding in Scotland. Is that not something that the Government should look at? My final point is about mineworkers who have survived. She may be aware that the Government take 50% of the annual returns from the mineworkers' pension pot, and I suggest that the Government should reconsider that as well.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman refers to the trust, which was closed and wound up. However, other sources of funding were made available through the usual growth funding channels, and much of that funding has been directed into the communities that we are

discussing. I know that, because I was at the Department looking at how those funds had been allocated. Whether we are talking about mining or other industries that are not providing the necessary support to communities across the UK, we need to have a strong plan and vision for those communities and what will replace those industries. We should not leave people without that.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady has made some very encouraging and positive points, and I look forward to receiving those responses. On the distribution of funds, does she consider it appropriate for the former mining communities to be considered alongside other communities for the city growth plans and deals? That seems to me to be an ideal criterion to apply in considering the distribution of funds, because the areas of worst deprivation and challenge are often outside city centres, such as those in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown).

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. If one aspect of what makes a community strong and economically viable is removed, other aspects—the education system, the ability to attract teachers and all sorts of things—start to become harder. It is absolutely vital, as I know from my own constituency, to have a clear vision for and proposition on how the economy will not only grow, but be stable. That may mean diversification, or a different approach to the strengths and assets a particular community has had, but that is the key to success. It is what attracts not only public money and investment, but private investment, which is what some of these communities need.

Mr Skinner: The Minister has failed to answer the point about the money that the Government take from the mineworkers pension scheme. Now there are no deep-mine pits left in Britain at all—just a few private mines and bit of open-casting—can we have an assurance that the Government will cease taking that money out of the pension scheme so the miners she is talking about get an even better pension?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious point that deserves a serious answer, but given the limits on me in this Adjournment debate, may I ask him to write to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions?

Mr Skinner: I have done all that.

Penny Mordaunt: I am sure I do not need to encourage the hon. Gentleman to keep going, but if he is not satisfied with an answer, he should write again. I am afraid that I am not able to add anything to what the Pensions Minister will already have told him.

Unless there are any other interventions, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Livingston, who has done a great service to all those who lost their lives in this tragedy and to all those touched by it.

Question put and agreed to.

6.37 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 March 2017

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

Preventing Avoidable Sight Loss

9.30 am

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered preventing avoidable sight loss.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating me this debate, the Chairman of Ways and Means for approving it and you, Mrs Gillan, for being in the Chair. I am also grateful to all the MPs who supported my application and to Lord Low of Dalston, my co-chair on the all-party parliamentary group on eye health and visual impairment, who, with his passion and experience of these issues, is a fantastic source of knowledge and support for the group. I believe that he is with us today in the Gallery.

The latest information from local authorities, which is from 2014, shows that almost 300,000 people in England and many thousands in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland are formally registered as blind or partially sighted. Many thousands more suffer from sight difficulties without being registered with their local authority. I thank the Royal National Institute of Blind People for its support as the secretariat of the all-party group, which I have the honour of chairing. The RNIB estimates that almost 2 million people in the UK live with sight loss. It is predicted that that will double to around 4 million by 2050 due to our ageing population and the fact that more people will live with conditions, such as diabetes, that can lead to visual impairment.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about sight loss increasing in the future. Does she agree that obesity, which has the knock-on effect of causing type 2 diabetes, is one of the causes of sight loss? Children in their teens are being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, so we really need to think about how we tackle and prevent that in the long term.

Nusrat Ghani: I definitely agree that we need to think about the long term and look at childhood obesity and diabetes, which are on the rise. I would like to put on the record that my application for this debate—I applied for a debate in the main Chamber—was supported by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes.

It is estimated that half of sight loss is potentially avoidable. Glaucoma is the single biggest cause of preventable sight loss. Some 600,000 people in the UK have glaucoma, but half are undiagnosed. If it is detected and treated early, around 90% of people with glaucoma retain useful eyesight for life.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the most important features of this situation is that at least half a million schoolchildren are affected, one way or another, by sight problems, if I may use that expression? Some 100,000 people in the west midlands, of which my constituency is a part, are probably also affected.

Nusrat Ghani: Of course. I will go on to mention children and the fact that it is necessary for them to be tested earlier than we previously believed they should be.

Wet age-related macular degeneration affects the retina and causes changes to central vision. In October last year, Jean Rugg's eye clinic consultant told her that she needed follow-up treatment. She was told by the receptionist to expect the appointment in the post, but nothing arrived. By December, Jean was continually contacting the booking department and being turned away. She was told that she would not be booked in because the department was just too busy. Time passed. Jean noticed changes in her vision and was extremely worried about permanent damage to her sight. She was getting nowhere, so she contacted her consultant's secretary and, after much urging, managed to secure an appointment with him to discuss her sight.

By that time, three months had passed. Jean's consultant was alarmed that she had not received treatment sooner and explained that her vision could well have deteriorated due to the delay, as there had been further leakage of fluid into her eye. Jean needed an urgent course of injections, so the consultant took her to the booking department to try to secure an appointment that same week. They were both told that there were simply no spaces in the injection clinic. After repeatedly explaining the urgency of the matter, the consultant was eventually able to obtain an appointment for Jean the following week.

I am sure that the Minister agrees that that is just not good enough. That delay and lack of responsibility and urgency is just not acceptable. There are many more Jeans across the country. A 2014 survey by the Royal National Institute of Blind People showed that 86.5% of the public were more fearful of losing their sight than any other sense. As I said, 50% of all sight loss is potentially avoidable if treated early, yet NHS England does not give eye health the profile it deserves. There is no overarching NHS England-led strategy to govern it and push for more prevention of avoidable sight loss. There are equivalent strategies for hearing loss and dementia.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The hon. Lady mentioned dementia, which is a growing problem, especially among elderly people, although not all elderly people. Sight loss can exacerbate or even mask symptoms for people with dementia. Correcting vision loss can help reduce the impact of dementia, at least in the early stages, and improve quality of life. Does she agree that policy makers and commissioners must seek to prioritise addressing sight loss for people who have dementia or are suffering its early onset?

Nusrat Ghani: I agree. We most definitely need to prioritise sight loss for all vulnerable people, including older people, who might also have mental health illnesses.

[Nusrat Ghani]

There are eye health strategies in place in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; England is an anomaly. I therefore ask the Government to consider developing and implementing a national strategy for eye health in England. That would not require additional funding, but would be a commitment to improving the efficiency of eye care services and ensuring consistency across the country. It would enable the development of improved clinical leadership at clinical commissioning group level to prevent eye health from slipping down local commissioning agendas, enable closer partnerships between CCGs and local eye health networks, and aid commissioners to identify eye health priorities that respond to the needs of local populations.

The Department of Health and NHS England already do great work to support the voluntary sector-led England Vision strategy, but that is, by definition, limited in its ability to bring together all the relevant organisations in a joined-up way. In response to a written question that I tabled last week, the Department rightly explained that England's size

"and the diversity of the health needs of different communities" mean that commissioning is best "owned and managed locally". I completely agree, but that should not be incompatible with strategic thinking from above by people who see the bigger picture, or establishing principles that local areas can fit to their circumstances.

Local commissioning must be coupled with national leadership. Leaving things to local commissioners is not working as well as it should. There is significant variation in the quality and quantity of services. For example, someone in Luton will wait for 15 days between their first attendance at a hospital out-patient clinic and their cataract surgery, but if they were in Swindon, they would wait not 15, 50 or even 150 days, but 180 days. That is a shocking difference. No doubt the Minister agrees that, again, that is just not good enough.

Small changes to guidelines and legislation would streamline the process for many patients. For example—my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) may have to help me out with my pronunciation—allowing ophthalmists to sign hospital eye service spectacle prescriptions, rather than requiring ophthalmologists to sign them, would allow the delivery of effective patient care and reduce the number of appointments required to access spectacles.

Mr Jim Cunningham *rose*—

Nusrat Ghani: I hope that the hon. Gentleman does not intend to make a quip about my pronunciation.

Mr Cunningham: The hon. Lady's pronunciation is not as bad as mine. I would support a national strategy. More importantly, however, the cost of drugs for treatment is an area that creates difficulties. In 2014-15, the cost of two drugs alone to treat age-related macular degeneration was £287 million. There is room for discussion between the Government and the drug companies on the cost of drugs to treat people with eye problems.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I gently remind Members that interventions are supposed to be short. We seem to have plenty of time, but we have quite a few speakers, so I would like interventions to be short.

Nusrat Ghani: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope that the Minister will respond to that and that we can tackle the postcode lottery in treatment and care across the country.

More generally, sustainability and transformation plans are an exciting opportunity to bring different parts of the NHS together, with greater efficiency and greater outcomes. They are designed to ensure that health and social care services in England are built around the needs of local populations. However, of the 44 STPs, only 22 mention ophthalmology. There is a gap in local plans, which could be narrowed by a national strategy. No doubt the Minister will share my disappointment that half of all STPs do not mention ophthalmology.

It is also worth noting that there are national strategies for other health conditions, in which local commissioners play a role alongside national leadership. The cancer strategy for England, for example, was developed by an independent cancer taskforce, including a number of charities. As a result, NHS England's national cancer transformation board subsequently published an implementation plan. If there was a need for national leadership on cancer, dementia and strokes among other things, why does the same not apply to eye health? If the Minister needs to look elsewhere for places where there are national eye health strategies, he could even look to Zimbabwe, which has one.

Professor Tim Briggs's review of ophthalmology services in his capacity as national director for clinical quality and efficiency is warmly welcomed, but his review focused predominantly on secondary care. A national eye care strategy would cover all stages of the patient pathway, from prevention and early diagnosis to effective treatment and management, and high-quality rehabilitation and social care.

Early diagnosis is an important part of prevention, and it hinges on awareness. Eye health must be seen as a public health priority rather than in isolation from wider health and wellbeing issues. For example, too many people see eye tests simply as a way of identifying refractive error, but their purpose is wider: to identify eye conditions that could lead to loss or deterioration of sight at a later date and prevent that before it happens. Anyone entitled to a free eye test must know that they are entitled to it.

Vision defects in children include amblyopia, which can be mild but becomes more serious if left untreated or if the sight in the other eye is lost or damaged. In December 2013, the UK national screening committee recommended that screening should be offered to all children aged 4 to 5 years. However, children's vision screening in schools has yet to be implemented across all local authorities. Some, where it does not exist, are not commissioning it, and some are decommissioning existing programmes. The national guidelines provide a population-based examination of all children, ensuring that at-risk and vulnerable children in the population are reached. How does the Minister see the future of eye treatment and screening for children, and how does that fit into wider healthcare plans? I know that NHS England is working with CCGs, general practitioners, patients and the public to improve patient choice in all secondary care services by 2020, not least to increase awareness and achieve improvements in patient outcomes

and experience. That is extremely welcome, but will the Minister outline how that applies to ophthalmic services in particular?

When early diagnosis is achieved, referral processes must be equally efficient: straight to hospitals, rather than via GPs as happens in some areas, which is inefficient for patients, GPs and hospitals alike. I would be grateful if the Minister provided information on how optometrists and other service providers are encouraged to follow referral guidelines issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and professional bodies.

Preventing avoidable sight loss relies on timely access to treatment for eye conditions. The latest hospital episode statistics for ophthalmology show a picture of missed and delayed appointments across England. In the High Weald Lewes Havens CCG, which covers my constituency, 6.47% of ophthalmology appointments were cancelled by hospitals in 2015-16. In Sutton, that figure leapt to 26.17%. Cancelled appointments put people at risk of losing their sight unnecessarily, so I would welcome the Minister setting out how his Department works with hospitals and CCGs to ensure that such cancellations are as rare as possible.

As I draw to a close, I will briefly mention the UK's work on global eye health. In May, the World Health Organisation will discuss how countries are delivering on the avoidable blindness plan. The UK is a signatory to that and also one of the largest supporters of aid to combat the neglected tropical diseases that often cause blindness. Some 90% of blindness is in the developing world, and 80% of cases can be cured or prevented. I pay tribute to the Sussex-based non-governmental organisation Sightsavers, which the Department for International Development supports to deliver British goals for the reduction of blindness abroad. I thank the Government for their international leadership on this important issue.

Back home, I pay tribute to all the work done by Lord Low, the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group. I asked him what sight loss is like and what obstacles have to be overcome. He said that we cannot underestimate or understand the hurdles, time and energy it takes just to try to live independently and have access to services that the rest of us do to enable us to live a full life. There is also the importance of technology in this area, and how it must be harnessed to support people with sight loss.

Will the Minister explain how much work is being done to harness technology to help people with sight loss and how much work, commitment and finances are put into research? The eye research charity Fight for Sight has done so much commendable work in research. We cannot deal with some sight conditions, but the right amount of investment may help us tackle and stem the rise in sight loss in our ageing population.

Blindness and partial sight in the adult population costs the UK about £28 billion a year—not the £28 million mentioned in the House of Commons Library research paper. However, it costs so much more than that: opportunities are missed and careers stall. While disability employment in general is increasing, the one exception is eye disabilities. Family and relationships are challenged. I know the Government and the Minister are committed to reducing avoidable sight loss, improving the quality of life for people with sight loss and addressing persisting

health inequalities. I finish by thanking the Minister for the work he does in this area and encouraging him to keep going.

9.47 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) on securing the debate. To lose one's sight partially or wholly, gradually or rapidly, is a life-changing experience. Ordinary, everyday activities that were once straightforward become increasingly complicated, with simple tasks taking longer, and people create their own adaptations in order to cope. The number of people who live with sight loss in the UK is predicted to double to about 4 million by 2050. Due to our ageing population, more people are living with conditions that can lead to visual impairment, such as diabetes.

Loss of sight is more prevalent in my constituency, which is having a dramatic impact on quality of life, particularly among older people, yet we are failing to provide sufficient access to preventive treatment. In October last year, Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust was found to have nearly 22,500 appointments overdue at its three hospitals. More than 12,500 of those were at the Diana, Princess of Wales hospital in Great Grimsby, with hundreds of people at least eight months overdue for appointments. Across all three hospitals, the department most affected was ophthalmology, with 2,200 appointments overdue in Grimsby alone.

By 2030, there are expected to be 7,050 people in north-east Lincolnshire living with sight loss, an increase of 32.5%, and 980 living with severe sight loss, an increase of 38%. That increase is largely because we have an ageing population and, generally, the older someone is, the more likely they are to suffer from loss of sight. That is important, because visual impairment has a considerable impact on our psychological wellbeing, which means that older people are three times more likely to experience depression caused by sight loss, not to mention isolation and loneliness.

Yet as the RNIB and the hon. Member for Wealden have pointed out, nearly half of sight loss is avoidable. Timely access to treatment, including follow-up appointments and the effective monitoring and management of eye conditions, is vital to preventing unnecessary loss of or deterioration in sight. It is important because successful treatment of many conditions is time-dependent. That is why it was so shocking to learn in late October last year that up to 800 patients in the eye department of Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Trust who are potentially at risk of harm were left waiting—many of them for months on end—to be told what treatment they needed. Additional clinics were arranged to deal with the backlog, but patients should never have been left for such an extensive period of time without any check-ups or assessment of their condition.

In that area of the world there is a shortage of clinicians across the board, but particularly in ophthalmology, which adds to the strain on the system. When asked about the backlog of patients, the leadership at Northern Lincolnshire and Goole Trust said that they knew about it and saw it grow, yet they failed to draw up a coherent plan to address it, despite it being a year on from the tragic 2015 case of Brian Critten, a

[Melanie Onn]

patient at Scunthorpe general hospital, which is run by the trust. In an investigation that was launched after Mr Critten alleged a failure in duty of care, the hospital acknowledged that there might have been an opportunity to identify his cancer earlier if a cataract operation had not been cancelled and subsequent appointments not repeatedly postponed.

We cannot continue with a situation where preventive treatment is missed. The NHS must work with stakeholders, including the RNIB and other charities, to develop and implement a strategy that ensures adequate eye care services across England. I was contacted by Scartho Eyecare, an optician in my constituency, and informed that we are one of the few areas with no optical enhanced services—services that can ease the burden on GPs and on hospital ophthalmology services. There is apparently capacity to help at a lower cost to the NHS, but it has not been taken up. Perhaps the Minister will reflect on that in his speech.

It seems irresponsible that eye care strategies exist in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but that England does not have a strategy to meet the future needs that have been highlighted. Surely now is the time to get that right.

9.52 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) for securing this important debate; there have already been useful contributions. I want to make a short speech. I declare an interest: before I was a Member of Parliament, I worked in the NHS as an ophthalmologist.

I hope that the Government can achieve their own 20/20 vision for eye care in England. I hope that the Minister will go away with knowledge of what that should mean for the Government. We have heard about delays in the NHS. The figure from the Royal College of Ophthalmologists is that 20 people a month in England experience sight loss because of delays with appointments. I do not know about anyone else, but I have found that the hairdresser and dentist are better at telling me about appointment times than the NHS. It is the 21st century, and I believe that that is negligence—I do not know if lawyers would call it wilful negligence. It is one thing for a doctor in a clinic to have to tell a patient, “I am sorry, there is nothing I can do for you,”—it is the worst part of the job—but it is even worse to have to say, “If you had come to me a month ago, I might have been able to help you.” That is England today. The NHS and Government need to be transparent about where they are letting patients down.

The other 20 in my 20/20 plea to the Government—I have mentioned it to the Minister—concerns the £20 million cap that NHS England is talking about for the annual cost of new NHS drugs. The Minister is aware that for dry macular degeneration—the commonest form of macular degeneration, accounting for 90% of cases—there is currently no treatment. Those are among the sad cases in clinics when people are told, “There may be nothing we can do.” However, a phase 3 trial is being undertaken of a drug that may help with dry macular degeneration. If everyone present were to have

an examination, I am sure that there would be people here now with signs of dry macular degeneration—perhaps even the Minister himself. The drug will be an exciting change in medicine. It is not about just preventing sight loss; it is about maintaining independence. I do not believe that the £20 million cap takes into account the cost when someone loses their central vision, through losing independence and depending more on social care or family members who may take time off work to help.

The Government need 20/20 vision. We need to be transparent with patients. We heard about the case of Jean Rugg, who was losing her sight because of delays with appointments. A lady who came to my constituency surgery told me she was getting private treatment for her husband, because she realised that the delay in the monthly appointment for an injection for wet macular degeneration would cost him his sight. She was not angry; she just wanted me to be informed. If there is a £20 million cap, every MP will have people in their surgery saying, “I am trying to sell what I have to save my family member’s sight.” The £20 million cap must not apply to sight-saving treatments. I hope that there will be other speeches—it is a wide field—but that is my plea for the Government to have 20/20 vision.

9.57 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I thank the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani), who as always made a thorough and insightful speech. She put on the map what needs to be done about preventable sight loss. Given that that is what it is—preventable or avoidable—it is incumbent on the Government to have policies that ensure that patients get access to treatment. Those patients are our constituents and members of our community. We must support their access to treatment, because it will make a huge difference to their lives.

From my background in psychology, I can say that people with sensory impairment often lack confidence. They may become depressed or, if they have sight difficulties, be isolated because they worry about going outside and tripping or falling over. That has an impact on the whole wellbeing of the individual and therefore also that of family members. We must also consider cost-effectiveness. We have heard today that people who require care sometimes cannot get access to it. I know from other hon. Members that there are anecdotal reports of cataract operations being rationed. Such things are not particularly cost-effective ways of using resources. Obviously people who experience preventable sight loss will have falls and require NHS treatment. They may then require hip surgery as well as surgery for their sight loss. These things tend to exacerbate each other. I would like the Government to look at both the treatment that people should have, and deserve to have, and why preventive care is at the heart of a cost-effective NHS.

My grandmother required a number of cataract operations, and the difference I noticed in her following those operations was remarkable. It was almost as if she had her lease on life back. She was able to get out to the shops. She was an individual who really liked to be out and about because it kept her mood up and her spirits high, which is something I would like for everybody who requires it—particularly older adults.

My understanding is that, by 2021, 40% of the Scottish population will be over 50—I actually have to include myself in that figure. A significant proportion of sight loss is related to age, and one in eight over-75s and one in three over-90s will suffer significant sight loss. We have an ageing population and we are going to have to look at this issue extremely seriously, in terms of services right across the UK.

The Scottish Government are committed to keeping NHS services free at the point of delivery, and prescriptions and eye tests are currently free of charge, which has resulted in a 29% increase in the number of tests undertaken. That is important, because my understanding is that one of the barriers to preventing avoidable sight loss is that people are not accessing care, which is particularly linked to areas of deprivation. If the UK Government looked at making eye tests free, people in areas of deprivation in particular might not have to choose between a sight test and a meal on the table at the end of the day. In these times of austerity, those are some of the choices that some families unfortunately have to make.

I understand that the Christie Commission report looked at the future of public spending and estimated that 40% of public service spending could be avoided by using a preventive approach. Once again, I emphasise that it is not only morally right and our absolute responsibility to our constituents to ensure that avoidable and preventable sight loss is avoided and prevented, but that doing so is also cost-effective. International research indicates a fourfold return on investment in early eye care intervention, so this absolutely makes sense. Early diagnosis is key.

Let me end by saying that long-term planning is needed. We have made significant steps in policy in Scotland, but I do not want to see a postcode lottery for the rest of the UK. The Minister should look at making sure the policy is commensurate and gives the very best in evidence-based practice for constituents right across the UK.

10.3 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have 27 minutes to speak. I jest, by the way; I am not going to speak for 27 minutes.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Mr Shannon, you have plenty of time to speak. I feel I should declare an interest as I am wearing glasses to read my papers.

Jim Shannon: It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani), who very capably set the scene for us all on a subject that is obviously close to her heart; I believe it is close to the hearts of those of us who are here to participate in the debate as well.

As someone who has needed glasses from eight years of age—I am over 50; well over 50, let me tell you—I have never really known any other way; that is the fact of it. I can well remember those first glasses, with those round circles of glass like milk bottle bottoms. Those were the prescription glasses I wore in the '60s; we have come a long way to the perfection of eyesight and glasses today. In my case, I wear varifocals, and others

in this Chamber probably have the same. I look down to read and look up to look away. Varifocals give that better vision, and it is good to have that.

I certainly have compassion for those whose sight is deteriorating or lost completely. I think losing sight is probably one of the worst things that can happen to anyone. How much do we all appreciate seeing things in colour and all around us? There are some who cannot. My dad lost his sight at a late age in life, and I know it is one of the things that he particularly missed. He used to read his Bible in braille in the last few years of his life. To understand that sight loss can be prevented in some cases is something that we must all work towards achieving, and we must play our part in the House.

The Library pack has been quite helpful, and some of the information it gives is particularly applicable. The fact that sight loss costs the UK economy £28 billion is something that cannot be ignored when it comes to adding equations; we understand and appreciate that we have to balance the books, but when balancing the books we should sometimes do the necessary preventive action that the hon. Member for Wealden referred to.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Only yesterday in my surgery some folk came to see me about sight loss, the lack of appointments and the length of time they had to wait. We have been given the figure this morning of 20 people per month losing their sight, which is a precious thing. If there is a drug that can help to prevent that, surely the onus is on the Government to give people the gift of sight? That is worth pursuing.

Jim Shannon: It absolutely is. The hon. Member for Wealden referred to England in her introduction, but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have taken some steps in that direction. At the end of the day, we can certainly do this much better.

Sight loss affects people of all ages, but older people are more likely to experience a sight-threatening condition. That is clearly understandable. Having celebrated another birthday on Saturday past—I have stopped counting birthdays, which I think is probably the best idea; I try to forget about it, but the family keep reminding me that I am of a certain age—I certainly feel a deterioration process in action. That old saying that the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak becomes more and more a reality as I mow the lawn at home and carry out maintenance on the farm.

My glasses prescription has changed greatly over the years, and not for the better. That, again, is part of the ageing process. I am also a type 2 diabetic, so I have to be particularly careful with my eyesight. The former health Minister, now the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, replied to a question I asked about diabetes, and I think the hon. Member for Wealden referred to diabetes in her speech. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) also mentioned it in an intervention. We need to be aware of the complications of diabetes. Early diagnosis is very important.

It is critical to have regular appointments with an optician. I am not sure if everybody has one as regularly as they should. In Northern Ireland, I see my optician twice a year—probably because I am a diabetic. Others probably do it at least on a 12-month cycle. It is important to do so, because an optician can spot things in someone's eyesight and signs affecting other parts of the body. It is important that the role of the optician is encouraged.

[Jim Shannon]

One of the lesser-known reasons for sight loss is leber hereditary optic neuropathy. It is an ultra rare and very disabling disease that leads to blindness in approximately 80% of those affected within one year of the onset of symptoms. It affects just one in 50,000 people and is caused by a disorder of the mitochondria; it usually strikes young men aged between 15 and 35. Again, it can be prevented by early diagnosis, but there are no treatment options routinely available to patients with it in the UK. I often look with envy towards Scotland, because Raxone is currently undergoing a review there, whereas in England it was not selected by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. That is a bit of a disappointment. If the Minister does not mind me asking, perhaps he could respond to me on that as well when he gets a wee chance. It is most important.

I will give a Northern Ireland perspective, but I will not be taking the time that we talked about at the beginning. In Northern Ireland, the 2011 census reported that, out of a population of 1.8 million, a total of almost 31,000 people self-reported a long-term condition related to blindness or partial sight loss, representing some 1.7% of the population. However, the figure is set to increase dramatically in the future, as the population ages.

I am not sure if anyone has mentioned this yet, but we have an ageing population. We are getting older, and people are living longer, so this issue will become a bigger factor than ever before. Recent population statistics from 2016 reveal how the age structure in Northern Ireland is projected to change. I will give an example. The population aged 65 and over is projected to increase by 74.5% to almost 500,000 people from mid-2014 to mid-2039, with the result that one in four people—24.7%—will be in that age category. The population aged 85 and over is projected to increase by 157.3% to 88,600 people over the same period, which will see that share of the population increase from 1.9% to 4.4%.

The reason for giving those stats is simple: there will be greater demand on the NHS. The increasing prevalence of sight loss over the next decades requires additional planning, a long-term strategy and policy development now in order that the Government best respond to people's needs and concerns. That is what we are asking of the Minister, for whom we have the utmost respect, and I know he will reply with conviction and a desire to answer our questions.

I wonder whether this could be done better together, through a UK strategy. I am a great believer in the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have been told off this morning for saying that once or twice too often, but I continue to say it because it is important, as it is for my colleagues close to me in the Chamber.

In Northern Ireland we face a particular challenge in relation to timely and responsive ophthalmology treatment. In recent years, many new treatments have been developed, saving the sight of thousands of people who previously would have gone blind. One of our universities in Northern Ireland has been involved in perfecting new drugs and systems to prevent sight loss. An enormous amount of work is going on behind the scenes. Those new treatments are an enormous and welcome step forward.

Some conditions, such as dry age-related macular degeneration, can cause permanent sight loss in a matter of weeks or months. That is why early diagnosis and treatment is vital if a person's sight is to be saved. It is no surprise that delays to treatment can have a severe impact on patient outcomes. Everybody who has spoken so far has said that, as will those who speak after me.

Many new treatments for sight-threatening conditions require frequent follow-up appointments for monitoring and re-treatment. That has caused a rapid increase in demand for services. Northern Ireland faces a waiting list crisis across a number of specialties, including ophthalmology. I know this is a devolved matter, but I want to give some stats. As of 31 December 2016, some 23,000 people were waiting for a first out-patient appointment in ophthalmology, while 14,221 patients—approximately 62%—were waiting longer than 18 weeks. Statistics also show that patient numbers within ophthalmology are increasing year by year. On 31 March 2013, there were more than 8,000 patients waiting for first consultant-led outpatient appointments, compared with 23,000 in December 2016. That is an increase of 184%.

Severe financial constraints on the health service mean that increased demand for eye care services has not been met with increased resources. That has led to some patients losing sight unnecessarily because they are not seen within clinically safe timeframes. That is the core point we are all trying to make. In March 2016, the Royal College of Ophthalmologists released preliminary findings from a national study indicating that at least 20 patients per month suffer severe and unnecessary sight loss due to appointment delays. That is avoidable—if it is avoidable, for goodness' sake let us try to address that issue.

The situation in Northern Ireland is similar to that in other parts of the United Kingdom; urgent action is needed so that preventable sight loss is avoided and people do not come to harm while waiting to be seen. With more than 14,000 Northern Ireland patients waiting 18 weeks for an initial appointment with a consultant, and more than 30,000 planned appointments missed due to hospital cancellations or the patient's failure to attend, now is the time to address the provision of eye care services. This is putting an enormous strain on busy hospital eye departments and overworked NHS staff.

To conclude, while the lessons learned in Northern Ireland must be shared and there must be central learning for all the United Kingdom's devolved Assemblies and the Government's Developing Eyecare Partnerships strategy, it is important to resource and implement that strategy if effective change is to happen. We are looking for effective change, because without it, this debate will have failed. We are here to be positive, but we need Government assistance to make this happen.

While additional resources are needed, the reconfiguration or development of services does not necessarily need resources; it just needs a more effective way of approaching services. We cannot wait any longer, as each month of waiting for proper funding and implementation is a month in which people are losing their sight unnecessarily. I have said before that I have the greatest respect for the Minister. I look to him for UK-wide action now, and for the Government to work in conjunction with the devolved Administrations.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Unless anybody else wishes to speak, we will move on to the Front-Bench contributions. I am pleased to call Marion Fellows.

10.15 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Mrs Gillan; it is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I commend the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) for working so hard to secure this Backbench Business debate.

I must start by declaring a personal interest in this debate: I have been diagnosed with cataracts and also have an issue with the macula in my left eye. I would like to thank the Doorkeepers, who are always present, for writing down the names of all Members for me so that I can refer to them properly in my speech. I simply could not do it without them.

Like a lot of people, no matter how hard I listen at hospital appointments, I cannot always absorb everything that is said to me, so I do not know exactly what is wrong, but I am due another appointment soon. I am fortunate that as a result of visiting my local optician for my regular free eye test, the optometrist saw what was wrong and referred me to a local hospital for further investigation, and then on to a hospital in Glasgow. My husband has also benefited from free eye tests and is receiving treatment. We are really grateful to the Scottish Government that we have free eye tests.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health committed last year to a review, to consider an even more joined-up strategy and ensure that practices already taking place in parts of Scotland are spread across the country. The chair of Optometry Scotland has said that the review, which will look at existing models of good practice, could really change what is happening.

As the hon. Member for Wealden said, almost 2 million people are living in the UK with sight loss, and the number is expected to double to 4 million by 2050 because of the ageing population, which many speakers have referred to. I am one of those older people, so I have a dog in this fight. I do not want people across the UK to wait any longer than necessary for proper treatment. The hon. Lady also referred to glaucoma, which is the most prevalent cause of preventable sight loss. As she pointed out, there is no overarching eye strategy for England, but there are strategies in place for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Almost 300,000 people are registered with sight loss in England, and that figure will double. The voluntary sector in England is supported on this, but the Department of Health recognises that local solutions are better. Indeed, the hon. Lady made an impassioned plea for that. She referred to small changes to guidelines. A national strategy is vital to plug local gaps. She called for the screening of all children between four and five, which has been recommended but not yet implemented; I had not recognised that previously, but I do not think anyone in this Chamber would not support that.

The hon. Lady said that early diagnosis is really important and must be followed by speedy treatment, and that missed and cancelled appointments should be minimised. Finally, she looked at the international landscape and the good work done by DFID. She also mentioned that the cost of vision loss in the UK is £28 billion per

annum, which could be mitigated by changing the type and speed of treatment that people receive. That was echoed by other speakers.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn)—what a wonderful name for a constituency—talked about quality of life, especially for older people. That was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who said that the difficulties experienced by older people lead to things such as falls, which impacts on the national health service across the UK, but especially in England. It also leads to isolation and loneliness, of which my hon. Friend has great professional experience and also family experience with her own grandmother. As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby said, patients should not be left waiting. She referred to problems with Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust, which has been sued as a result of delay in treatment.

The hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) referred to her career as an ophthalmologist. I must say that ophthalmologists do great work, because it was my local ophthalmologist that started my long referral for treatment. The hon. Lady hopes that the Government will achieve their own 20/20 vision for England; indeed, I think we all hope that. Delays are affecting 20 people a month. It gets to the stage where people turn up for appointments but nothing can then be done. No one should be happy with that situation, and no one is. I make a plea to the Minister to ensure that he looks at it.

The hon. Member for Wealden referred to the case of Jean Rugg and the fact that people are now going private across the UK to try to prevent sight loss. I am sorry, Mrs Gillan: I get a bit emotional about this issue because of my own fear. I have not been wearing glasses from such a young age as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I was 11 when I started—but I think I can safely say that I can give him a good few years, so I have been wearing them for a long time. For someone who already has sight problems, the thought of losing their sight is something that they live with daily, and when it is flagged up that there might be something wrong, that causes great personal distress.

A really important point is that free eye tests, which we have in Scotland, encourage people to attend regularly to have their eyesight checked, which, as I said, leads to better treatment earlier. We really do not want a postcode lottery anywhere in the UK but, as hon. Members said, there is a postcode lottery in England: people need to live in the best place to get the best treatment.

The hon. Member for Strangford talked about the role of the optician. He said that 30,000 people in Northern Ireland—1.7% of the population—are affected at present. However, as is the case for the whole United Kingdom, this will be an ongoing and serious issue as populations age. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow painted a vivid picture of how people can be affected psychologically by sight loss—loss of vision. It is awful.

I want to ask the Minister about the cost of drugs and the £20 million cap that NICE has implemented in England. Does he consider the new cap an appropriate measure, given the Conservatives' manifesto promise to speed up the introduction of new medicines into the NHS? It seems counterintuitive, when we can save the NHS money through early treatment, that we stop treatment that will help to prevent people from suffering

[*Marion Fellows*]

falls and psychological illnesses and costing the NHS even more in the long run. Prevention is always better than cure. We really should be looking at that. In Scotland we do our best to do that. There is a different ideological focus. I have talked many times in this Chamber about how we do things better in Scotland. Hon. Members across the Chamber do not always agree with me, so it has been comforting, and indeed pride making, to hear them agree with me on this issue. A national strategy is needed in England as well as in the rest of the UK—in the devolved Assemblies and in the Scottish Parliament. Can the Minister give some comfort this morning to my colleagues who represent English constituencies?

It is a privilege to be able to talk here about the good work that we are doing in Scotland and that has been done in other parts of the UK. I again ask the Minister to look at the £20 million cap and at providing for the NHS in England a strategy that can help prevent avoidable sight loss.

10.25 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I thank the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) for securing this important debate, which is long overdue. I also pay tribute to the excellent work that she does on the APPG to reduce sight loss; I was privileged to attend a recent meeting, and she is doing sterling work, for which I applaud her.

We are fortunate also to have the expertise of the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias); I am sure that we were all interested to hear her expert opinion. We also heard very human stories from hon. Members representing constituents all over the country. They made very powerful cases. As I said, a debate on this subject was long overdue. Given the scale of the problem, to which many hon. Members alluded, the fact that it barely gets a mention in Parliament from one month to the next is quite shocking.

It has been said already, but is worth stressing, that more than 2 million people in the UK are living with sight loss. This is not a problem that affects a small number of people; it is a major problem. One in five people over 75 and one in two people over 90 are living with sight loss. With regard to the impact on the wider NHS, every year there are 2.6 million GP appointments for eye-related conditions and 270,000 accident and emergency visits for acute eye problems. And the problem is not going to go away. We have heard that the number of over-85s will double over the next two decades and that problems with sight loss are also set to double. Research by the Royal College of Ophthalmologists shows that there has been a 37% increase in eye clinic attendances in the UK over the past 10 years, and demand is growing year on year, making it the specialism with the second highest out-patient attendance. New treatments as yet unimagined will inevitably add to that demand.

For me and, I am sure, most Members in the Chamber, the most alarming statistic is that more than 20 people go blind unnecessarily every month in England. That is 20 people who did not need to lose their sight. It is a really shocking statistic. Many Members, including the

hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn)—I only represent great Burnley—have alluded to the horrors of blindness. Particularly affected are the elderly, people with dementia and people suffering from diabetes.

Jim Shannon: I have a very good friend back home in my constituency who has diabetes. He decided to go for laser treatment to correct his short-sightedness and, as a result, he lost sight in both eyes. There can be complications for diabetics who try to improve their sight. For my friend, that became a horror story rather than a good story. People who are diabetic need to take special cognisance of the possibility of complications before they do anything. I apologise, Mrs Gillan, for intervening for a wee bit longer than usual.

Julie Cooper: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. Diabetes brings its own special problems, which we need to be widely aware of and build into any future strategy.

Some 20 people every month in this country—one of the richest countries in the world—go blind unnecessarily; it is not because we lack the ophthalmic expertise to save sight. On the contrary, we have many leading centres of excellence. Indeed, the Manchester Royal eye hospital that serves my constituency is one of the finest centres in the whole of Europe. People are going blind because capacity in the service is failing to keep pace with demand. For many eye conditions, including glaucoma and macular degeneration, early diagnosis and regular treatment are vital if sight is to be retained. For example, if glaucoma is diagnosed early, good sight can be retained, but in the overstretched and under-resourced system that we have now, 17% of those diagnosed lose their sight.

Currently, fewer than half the patients requiring multiple appointments are seen within the optimum timeframe, and the statistics given by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby about the effect on her constituents are truly shocking. Research shows that more than half a million appointments in England were cancelled by eye departments in 2015-16. It is therefore not really surprising that the Royal National Institute of Blind People reports that 50% of the incidences of blindness could have been avoided. It is undoubtedly a source of misery for the individuals affected, causing untold suffering, restrictions on lifestyle and a host of missed opportunities. In addition, as has been referred to, it places massive additional pressures on social care services and the wider NHS. I think that we all agree, on both sides of the House, that services need to improve.

There are already many examples of pockets of good practice—deploying mobile units and the multi-skilling of staff—where experts are desperately trying to compensate for a lack of resources to deal with increased demand. Clearly, the knowledge that demand will continue to grow means that there cannot continue to be business as usual. The clinical professionals have identified four areas that need to improve. They have said clearly that there is a need for an overall strategy—a direction from above and from Government. It is significant, as the hon. Member for Wealden pointed out, that in Zimbabwe there is a national strategy to prevent sight loss and retain sight, but in England we do not have such a

strategy—I am shocked. The professionals also call for improved access to data to make their job easier and more efficient; to avoid duplication and ensure that they have access to the best possible information about their patients in a timely fashion.

In addition, the professionals call for services to be provided locally. That is particularly important because many of the patients are elderly. The current system of geographically distanced centres seems to be in direct contradiction to the aims of the five year forward view, which asks for treatments to be delivered locally. Current financial constraints must also be reduced to increase capacity. That makes sound economic sense, as we heard from the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, because it is estimated that the failure to tackle this problem actually costs the UK economy a shocking £28 billion—no wonder the parliamentary researchers got the figure wrong. Like me, they probably could not believe the figure when they saw it; £28 million sounds like a lot, but the cost to the UK economy of failing to act on this issue is actually £28 billion.

I want to pick up on some of the other points made by hon. Members today, most notably on prevention. Early diagnosis and prevention are extremely important, and it is a fact that in many areas across England school eye tests are becoming a thing of the past. Most of us will have had our eyes tested in school as children and had difficulties picked up then, but many areas are choosing not to commission such tests. In deprived communities, such as those in my constituency, many people simply cannot afford eye tests that are charged for and therefore choose not to prioritise them. As eye sight deteriorates with age, many people make do with cheap, over-the-counter spectacles. The point has been powerfully made that people do not just visit their optometrist so that they can read more efficiently; they also need to check and make sure that there are no early signs of other diseases. That is really important.

I totally agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Twickenham about treatment. How can an expert look a patient in the eye knowing that a treatment is potentially being developed but that, for reasons of resources, in one of the richest countries in the world, it is not a priority for us? I ask the Minister to consider all these points. STPs have been mentioned, and they are an exciting opportunity to address some of the issues raised today. Like the hon. Member for Wealden, I have looked at many of the STPs for many reasons; worryingly, even in the ones that do mention sight loss and eye care services, it is a passing mention—a tick-box exercise—and I hope that the Minister will address that. Today we look to the Minister to outline the action that the Government will take to address the many issues that have been raised, and to address what has become a national scandal.

10.36 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) not only on leading the charge today but on her work on the APPG more generally. A number of Members have made the point this morning that we have not debated eyes and sight in this place very much over the past few years. It is good that we have the time to put that right today, so I congratulate her on doing so.

I start by acknowledging what a number of Members have said—that 50% of sight loss is preventable. I think my hon. Friend said that 85% of people regard sight as the most precious of all our senses. Frankly, I am surprised that the figure was not higher than that. This is clearly massively important. We can debate numbers—the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) just talked about £28 billion—but the key figure is the statistic that my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) started with. Some 20 people a month are losing their sight, whether due to lack of prevention or lack of early treatment, in ways that are preventable. That is not acceptable, and we need to work collectively to address it—I will try to set out the Government response to it now.

I will talk first about prevention and the need for early detection and improved treatment. We heard about waiting lists in Great Grimsby, which I will come to. I will also talk about the social exclusion that can occur, and the mental health issues that can come from that. As I go through, I will try to address the points raised during the debate by Members on both sides of the House. If I do not, I am sure Members will remind me that I have not; in any event, we will write on any points that are not directly addressed.

The UK vision strategy was produced jointly with the RNIB, which does a lot of extremely good work in this space, for which the Government are grateful. Both the Department of Health and NHS England fully support that strategy, and need to continue to drive it forward. We also support global issues; Members have talked about the WHO global plan, which intends to eliminate preventable sight loss by 2020, and my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden talked about some of the work we do globally. She talked about patient choice and the referral process—whether it is via GPs or direct—which is an interesting point that I will come to. She talked about STPs, as did the hon. Member for Burnley, cancelled appointments and the need for a national strategy in England. I will come back on those points, if I do not get to them during my remarks.

To frame the issue, 2 million people in the UK have sight loss—because sight loss is so related to age, 4 million people will almost certainly be affected by 2050—and 80% of those are over 60 years old. Several Members cited statistics illustrating the demographic changes, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who spoke about Northern Ireland. As we debate these things across health and social care, we have to recognise the incredibly significant changes to our demography.

When the national health service was set up in 1948, one person in four lived to be over 65. We have totally fixed that, in the sense of increasing longevity. In the last 10 years, our population has increased by 10% and our population of over-85s has increased by nearly 28%. That trend will continue and accelerate, which gives us all challenges, including resourcing and all that that means. I heard a very apposite phrase recently: “We have done a good job of increasing quantity of life, but we haven’t yet increased quality of life to the same extent.” That is true of sight loss. As we heard, 148,000 people are certified blind in this country, with all that that means in terms of benefits and tax changes. That figure has been fairly stable—indeed, it has gone down slightly in the past three years—but nevertheless, it presents us with a big challenge.

[David Mowat]

In responding to those changes, we have to look at prevention and understand the risk factors. I have just covered the first risk factor, which is age. We cannot do a great deal about that, other than note that we are all getting older. Like the hon. Member for Strangford, I am over 50—considerably so—and the fact is that the sight loss numbers are driven by age. Smoking and obesity also play a big part in eye health, as they do in other aspects of health. Our tobacco control strategy will be produced imminently. We have done a good job in this country of reducing smoking, but we need to go further and faster, and I hope that the strategy will be a big part of that. There will be specific targets by age group for what we need to achieve. Obesity is equally and possibly more important; it is a risk factor for all sorts of things. I perhaps did not fully understand that obesity affects people's chances of getting cancer, dementia and suffering from sight loss as much as it does. We need to drive home the potential benefits of the obesity strategy that we published, which aims for a 20% sugar reduction by 2020.

Hon. Members, including the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), mentioned cataracts. Obesity doubles the probability of getting a cataract. That is an extraordinary statistic given that it is not intuitive that those are linked, even though they clearly are. I do not want this debate to be about money—what we are talking about is more important than money—but the cost to the country of obesity and diabetes put together means that we now spend more in the NHS on treating them than we do on the police service, the judiciary and the Prison Service combined. That puts into perspective the magnitude of the cost and what we need to achieve.

On prevention, we have not talked about the screening programme that we have introduced for diabetic eye disease, which was the principal cause of blindness in working-age people until recently. As a result of the programme, which involved offering a digital photograph to all people with diabetes over the age of 12, something like 2 million people were screened last year. For a screening programme, there was a very high uptake—over 80%—and some evidence shows that it has resulted in significant progress in preventing that type of blindness. This is the first year for which we have those figures, and diabetic eye disease is no longer the principal cause of blindness in working-age adults. That has largely been achieved through that very effective screening programme.

Let me talk briefly about the four most common causes of blindness, which are cataracts, age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma—that is the most prevalent, as we have heard—and diabetic eye disease. All of those can be treated most effectively through early diagnosis—frankly, that applies in most areas of health, but it is particularly true of eye health—and the first part of that is timely sight tests. Sight tests are free for children at school, although parents have to arrange them. They are also free for the over-60s, for anybody who is in a high-risk group, including those with diabetes or glaucoma, and for people on various income-supported benefits. There were 13 million eye tests last year, which was an increase of 2%. There is always a case for doing more, and I say to anyone who is listening to this debate,

even if they are not of such an advanced age as me or the hon. Member for Strangford, that these things are worthwhile.

Treatment is CCG-led in this country. The principal reason relates to some of the issues that we heard about from the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), who spoke well about the large numbers of people on the waiting list of the Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust and the extra clinics that had to be put on. That is a CCG responsibility. With national strategies, there is a choice about whether something should be locally focused, with local commissioners having the resources and money—although resources are a different issue—or whether there should be an overarching national plan.

I was struck by what the hon. Lady said about the actions that were taken. Those were local actions, which were completely appropriate. In England, we produce a public health outcomes framework—I do not think that is the case in Scotland, notwithstanding the excellent speeches by the Scottish National party Members about what is done in Scotland. The framework sets out for every local authority area in the country the extent to which there is glaucoma, diabetic eye disease and age-related macular degeneration, and the total number of people who are certified blind. Those data are tracked over the years and ought to inform local commissioners, and indeed, local health and wellbeing boards in the priority areas. There are striking differences and clusters of different types of blindness and different issues in different areas.

To cite a few of those differences, Barnsley has three times the national average of age-related macular degeneration and twice the national average of people who are certified blind. To me, that suggests that the commissioners in Barnsley should, in particular, be putting effort and resources into treating AMD. London has something like 20% more diabetic eye disease than other parts of the country. That may be to do with the large south Asian population in parts of London and the diabetes that that implies. Those sensible decisions should be taken by local commissioning groups in the knowledge of the facts. I commend the public health outcomes framework to hon. Members, who may not have looked at it for their own constituencies and patches. That should be considered and understood, because for this and other issues, it tells us where the priorities ought to be.

Melanie Onn: If CCGs are to focus on providing more support for a particular service, it prompts the question, “What will support be taken away from?” The trust in my constituency has now gone into financial special measures. There is only so much give in the system. What does the Minister think is the solution?

David Mowat: I did say, when I was making the point, that I was not talking about priorities in terms of total resource there. We must make choices. I will come to the point about the £20 million budget.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned concerns that cataract operations were being rationed. In response, the Secretary of State requested that NICE issue guidelines this year rather than next year, and we will pursue that. However, I make the point that 17% more cataract operations are

being done in England now than five years ago. That does not imply rationing to me, but we need to be careful. Operations should not be rationed, and we want NICE guidelines in place to ensure that they are not.

I will address some of the points made by hon. Members. My hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wealden mentioned referral pathways. She is right to say that different CCGs do things differently. Some CCGs will require an optician to refer a patient to a GP, who then refers onward to the hospital or ophthalmologist; around 11% of CCGs do not do so, which is quite odd. I will ask officials to investigate why. The principle is that CCGs are responsible for setting their own pathways. It is not for the Government to tell them what to do, but it is possible—indeed, likely—that some might not have wholly addressed the issue.

There is a general drive right across the health service to do more things in the community and fewer things in hospitals. Part of that involves using opticians in the best way possible, and not just on this issue. Although it has not been mentioned in this debate, I would like to see opticians used much more for glaucoma monitoring and other such things that, at the moment, tend to happen in hospitals, because as we have heard, there is a great deal of strain on a number of hospitals. We will try to make progress on that issue. I am happy to sit down with my hon. Friend and the Royal National Institute of Blind People, as she asked, to talk about it in more detail.

My hon. Friend mentioned shared delivery plans. She said that only 50% of STPs include a coherent eye strategy, and the hon. Member for Burnley said that some of those looked like tick-box exercises. I accept that, and I have two points to make. One is that an STP is not an organisation but a planning document, which must be put in place to begin to establish planning areas across the country where we can marry up prevention, primary care and secondary care. Not all STPs have yet addressed all the issues that they should; they are a process, not an event. I say to the people concerned about that that they should keep lobbying their local STP leadership, who are responsible for addressing it. Frankly, many STPs have a long way to go to become coherent plans, and eye health is just one area on which we need to make more progress.

We heard about the issue of cancelled appointments. They are a particular problem with eye appointments, which can be time-critical; the figure of 20 avoidable sight losses a month was quoted. The principles governing missed appointments across the NHS apply in exactly the same way to eyes as they do to all other things. The NHS constitution sets out an 18-week limit. I have heard speakers in this debate mention clinics where 50% of appointments are not attended. Such numbers are completely unacceptable. What is hard to understand in that context is that in the last five years we have increased the number of consultant ophthalmologists across the patch by around 27%. That does not imply that the problem is staffing, but I will take the issue away and consider it. I reiterate that the same provisions that apply to all aspects of our NHS apply to eyes and to national waiting lists. People who fail to get appointments for which they are clinically ready should be on a national waiting list. We should performance manage it in that way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden mentioned choice, rightly saying that people are entitled to choice in their secondary care. The same principle applies to eye care as to all other types of care, but there is more that we can and must do to build awareness.

I will touch briefly on the issue of an eye strategy. I have asked why NHS England feels that it is better for it to be owned and controlled locally; I made the point previously about the degree of local variation. We heard some instances from Northern Ireland, where there is an eye strategy, that show that it is not a panacea. As a Minister, I have a general view. There are a lot of strategies, but many fewer clear action plans with deliverables and accountabilities. It is rather like what we heard about in Great Grimsby. My preference is to work with NHS England and with Health Education England, if it is a question of getting more people into roles and all that goes with that. Having said that, I am happy, as I said, to talk to my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden and the RNIB more generally, but overall, across the health system, I do not see a lack of strategies. I sometimes see a lack of action plans with accountabilities and clear deliverables. My bias is towards the latter, not the former.

On the point about rationing, the NICE process is an attempt to create, across the whole health system, coherent guidelines and structured ways to evaluate different medicines. Broadly speaking, a cost of £20,000 per quality-adjusted life year is used by NICE to decide whether a drug should be offered or not. However, the point about the £20 million cap is slightly different. The cap is being introduced, potentially, for new drugs; it would not apply to any existing treatment. We are accelerating new drugs coming into the system. The cap would act as a trigger point: after £20 million has been spent, a renegotiation with the manufacturer would take place. On that point, I will sit down and allow my hon. Friend to sum up.

10.58 am

Nusrat Ghani: I have only a few minutes for my winding-up speech. It has taken a long time to discuss sight loss here in Parliament, but I am pleased that the Minister has responded so positively. Of course the all-party parliamentary group, the RNIB and I look forward to holding a meeting with him. We agree that the lack of local action, accountability and deliverables must be addressed. We are still convinced that it requires a national strategy, but we are more than happy to discuss that with him.

Fundamentally, the population is growing older, and more and more health problems are coming our way. The number of those with sight loss will increase from 2 million to 4 million. We need to do more on screening, research into treatments, prevention and ensuring that, regardless of where in England people live, they are treated equally and with dignity, within a period of time that ensures that preventable sight loss does not happen. Some 50% of current sight loss could have been prevented. That is not a statistic that we want to repeat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered preventing avoidable sight loss.

Children's Health: Access to Milk

11 am

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered children's health and access to milk in educational settings.

It is a great honour to speak under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. School milk is an issue that cuts across three Departments—the Department of Health, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Department for Education—but I am glad that the Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families is here today to respond to the debate.

I want to highlight the importance of school milk because it is fundamental to children's health and is a nutritious source of energy during the school day. I thank the School and Nursery Milk Alliance for all its good work and for the information it has supplied for the debate. I am also grateful to Tetra Pak for sharing with me a copy of its forthcoming report, "Making More of Milk", which will be formally launched on 5 April and which contains information particularly pertinent to the debate.

Milk has been an important part of our diet for hundreds of years. It is a natural healthy option for children that contains vitamins and minerals vital for good dental health and bone development. It also plays a key role in a healthy diet, helping efforts against childhood obesity and dental decay.

The Health Secretary has identified childhood obesity as a public health priority. It is estimated that 29.2% of children between the ages of two and 10 in England are either overweight or obese. Excess weight during childhood often precedes the development of cardiovascular disease, hypertension, insulin resistance and other diseases. Overweight and obese children are more prone to become obese adults.

The latest data from the Health and Social Care Information Centre show that 34% of 12-year-olds and 46% of 15-year-olds exhibit tooth decay. As well as being unpleasant for children, treating tooth decay is a significant cost to the NHS. Cow's milk contains micronutrients, such as calcium and vitamins B3, B12 and B2, that reduce the risk of tooth decay, bleeding gums and mouth sores.

Statistics released only last week by the faculty of dental surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons showed that more than 9,000 tooth extractions were performed on young children last year, including 47 extractions performed on babies under one year old. The dean of the faculty, Professor Hunt, described the figures as "shocking" and as attributable to the amount of sugar that children consume. Sadly, although the figures were widely reported in the media and although the new soft drinks levy will exclude milk products that contain at least 75% milk, there was no mention of the fact that drinking milk as a healthy alternative to sugary drinks can help children to develop strong teeth.

In 2016, Northumbria University published a review of the available research on the impact of milk on children's development. The evidence reviewed by the researchers suggested that milk consumption greatly improves children's nutritional status. The review, which was drawn primarily from cross-sectional studies, reported

that children who regularly drink milk have lower body mass indices, lower body fat percentages and lower waist circumferences than children who rarely drink it. That is probably due to the unique combination of essential nutrients that it contains. In particular, the evidence suggests that milk contributes to body mass control and body composition in children—possibly because of the high satiety effect, which makes it an ideal mid-morning snack—and contains multiple nutritional properties that protect against dental decay and promote good dental health.

The nursery milk scheme was subject to a lengthy consultation during the last Parliament about whether it could be made more cost-effective, possibly by giving a single large company the contract to provide milk to all settings across the country. The scheme was left in place untouched, but the problem with it is that children are no longer entitled to milk once they turn five, whenever in their reception year that happens. This confusing system not only creates extra work for teachers but seems very unfair on little children. Tetra Pak's "Making More of Milk" report has found that 89% of parents and 93% of teachers think that school milk should be made available to all reception children, regardless of when they turn five. Will the Minister commit to changing the scheme and making free school milk available for all reception children?

The Government have given assurances that until we leave the EU we will continue to participate in the European school milk scheme, through which over-fives can receive a subsidised portion of milk, but schools and parents need to know the Government's plans for the future. Can the Minister offer us any further information or assurances about the future of subsidised school milk for children over five?

Another worrying factor is that Public Health England's "Eatwell Guide", which was published in March 2016, reduced the content of milk and dairy products in the recommended daily diet from 15% to 8%. Although the guidance includes recommendations of healthier drinks for the first time, the reduced role of milk and dairy products could limit alternatives for children and young people who are unwilling to drink water or unsweetened beverages.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and on highlighting the many health benefits of drinking milk. I represent a constituency that produces a great deal of milk. It is fantastic to see her advocating those health benefits; I hope that the Government will listen and, more generally, that people around the country will realise that the more milk they drink, the healthier they will be.

Mary Glendon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He expresses a sentiment that will be shared by many people around the country.

Milk can play a role in keeping children hydrated. The British Nutrition Foundation's healthy hydration advice for children puts milk second only to water as a drink that they should consume. Although greens are important in everyone's diet, it is worth knowing that a 200 ml glass of milk provides the same calcium as 63 Brussels sprouts or 11 servings of broccoli—quite a thought.

The “Eatwell Guide” caused great concern among stakeholders in the dairy industry, who did not feel that they had been properly consulted during its development. Although Public Health England published information last December on the process of developing the guide, it did not make it clear why the recommendations to reduce the level of dairy were introduced. Can the Minister offer reassurances that the new guide will not discourage children from drinking milk? Will he commit to involving the full range of stakeholders next time any important public health guidance is being revised?

Finally, I would like to raise the issue of school food standards. The school milk sector was broadly positive about their introduction in January 2015, but the School and Nursery Milk Alliance has highlighted the fact that there is no clear evaluation or monitoring of them. To ensure that we make the most of the standards, schools not only need to provide milk, they need to provide it in a way that is appealing to children and that encourages them to drink it. Does the Department for Education have any plans to evaluate the implementation and impact of the standards?

Today, school milk tends to be chilled and served in individual cartons—a big contrast to the warm milk that some MPs may remember from their childhood—but there are other factors that affect whether children want to drink it. For example, milk is more appealing at the mid-morning break than at lunchtime, because its high satiety effect means that it does not make a good accompaniment to a meal. A mid-morning break is also a good time to have a healthy snack, to help children to get through until lunch, particularly if they did not eat a proper breakfast.

Evidence shows that many children drink only skimmed or semi-skimmed milk at home, so if they are given full-fat milk at school, they tend not to like the taste. The school food standards will be revised as part of the childhood obesity plan and it is important that the requirement to provide milk is retained. Can the Minister provide any details about the plans to update the standards as part of the childhood obesity plan? As part of the childhood obesity plan, a new health rating scheme for primary schools will be introduced in September this year. It would be helpful if it covered access to milk in schools, including how it is offered to children. Will milk be included at least once a day?

Ofsted is also planning to produce guidance for schools following its thematic review of obesity, healthy eating and physical activity in schools. It would be helpful for this guidance to include information on milk, including best practice on how to serve it. Academies established between June 2010 and September 2014 are not required to implement the school food standards, although we understand that many of them do so voluntarily. Are there any plans to make compliance compulsory for all schools?

There are a wide range of issues impacting on school milk today. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to this debate. As these issues cut across a number of Departments, I hope he will be able to tell us how they are working together to ensure that children are able to access milk in schools for the benefit of their health, for now and for their lifetime.

11.11 am

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): As ever, Mrs Gillan, it is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I begin, in the customary way, by congratulating the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) on securing this debate. It goes without saying that, like her, we want to ensure that all pupils are healthy and well-nourished. To that end, we promote and encourage a healthy, balanced diet and healthy life choices, through school funding, legislation and guidance—the tools at our disposal. We use our legislative frameworks, such as the school food standards, to ensure that children receive a healthy, balanced diet within all educational settings.

We know, of course, that most adults and children in the United Kingdom eat too much sugar. That is why the Government recommend that we reduce our intake by eating fewer sugary foods and drinks, such as sweets, cakes and biscuits. We also know that the earlier that eating and drinking habits are ingrained, the harder it is to disrupt them and put people on a different dietary path in the future.

It is in such a context that this debate is timely, as it gives me the opportunity to explain how we are promoting a healthy, balanced diet and milk consumption within educational settings, particularly among those children who are most in need. For example, children under the age of five who attend a day care or early years setting receive milk via the nursery milk scheme, which the hon. Lady referred to. That scheme is funded by the Department of Health, so it is a cross-Government scheme, but we work together to ensure that it reaches the children who need it most. It has actually been in existence since the 1940s, so it is a very well-established route to ensure that those children who perhaps would not enjoy that level of milk consumption at the early age they need it are able to do so.

Indeed, I suspect that I was a beneficiary of that scheme in the 1970s, believe it or not, when I was at Mrs Batsen's nursery in Wilmslow, where—from memory—I was first faced with the reality of needing to learn to share with others and not just think about myself. I was very excited on the day I was asked to be the milk monitor. The job was to go downstairs with another child—my fellow milk monitor—to collect a crate of small milk bottles for distribution upstairs among our peers. Now, we knew that there were two children absent that day, so we concocted a plan to drink two of the bottles downstairs and then bring the remaining bottles upstairs, where we would then be able to consume another bottle, knowing that there should be two bottles spare. Unfortunately, the plan did not turn out to be the grand plan that we had hoped it would be, as a number of bottles had already been taken out of the crate by the staff, who recognised that they needed to reduce the number of bottles to reflect the level of attendance. So we were caught red-handed and I was never made milk monitor again.

Consequently, when I visited Beechwood school in my constituency in 2011, on what was World School Milk Day, it was something of a surprise to be made an honorary milk monitor. That gave me an opportunity to reflect on the role that milk has played in my life, both in learning life lessons and in being able to access what is an important part of a healthy diet in those formative years as we grow up.

[*Edward Timpson*]

That is why the Government promote a healthy, balanced diet to children, using legislative frameworks such as the school food standards. Those standards, which apply to the overwhelming majority of maintained schools as well as to maintained nurseries, restrict the amount of fat, sugar and salt that can be served during the day. I heard what the hon. Lady said about the fact that there are some academies formed between September 2010 and 2014 to which those school food standards do not apply. We encourage those schools to follow the standards, but of course we keep this matter under review and in the future we will look to see how we can ensure a greater level of engagement with those standards, as they reflect exactly what we want to see happen in schools for the good of children.

The benefits of providing a healthy school meal and milk to the most disadvantaged children are well-recognised. Currently, around 1.15 million of the most disadvantaged children are eligible for and claim a free and nutritious meal. As for milk specifically, we promote its consumption as part of a healthy, balanced diet through funding, legislation and guidance.

Why do we do that? As the hon. Lady rightly highlighted, we know that milk is excellent for children's growth and development, which is why the school food standards require lower-fat or lactose-reduced milk to be available for children who want it during school hours, and it is offered free to disadvantaged pupils. We also provide significant funding to schools to support the provision of milk, through the European Union, which I will move on to in a moment, as well as through top-up and nursery milk schemes, as part of free school meals, and more recently through universal infant free school meals, which benefit 1.4 million infants.

The hon. Lady made it clear that we have continued our commitments to the European Union scheme during our period of membership of the EU. Of course, like all areas of policy that will be moving into a domestic arena, we will carefully consider how we will continue to support schools, so that we can fulfil our obligation to provide children with a healthy and balanced diet. I cannot say at this stage where that consideration will lead us, but the fact that we can go back to the 1940s to see how Governments have provided help and support in this area is an indication of where we may want to take the evidence in future, when we come to make those decisions in a few years' time.

Notably, we provide around £60 million each year, outside the EU arrangement, to reimburse costs for the nursery milk scheme, which is targeted at children under the age of five, to ensure that they get the important nutrients they need in those important years of development.

The hon. Lady asked about the over-fives who are still at nursery school. I will look carefully at what she said and discuss it with my ministerial colleagues. However, it is worth pointing out that over-fives who are entitled to receive a free school meal do so, and where they are entitled to a free meal they also receive free milk. Also, under the universal infant free school meals scheme that I referred to a few moments ago, free milk is available to infants if it is served as part of their lunch. We will look at the impact that is having as part of our consideration of where we go next with our commitment in this area.

Mary Glendon: I thank the Minister for giving way, and it was very entertaining to hear about his time as a milk monitor. I just wanted to emphasise the issue of children having free milk throughout reception, rather than the current situation, where a child stops getting free milk the moment they are five, even though they will obviously be in a class with other children who are younger than they are. That is the point I want to emphasise. If free milk could be guaranteed to children while they are in a reception class, it would make life a lot easier for the teachers and it would seem fairer to the little children themselves.

Edward Timpson: As I have said, I will look carefully at what the hon. Lady has said, but there are a number of routes that I have described whereby children over the age of five in a nursery setting are able to access free milk, whether that is through free school meals or universal infant free school meals. There will be a continuation of the policy in the deliberations by different Government Departments about where it goes next, and clearly that issue will be part of future discussions.

The scheme we support—the nursery milk scheme—has extensive reach, providing milk to 1.5 million children, and it should not be forgotten that it saves families about £400 a year and ensures regular milk consumption. Because milk is a valuable source of a range of nutrients, including calcium, protein and B vitamins, the Government recommend the consumption of lower-fat milks for the general population aged over five years, and promote that through the “Eatwell Guide” the nation's food model and the Change4Life social marketing campaign, which recommends swapping sugary drinks for water, lower-fat milks, and diet, sugar-free or no-added-sugar drinks. The “Eatwell Guide” has been distributed to all primary, secondary and independent schools in England. I hear what the hon. Lady says about the guide and the advice, but the advice was set after a review of all the evidence, including the recommendations of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition on the basis of a full public consultation. The intention is absolutely not to discourage children from drinking milk but to encourage them to do so as part of a healthy, balanced diet. That important message should be taken away from the debate.

I turn to the early years foundation stage framework, which sets out the regulatory standards for all early years providers. The framework requires early years settings to

“promote the good health of children attending the setting”, and to provide meals, snacks and drinks that are “healthy, balanced and nutritious”. About 40,000 childcare settings are currently registered with the nursery milk scheme in their fulfilment of that responsibility. Such settings must also help children to make healthy food and drink choices, so that they can formulate healthy lifestyle habits early on. In line with our commitment in the childhood obesity plan, we will publish and promote example menus for early years settings in England, to help them meet the latest Government dietary recommendations. I am sure that the hon. Lady will be interested in looking at those.

We are also committed to improving young children's oral health. That is a Public Health England priority, and it has established a child oral health improvement programme board, with a substantial programme of work and a wide range of partners, to improve the oral

health of children under the age of five. In fact, only a few months ago, in December, Public Health England and the Department for Education—another example of cross-Government working—published a toolkit for early years providers, to support those considering setting up a supervised teeth-brushing scheme. In addition, Government measures to reduce sugar consumption, as set out in the childhood obesity plan, are designed to have a positive effect, and they include the soft drinks industry levy announced last year and wider measures to reduce sugar in food and drink products.

Although it is encouraging that the data published by Public Health England show that over the past two years the number of tooth extractions for children in hospital has reduced, there is no let-up in doing all we can to improve children's oral health. Public Health England and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence have published evidence-based guidance and toolkits to support local authorities, and NHS England is also working up plans to test, in 10 high-need areas, more creative ways of using commissioning expenditure to improve children's oral health. I understand that those areas will be announced shortly. The Department of Health is working with NHS England to test the NHS dental contract focus on improving oral health, particularly in children.

This is about promoting not just milk but other physical activity that can be undertaken by children, at home or at school, to support a healthy, balanced diet. As part of the work to tackle childhood obesity, we are also committed to updating the school food standards, to align them with the latest scientific advice on sugar. We are in the process of scoping out the timeliness of that work, and I hope further information will be available later in the year. We will take into account the hon. Lady's points about who the standards apply to and will ensure that the standards best reflect what we know works for children in instilling good, healthy lifestyle choices, including the regular consumption of milk as they grow up.

Sugar consumption is a major factor in childhood obesity, and sugar-sweetened soft drinks are now one of the biggest sources of dietary sugar for children and teenagers. The introduction of the soft drinks industry levy is a clear indication of our determination to address that vital issue. The levy will generate significant funding for a variety of initiatives announced in the childhood obesity plan, including the doubling, from September 2017, of the primary physical education and sport premium from £160 million to £320 million a year, the provision of £10 million a year to fund breakfast clubs in up to 1,600 schools, targeting pupils most in need—milk could play a part in those clubs—as well as £415 million towards the creation of a new healthy pupils capital programme, supporting schools to pay for facilities for PE, after-school activities and healthy eating. There is an opportunity there to use significant new money to promote the cause that the hon. Lady has articulated so well.

Mary Glendon: On the levy, I asked the Minister whether the Government would consider it a good idea to promote drinking milk as opposed to sugary drinks,

since not all children like water or unsweetened beverages. That is my key point on the issue; the Government should say, "Milk is good for you. Drink it" instead of a glass of sugary pop.

Edward Timpson: At the risk of harking back to the halcyon days of the 1970s and 1980s, I remember the adverts, "Gotta lotta bottle" and "Nice cold, ice cold, milk", which did a lot to promote milk consumption, not just within educational settings but in the wider community. I think I have given a strong message today about the Government's support for the continuation of milk as a central tenet of a child's dietary upbringing. Through the various schemes that we still support and also the new money that we have announced, there is an opportunity to help that to infiltrate even further into our education system.

However, we still have a lot of educating of parents to do. Last year a survey in Scotland showed that a third of parents still did not think it an issue if their child had tooth decay by the time they were a teenager. There are some perceptions and societal norms that we would not want to support, and there is work to do to bust them as we strive to improve the health of our nation. The Government want to help children to achieve a healthy, balanced diet and to encourage them to make the right food choices, and I want to reassure the hon. Lady that we will continue to encourage the consumption of dairy products, including milk.

James Heapey: It is useful to hear about the role the Minister sees for his Department in promoting the drinking of milk. Does he see a wider role in promoting an affinity with farming, to encourage children to have a greater interest in the provenance of their food? That might be a catalyst for healthier eating and for support for the UK's agricultural industries.

Edward Timpson: As a Member of Parliament with a strong dairy industry in my constituency, I am always keen to find ways of bringing children closer to the land and helping them to understand the importance of the industry and its produce to them and their health as they grow up. My hon. Friend's suggestion is helpful. The more we can do to bind those things together, the better.

Through the likes of the nursery milk scheme, we can ensure that children under the age of five receive free milk every day. In addition, through the early years foundation stage, we are ensuring that early years settings are promoting good health choices and providing meals, drinks and snacks that are healthy, balanced and nutritious. We are always open to suggestions and evidence that point towards other approaches to help us tackle what is, as the hon. Lady said, and as the Secretary of State for Health has said on many occasions, a public health issue. I thank the hon. Lady for using the debate to do just that, and I hope that she has been reassured by the Government's continued commitment to ensuring that children can grow up and have a healthy and fulfilling life, in which milk plays a prominent part.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

National Spitfire Project

[PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered funding for the National Spitfire Project.

A national monument to the iconic Spitfire is long overdue, and in moving this debate, I hope the House will also consider the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. The Spitfire, like me, was made in Southampton—I always have to get that in. The prototype was designed by the famous aeronautical engineer—he was also one of the country's most successful apprentices—R. J. Mitchell, at the Supermarine factory in Woolston, which is situated in the east of the city and the heart of my Southampton, Itchen constituency.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): While Reginald Mitchell was one of Southampton's most famous apprentices, he was one of my constituency's most famous residents. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have an opportunity for a national celebration of Reginald Mitchell's contribution?

Royston Smith: I agree with the hon. Lady that it is a national monument that we seek. I acknowledge that R. J. Mitchell was born in Stoke-on-Trent. In fact, it was where he started his apprenticeship. However, he designed the iconic Spitfire in my constituency of Southampton, Itchen, which is where I think the monument should be situated.

The Spitfire completed its maiden flight from Eastleigh airport, latterly renamed Southampton airport, on 5 March 1936. With a powerful and instantly recognisable Rolls-Royce Merlin engine and eight machine guns, it was a formidable fighting aircraft in its day. So impressed were the Royal Air Force with the prototype that the Air Ministry ordered 310 Spitfires to be produced at the Woolston factory in Southampton. By 1940, the factory was at full production, employing thousands of technicians and engineers to manufacture the Spitfire. The aircraft had to be built quickly to replace the many being lost during the battle of Britain, so the factory was working flat out. The Nazis knew that, and they also knew they had to stop it. The Luftwaffe had been taking catastrophic losses—they estimated that they had lost nearly 1,200 aircraft between July and September 1940 due to allied action—so it was imperative for them to prevent the manufacture of British fighter aircraft.

September 1940 was Southampton's darkest period of the war. On 15 September the Woolston factory was attacked by 15 Luftwaffe bombers dropping 23 bombs. Fortunately, on that occasion they missed their target, but on 24 September 17 enemy bombers managed to reach the south coast and attacked the Itchen and Woolston factories. Two days later the Nazis redoubled their efforts and two waves of bombers got past the British air defences and dropped 60 bombs on the two Supermarine complexes. Both factories were destroyed, and as a result 110 people lost their lives and many more were injured.

The blitz on Southampton was devastating, and the city was hit over and over again, not just because of its Spitfire production, but because of its docks and many other strategic targets. There were 57 attacks documented in all, dropping more than 2,300 bombs. Nearly 45,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed, with most of the city's High Street devastated. There were reports that the glow of the firestorm as Southampton burned could be seen from as far away as Cherbourg.

After the awful attacks on the Woolston Supermarine factory, the Nazis thought they had succeeded in halting production of the Spitfire. However, they underestimated the British spirit and stoicism, and not for the first time. Under the instructions of Lord Beaverbrook, production was dispersed to sites around Southampton, Hampshire and Wiltshire.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for the powerful case he is making. He may be aware that production of the Spitfire was distributed to bus depots, laundromats and all sorts of improvised mechanical workshops around Southampton. In that way, thousands of Spitfires were produced, touching the lives of almost every family in Southampton. Does he agree that the monument would be a tribute not just to the air force and the plane itself, but to the enterprising spirit of the people of his home town?

Royston Smith: I agree with everything my hon. Friend has just said. In fact, I was about to come on to that very point.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I am sure the hon. Gentleman will accept that when he talks about Southampton, he means both sides of the city. Indeed, it is a pleasure for me to be here this afternoon to support him in what he is saying about the Spitfire, provided that the word "Southampton" is completely underlined in proceedings so far as the national monument is concerned.

Royston Smith: I am happy to agree with the hon. Gentleman, my neighbour and friend. Southampton is the home of the Spitfire. It just so happens that the Supermarine factory was located in my constituency. However, I am referring to Southampton in general.

Returning to the comment made by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), sheds, garages, bus stations, industrial units and a hotel were used for production in and around Southampton—including Hendy's garage, Seaward's garage, Sunlight laundry, which were in the constituency of the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), and the Hants and Dorset bus depot—before the aircraft were assembled and test flown at Eastleigh airport.

Within a few weeks, the Spitfire was back in production all over Southampton and the neighbouring towns and villages, including Salisbury, Reading, Newbury and Trowbridge. It was an enormously challenging business building the Spitfire in that way, and we should not underestimate that. The work was carried out at the height of the blitz, often by unskilled labour. A large part of the workforce was women, girls and retired men, because most eligible men were in the armed forces fighting for their country.

The effects of the war touched the lives of almost every family in Southampton, and they continue to do so today. In fact, Flight Lieutenant James Brindley Nicolson was awarded the Victoria Cross in 1940 for his bravery in a dog fight over Southampton. His bravery has been studied and recognised by children from Sholing Junior School in my constituency. The pupils designed and raised funding for a memorial to commemorate his achievements.

Once assembled, the Spitfire was delivered to air bases across the country by the Air Transport Auxiliary. Many of those pilots were women. One of note is Mary Ellis, who celebrated her 100th birthday last month. Her extraordinary milestone was marked by a flight in an extraordinary aircraft, the Spitfire, one of the aircraft types she flew during the war. In 1943 the women of the Air Transport Auxiliary were awarded equal pay to their male colleagues, making the ATA the first equal opportunities employer.

On 1 April 2018 the Royal Air Force will celebrate its centenary, commemorating 100 years of devotion and duty to our country. As a former Royal Air Force engineer, I am enormously proud to be standing in this place today promoting the National Spitfire Project and the tribute to the Royal Air Force in the shape of the Spitfire monument. Perhaps the RAF's finest hours—they were certainly those of the Spitfire—were during the battle of Britain, when against the odds our brave pilots and engineers repelled the might of the largest air force the world had ever seen. I do not think anyone would say that the battle of Britain won the war, but it certainly prevented a German invasion and was a turning point in the fortunes of Hitler and his ambitions to occupy Great Britain.

The Spitfire played a central role throughout world war two, and our British pilots were joined by allied pilots from all over the world. In fact, up to 20% of pilots who flew in the battle of Britain were not British. Most notably, the Royal Air Force was joined by Poles, Czechs, New Zealanders, Belgians, Canadians, Australians, Norwegians, Greeks, Swedes, Italians, Indians and Pakistanis. Tomorrow the Prime Minister will write to Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, informing him of the UK's intention to leave the European Union. One of the first priorities of our withdrawal negotiations must be the status of European Union nationals living in this country and British nationals living in European Union countries. As the negotiations begin, it is important to take a moment to remember the significant contribution that those countries of the European Union made to our war effort.

A total of 145 Polish fighter pilots served in the RAF during the battle of Britain, making up the largest non-British contribution. By the end of the war, around 19,500 Poles were serving in the Polish Air Force in the UK and in the RAF. One Polish pilot of note was Stanislaw Skalski, who came to England after the fall of Poland. While flying with 501 Squadron, he shot down seven enemy aircraft before being shot down himself. After recovering in hospital, he joined 306 Squadron in February 1941 and by October he had claimed a further five enemy fighters.

Of course, this country produced its own heroes and the pilot credited with bringing down the most enemy aircraft from the cockpit of a Spitfire was Air Vice-Marshal Johnnie Johnson, who had 38 confirmed kills—that

might well have been more, if he had not missed the beginning of the battle of Britain due to a rugby injury. Flight Lieutenant Eric Lock became the RAF's most successful battle of Britain pilot, shooting down 16 German aircraft. In one week alone, Flight Lieutenant Lock managed to shoot down eight German aircraft—an impressive tally that earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

In November 2016 a new memorial was unveiled in Grimbergen, Belgium to honour the fallen Norwegians who flew Spitfires during the war. In the UK we have many monuments, including that to the women of world war two on Whitehall, the RAF Bomber Command memorial in Green Park and the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. It would therefore be fitting to further commemorate, in the Royal Air Force's centenary year, those who dedicated their lives to protecting our freedoms.

In order to celebrate the fantastic achievements of the RAF over the past 100 years, the RAF 100 committee has a selection of events planned. Those national events will raise the profile of the RAF across the whole of our nation, enhance its reputation and promote a better understanding of what it does. It will showcase the RAF's people, their depth of talent and their diversity. The events will celebrate the history of the RAF, but they will also demonstrate why it remains, and will continue to remain, vital to the security and prosperity of the UK. The national tribute to the Royal Air Force will be the only physical legacy to recognise and commemorate the RAF's centenary. It will serve to remind everyone who visits the monument what a significant contribution the RAF and the Spitfire have made far into the next 100 years.

The project for the Spitfire monument has been led for many years by my very good friend and colleague, Councillor John Hannides. He is joined in his endeavours by retired Air Commodore Gordon Moulds, Paul Lester and Tony Edwards, and the president of the trust, Sir Ralph Robins.

Everyone in Southampton has grown up knowing the story of our brave pilots and the iconic Spitfire. As a constant reminder, a fully functioning Spitfire is still the major attraction at the excellent Solent Sky aviation museum in Southampton, run by the determined and dedicated curator Squadron Leader Alan Jones. The legend of the Spitfire lives on in countless films, documentaries, essays and books. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who is unable to be here today due to his duties chairing the Defence Committee, is a keen supporter of the project and has himself written an acclaimed account about a highly decorated pilot, Kink Kinkaid, who died in Southampton water trying to break the airspeed record in a forerunner of the Spitfire, the Supermarine S.5.

We now have a site on Southampton's historic waterfront, generously donated by Southampton City Council, where the more than 1.8 million passengers on one of the 450 cruise ships that visit Southampton each year will pass. We have a detailed design for a stainless steel monument 1.5 times the size of the original Spitfire, which will soar 130 feet above the ground—nearly as high as the Statue of Liberty and twice as high as the Angel of the North—and be visible for miles around.

[Royston Smith]

We also have all the planning permissions in place. All that is missing now is the funding required to bring the project alive.

Since 2012, the Government, through the Financial Conduct Authority, have levied fines on the banks of more than £973 million for fixing LIBOR rates. Much of that has been allocated to worthy causes, and rightly so. The Chancellor has made clear his intention to use the remaining fines for armed forces and emergency services charities. I completely agree with that approach and I suggest that this project fits those criteria perfectly.

Sir Winston Churchill, one of our nation's greatest ever leaders, summed up the debt of gratitude we owe to the Royal Air Force, when he said:

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”—[*Official Report*, 20 August 1940; Vol. 364, c. 1167.]

It is time for the many now properly to honour the few, and what better way than to immortalise them and their most famous aircraft in a fitting monument to the Spitfire.

2.45 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies—and may I assure you that I am at least one of your Twitter followers who does not hate you?

I declare my interest in this subject. Both my parents were in the Royal Air Force during world war two—indeed, they met there, which is why I am here now. My father was an engineer. He maintained the Merlin engines on the Spitfires, Hurricanes, Lancasters and Mosquitos. He always said thereafter that he got very bored when jet engines came along, because the Merlin was such a beautiful and sophisticated engine to maintain, whereas jet engines were too simple for him.

In an iconic fashion, the Spitfire represents the common endeavour of these islands in their crusade against evil. With a nod back to last week, that is something that we should always remember. In expressing my interest in the subject, and as a member of the Scottish National party, I want to say that the Spitfire represented something for all these islands and for all the people of these islands—for the common people, for working people and for members of the services. The importance of the prospective Spitfire monument embraces not just the aircraft, but the human endeavour that lies behind it. I think we could all agree on that, which is why I am so serious that we must finish the project. As most people here know, the project has been a long time in gestation—far too long—and it is time that we make sure that next year, the 100th anniversary of the RAF, is the year that it actually happens.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and also you, Mr Davies, for your chairmanship. It is a pleasure to serve under you. I also love you on Twitter—and everywhere else too.

It is great to hear a member of the SNP being so positive about something. That is something of a revelation to me, sitting on this side of the Chamber. I hope the Minister is taking notice of the cross-party support at this point for the memorial. I was involved in the

Sir Keith Park memorial campaign, as were others here, and I was helped by some of those who my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) mentioned. It is great to see the project finally coming to fruition, but it does now need the Government to step up to the plate.

George Kerevan: I am happy to reinforce the sentiment to the Minister that the support comes from all over the islands. I want to underpin that with a little bit of extra history on the Spitfire, which I think all of us will do this afternoon.

The Merlin engines were largely manufactured at the Rolls-Royce shadow factory at Hillington, just outside Glasgow. Some 160,000 people worked at that factory and it provided the engines not just for the Spitfires, but for many of the other aircraft that served the RAF. That was part of what happened in world war two, and people did that selflessly. However, there is an interesting side to the Hillington experience of building the Merlin, because large numbers of the people making the engines were women. Initially, they were not paid the same as men; they were not even paid the same as the ordinary labouring workers were. That led to a lot of industrial unrest and, in 1943, to a major strike. Of course, that was a very difficult thing to contemplate in the middle of world war two. The feeling in the factory was that we were not just fighting against evil, but fighting for a new, democratic society, so they took industrial action—very regrettably, but they took it. The result was that for the first time in these islands a major engineering factory granted equal pay to men and women. We should weave into the Spitfire story the fact that the fight for equal pay began with the Spitfire, strange as it may seem.

I will not keep Members long, but I want to add another couple of Scottish contributions. I do so not to be sectarian, but to underline the fact that this would be a common monument and would represent all of these islands.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. His parents worked on the Spitfire, as did my grandparents. Does he agree that, without the combined resources and ingenuity of all the nations of the United Kingdom, the Spitfire would surely have never flown, and that the Spitfire is a powerful reminder to us today that we truly are stronger together?

George Kerevan: It is self-evident that we have to defend these islands together. What divides us at the moment and in times past is how we organise our democracy, and I think we are mature enough to have that discussion. What the SNP bring, and have always brought, to the table is the idea that we will share the common defence of these islands. That has never been in question. Indeed—my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) might say this in a brief moment—we often have discussions about defence issues because we do not think the Government protect these islands adequately, but that is a debate that we can have elsewhere. Our division on how we organise our democracy in these islands should not get in the way of the fact that we have a common interest in defending them. The history of the Spitfire and the second world war is an exemplar of that.

I will be very brief, as other Members want to speak. There is one other person who needs to be mentioned today with respect to the Spitfire and the battle of Britain: the man who was the head of Fighter Command, Hugh Dowding. We have all seen the film “The Battle of Britain”, which, for all its faults, I still love—when the music comes up I still get excited—and we have all seen Laurence Olivier play Hugh Dowding. There is just one slight problem—it is the same problem I had when Laurence Olivier played Earl Haig in “Oh! What a Lovely War”. Earl Haig was a crusty Scot, with a deep Scottish accent, which Laurence Olivier definitely did not have, and Hugh Dowding happened to be born in Moffat in Dumfries and Galloway. His father was a teacher at Fettes school in Edinburgh. The unity of these islands in the Spitfire story goes all the way to Hugh Dowding from Moffat, who was head of Fighter Command in those dark days. There is a large and very simple, but I think poignant, monument to Hugh Dowding, head of Fighter Command, in his home town of Moffat. That underlines the fact that the Spitfire monument in Southampton has been a long time coming.

I will finish with this. My wife was born and bred in Southampton—I know it well—and her image of the city is the bombed-out Southampton of the 1950s, so these islands are interconnected. We can have a serious debate about how we do our democracy. I grant no ground on that—Scotland will be independent—but we will all stand together in tough times. We share these islands; we will defend these islands together.

2.54 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): May I say on behalf of all Conservative Members that we are delighted that the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) made such a telling case for the Union—not only for the Union of the United Kingdom, but the union of the Kerevan household, in which England and Scotland are clearly united, as they are in my family? My parents, like his, served in the Royal Air Force during the second world war. My mother was a Scottish Borderer. I come from a long line of rapers and pillagers—I have a lot of Border reiver blood in me. My father was a Lancastrian. They met in Ceylon, where my father was serving on Mountbatten’s staff as a Royal Air Force liaison officer. One of his jobs was to vet material being submitted to the Royal Air Force journal for publication. He had to go and check this stuff, and he thought this WAAF sounded rather interesting, so he went up country to check her out. Five weeks later, they were married, and their marriage lasted 40 years.

My mother had a lifelong passion for the Spitfire, which I have inherited. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), who made a great case in opening this debate, that she was at Netley hospital and witnessed the bombing of the Woolston factory in 1940. She then went to Rednal, where she worked on Spitfires, and she wrote an article in *Royal Air Force Parade* called “The It in the Spit”. I have inherited all that Royal Air Force blood, and I have had the privilege to be a pilot for getting on for 52 years.

For those of us who fly, the Spitfire is unquestionably one of the most iconic aircraft ever developed. What a man R. J. Mitchell was. Yes, he was born in Stoke-on-Trent, but he designed his aeroplane down in the south. I went

to Southampton University, so I have a huge association with the Spitfire. It was an iconic aeroplane. It was born of a competition, of course—the Schneider trophy. It went on to do such sterling work throughout the second world war, and it continued afterwards and was in service until the 1950s.

The greatest privilege for me was when my 65th birthday came up—a short while ago—and my wife gave me a surprise present. I did not know until the week before that we were going to the Goodwood Revival festival. I said, “What should I wear?”—people are supposed to wear 1950s attire—and she said, “I think you should wear your flying suit.” I wore my flying suit, and we had a celebratory lunch and drink in the golf club at Goodwood, of which both my sons are members. The champagne was passed round, and I held up my empty glass and said, “What about my glass?” She said, “Well, you’re not drinking.” I said, “Why am I not drinking?” “Because you’re flying.” I said, “What am I flying?” I had the privilege of flying a Spitfire.

I do not know how many other Members of Parliament have had the privilege of flying a Spitfire. I have flown quite a few aircraft types—only as a private pilot, in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and in Southampton University Air Squadron—but there is unquestionably something completely special about the Spitfire. Some colleagues do not seem to understand that machines can have human attributes, but the Spitfire does. It is the most gentle of aeroplanes to fly. It is incredibly sensitive. On the south coast of England as sunset was approaching on Battle of Britain Sunday, there I was patrolling in a Spitfire.

Willy Hackett, the Royal Air Force officer testing the F-35, was flying in the front seat, because I could not fly it solo unless I had done the conversion course, which costs £40,000. He said, “I’ll do the takeoff,” and at 350 feet I had control. He let me roll it—rolling a Spitfire is a fabulous experience—and he did the landing.

The Spitfire is such an iconic aeroplane, and it is so much a part of the history of these islands and the defence against tyranny. Of course there were other aeroplanes, notably the Hurricane, but the Spitfire is so beloved of pilots. Having flown it myself, I can certainly respect that.

We have sadly very few battle of Britain pilots left. Among them is Geoffrey Wellum, who wrote “First Light”—a fantastic guy—and Tom Neil, who is still alive. They will be celebrating the battle of Britain on the south coast in July. Then there are great men such as Tony Iveson. Tony was not only in the battle of Britain, but in 617 Squadron and responsible for the sinking of the Tirpitz. Captain Eric “Winkle” Brown, born in Melrose, was probably the most celebrated naval aviator who has ever lived. He died only last year, at 97. It was a privilege to know him. Eric flew more aircraft types than any other man in the world—487, I think, which will never be exceeded—with 2,500 deck landings; no man has flown that many deck landings. He also flew the Spitfire.

The Spitfire has a fantastic history, which is so bound up with the history of these islands that I believe it deserves this monument supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen. He is joining forces with the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), so the whole city of Southampton will be behind it. There can be no fitter monument for the centenary of the Royal Air Force.

[*Sir Gerald Howarth*]

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out that so many of the Spitfire pilots were not from the United Kingdom. One was an American, with an English mother and American father, John Gillespie Magee. Some will know his poem, "High Flight", which he wrote as he was taking a Spitfire mark V up to 30,000 feet on the 3 September 1940. They are some of the most magical words in the English language:

"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of—Wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air...
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark or even eagle flew—
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God."

The Spitfire—I congratulate my hon. Friend.

3.2 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) on securing the debate and on his work on this matter.

As a piece of engineering excellence, the Spitfire has long been considered in a league of its own. Its speed and agility is legendary, and we just got a flavour of that from the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth). Surely there can be no better way than the proposal of the National Spitfire Project to remember that incredible piece of history, a monument on the waterfront of the city that built the Spitfire. The Spitfire project is warmly welcomed.

We have been discussing the funding of the project, and I pay tribute to those who have supported the crowd-funder effort to take it forward. At the height of the war, the public donated their pots and pans to be melted down for their Spitfire project—literally, to create and build the aircraft—and it is important that now the public find a way to put money into a national project that will properly recognise the Spitfire's contribution.

To me the Spitfire is familiar, and it has become part of my weekly commute: I see a Spitfire, or at least a replica of one, at the entrance to Edinburgh Turnhouse airport most Mondays on my way down here. The particular model that I am so familiar with is painted in the colours of the 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadron, which was said to be one of the most effective units in the battle of Britain, which we have heard so much about this afternoon.

My constituency has its own tale to tell of its history with the Spitfire and with flight more generally. Stirling was the home of the Barnwell brothers, Harold and Frank. They were aircraft pioneers who built their first glider two years after the Wright brothers' flight. The

Barnwells' first prototype, built in 1908, failed to take off—no pun intended—but, undeterred, the brothers successfully took to the skies on 28 July 1909 in the shadow of the National Wallace monument at Causewayhead, Stirling. Reportedly "soaring" at an altitude of 4 metres and travelling the grand distance of 80 yards, that small but significant step was Scotland's first powered flight and marked the beginning of an important relationship between Scotland and the skies.

The Barnwells' feat has been marked with an elegant plaque in Balfroon, where the brothers hailed from, and with a granite sculpture by what is now the Causewayhead roundabout, the site of their flight—I also understand that the brothers won £50 for their success in completing the first one-mile flight in Scotland. Although those memorials may not be on the scale of the one under discussion today, they are to achievements that are still worthy of recognition in the story of powered flight.

In Scotland, we feel a strong bond with the servicemen and women who have served us through the years, and I am sure that we all agree that their service must never be forgotten. That is part of the reason why I think the Spitfire project is particularly appropriate. As we have heard, we have just had the 75th anniversary of the battle of Britain—Scotland's First Minister was down here in London alongside Prince Charles and the Defence Secretary to mark that date—and last year Stirling commemorated 100 years since the formation of the 43 (Fighter) Squadron, initially a unit of the Royal Flying Corps, in the Carse below Stirling castle.

In my research for this debate, in seeking to tie the story of the Spitfire to my own constituency, I was delighted to find an account given to the BBC's Mhairi Campbell by Campbell Chesterton for the "WW2 People's War" site. In 2005 he wrote:

"During WW2 while my father was in the army overseas my mother and I stayed with my uncle and aunt (her sister) Mr and Mrs Blyth on their farm, Hill of Drip three miles NW of Stirling...During the second world war the carse of Stirling was used by the RAF for low fly training as low as thirty foot was permitted, this was very exciting for a young boy, one day we saw a spitfire aircraft and the tail of another over Dunblane. We heard that one crashed in Callander, there were many accidents. A hurricane fighter landed in the next farm with its wheels up, we managed to get a seat in it before the guard arrived."

That gives us a flavour of just how dangerous flight was in those days. It is a lot safer now. There used to be a lot of accidents and casualties even in training.

For such memories to be preserved is important, and the National Spitfire Project aims to educate the next generation, an aim that I wholeheartedly welcome. There can be no better way to tell the 100-year story of the Royal Air Force to future generations than with the backdrop of the Spitfire rising 130 feet above Southampton Water. I also echo the sentiments of Members who have made the point that we must commemorate not only the pilots but the hard work of the engineers at home who supported the RAF fighters in the battle of Britain and through the 100-year history of the Royal Air Force.

Part of the reasoning behind the memorial is to commemorate the history of the RAF, and in doing so we remember the individuals who have served in the force. It is worth pointing out that the average age of an RAF pilot in the battle of Britain was 20 years—people who were not yet old enough to vote, many of them,

were old enough to lay down their lives so that we could have the democratic debates we have in this place in the manner that we do.

I also want to make special reference in my contribution to the non-British RAF personnel who have been mentioned by a couple of the speakers so far. The Ministry of Defence cites Fighter Command in the second world war as a “cosmopolitan mix” of 141 Poles, 87 Czechs, 24 Belgians and 14 free French among its servicemen and women. Each individual was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice during the conflict to protect our freedom and way of life, and Scotland and our friends throughout the UK and beyond will never forget that.

I again thank the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen for the debate. The Spitfire project is an important one, and I wholeheartedly support it. I sincerely look forward to visiting the national project in Southampton on its completion, commemorating the iconic Spitfires.

3.8 pm

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): It is a pleasure to join the debate on the funding of the National Spitfire Project, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), whose constituency neighbours mine, on securing it. It feels particularly poignant, as I spent this morning with one of my youngsters at the Churchill museum in the War Rooms, which I urge people to find time to enjoy.

I found the input of my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) touching. He said so much of what we need to hear in the debate. I have the RAF yacht club in Hamble, and its members would have loved to hear the words he said. Also in my constituency, the Royal Victoria country park at Netley includes a very touching graveyard, where it can be seen that people from around the globe gave their souls to make the world a better place for us. I urge the Government to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen and to everyone with Southampton in their address. The cause is a worthy one for the LIBOR fund. In fact, many people work at Southampton airport, which some people still call Eastleigh airport, and rightly so. Many of the people who live in my constituency work nearby at NATS in Fareham. There is a strong association with the aircraft and the industry.

Perhaps we can raise money to help the Government match the funds. Perhaps hon. Friends will join us at Eastleigh—or Southampton—airport in the very early dawn on 25 June for the airport run, which is a chance for us to raise money for the Hampshire and Isle of Wight air ambulance. South Hampshire has had flights for more than 100 years, and aviation is an important backbone to our communities.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen and other hon. Members in hoping to secure this much-needed monument. It will certainly put Eastleigh airport on the map, although I may find myself in trouble with Southampton airport for bringing that name up.

3.10 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I rise briefly to support the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) in his debate this afternoon, which I congratulate him on securing. I also congratulate

him on his tenacity in pursuing this aim of a national monument for the Spitfire in Southampton. The bottom line of what we are talking about today is a request for money. We need the money—ideally from the Government. The hon. Gentleman’s suggestion for where that money might come from would be an appropriate source for the rest of the funds. Many people have already contributed small and varying amounts to the fund to secure the aim of a memorial for the Spitfire on Southampton Water.

Why is the memorial so important? There are three things we might say along with all the other things that have been said about the Spitfire. In this context, I want to offer the story of my father, who was an aeronautical engineer with the Fleet Air Arm. He spent most of the war repairing aircraft, never leaving these shores. Unfortunately, the story does not neatly end with Spitfires, because he worked on Swordfish. As some hon. Members may know, Swordfish were in service at the same time as the Spitfire, but they looked like a completely different generation of aircraft. They were held together with bits of string, sealing wax and various other things. Although they did a good job, if we put the Spitfire next to the Swordfish, the Spitfire design appears to have been from the future and an imagination from I do not know where. They brought this amazing aircraft into being at a time when those aircraft were the staple—

George Kerevan: On that point, it is worth remembering that R. J. Mitchell also designed the Walrus biplane seaplane, which picked up so many downed RAF pilots. It looked as antediluvian as the Swordfish, but equally it was very efficient.

Dr Whitehead: Indeed. That underlines what I was about to say: R. J. Mitchell designed a plane that was never equalled throughout the whole of the second world war. Not only did the Spitfire save our bacon during the Battle of Britain but it went on to play all sorts of other roles across Europe and the world as the second world war progressed, due to its unique capacities and design and the way it stood head and shoulders above any other aircraft. Later in the war it was not only employed in a fighting capacity but was the first effective reconnaissance aircraft for the RAF. It could fly high at speed and take reconnaissance photographs. Indeed, it got the first reconnaissance photograph of German radar, the first photographs of the Peenemünde works for the V-1 rockets, and was instrumental as the war progressed in all sorts of other fields as well as in the battle of Britain.

Secondly, hon. Members have paid tribute today to the few who fought in the battle of Britain and the fact that they were an international cohort of pilots. Hon. Members have mentioned the large number of Polish pilots: 15% or so of the total number of pilots. They not only made a great contribution, but I understand that the particular way in which they flew the Spitfires was unlike anybody else’s, and they tested the aircraft to destruction. It did not get destroyed, it still flew, and the things they could do with that plane, as was proved throughout the war, is another tribute to the genius of the aircraft design.

Thirdly, for all those reasons, Southampton as a city is proud of its heritage as the progenitor and manufacturer of the Spitfire. As the hon. Member for Southampton,

[*Dr Whitehead*]

Itchen has said, the Spitfire was not only manufactured at the Supermarine works in Woolston. There was a remarkable arrangement subsequently whereby shops, factories and sheds produced that amazing aircraft literally in people's back gardens in and around Southampton. The people from the city worked so hard to get the aircraft in the air and doing the job that they knew it could do.

So Southampton has an indelible and deep bond with the Spitfire. It is therefore absolutely appropriate that the site that has been chosen for the memorial faces out to Southampton Water, exactly under the path where the Spitfire pilots flew the planes from Southampton—or Eastleigh—airport, depending on your point of view. They flew over Southampton Water, absolutely at the centre of everything that happened that was part of the Spitfire legacy. The idea of a monument with a Spitfire soaring above Southampton Water seems absolutely the right use for the money that I hope will come in for that monument.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen on his efforts to make sure that the money comes our way. I am confident that his further efforts and hopefully those of the Members gathered here today will nudge the Government in the direction of making sure the money is available and will lead to an early and successful conclusion to this project. I will be first to applaud the successful completion of a long mission to get a monument to provide the recognition for the Spitfire that we in Southampton know is absolutely deserved, which can then go to a wider world.

3.18 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Davies. May I be the latest to add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith) on securing this debate on a subject that I know is dear to his heart and to those of many of his constituents? He spoke movingly about the sacrifice made by those in the Woolston and Itchen areas of Southampton where the Spitfires were originally built. I agree that the monument would be a fitting tribute to the memory of those who died when the Luftwaffe destroyed the factories in September 1940.

It has been an excellent debate and there have been many first-class contributions. That all-too-rare beast, cross-party consensus, seems to have emerged. That tells the Minister that we believe the memorial is important and should be built, and that there is no more appropriate location than Southampton. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) that it is right for the monument to be seen as common to everyone in these islands. Regardless of what the future holds for their constitution, we have a shared history and the Spitfire is a central part of that. I commend the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson), who was right to highlight the role that Scotland, and indeed his constituency, played in the development of the Spitfire. I could not—I would not dare—attempt to match the eloquence of the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), but I share the sentiment he expressed.

It is remarkable that in 2017 we are discussing with such obvious affection and warmth an aeroplane that ceased production 65 years ago. The Spitfire has almost uniquely embedded itself in the collective consciousness of the country, and has a unique place in popular culture. Apart from the Titanic I cannot think of many other objects that have taken up so many reels of celluloid—starting in 1942 with “The First of the Few”, starring and directed and produced by Leslie Howard, and co-starring the great David Niven. Then, of course, came “Malta Story”, in which Alec Guinness and Jack Hawkins told how the Spitfire provided the main defence for the island of Malta. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian mentioned “Battle of Britain”, which had a stellar cast—Laurence Olivier, Michael Caine, Christopher Plummer, Ralph Richardson, Michael Redgrave and Susannah York. The one that stands head and shoulders above them all is “Reach for the Sky”, the 1956 classic with Kenneth More playing the part of Douglas Bader. I saw it as a child, and have seen it many times since.

I am sure that we all have personal anecdotes from family and friends that link us directly or indirectly to the Spitfire. My story comes from my time as a youthful barman in the Royal Air Force Association club in Ashley Street, Glasgow, in the early 1980s. Back then the RAF club was a busy, thriving establishment with a loyal clientele of former RAF service personnel and their families. The walls were adorned with photographs and memorabilia, but pride of place was reserved for the Spitfire. The majority of members had not flown in them, but none the less the Spitfire emerged as the symbol that unified them as a group of RAF veterans.

I fondly recall how many an evening on a quiet weekday shift I would sit at the end of the bar listening to some of those remarkable men, who, at the same age at which I was pulling pints, were clambering into planes to defend the skies of the UK and Europe from the Nazis. With hindsight, a bit of life experience, a slightly more cynical disposition and an ability to count, I am now convinced that at least one or two of those men sharing stories of derring do with a highly impressionable teenager must have had their Royal Air Force career thrust on them by dint of national service, and been more—how shall I put it?—Kenneth More than Douglas Bader. However, at the time it was a fascinating insight.

Regardless of whether they flew or not, the fact remains that everyone loved the Spitfire, and everyone who could be associated with it—however loosely, in some cases—wanted that association. It is without doubt a source of great pride for many, and a permanent memorial to remember those who built, designed, fought in and maintained the planes is well deserved. I am sure that when the memorial is built it will commemorate the immense contribution of the chief designer, R.J. Mitchell, the chief draughtsman, Joe Smith, and the chief test pilot, Jeffrey Quill, whose contribution to the success of the Spitfire it is impossible to overstate.

We have heard much of the role of the Spitfire in the battle of Britain, and it is worth remembering, as the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) did, that it played a hugely important role throughout the second world war. He mentioned its use in photo-reconnaissance of the factories that were building the V-2. As I mentioned earlier, it played a crucial part in

protecting Malta, and it was also involved in the Pacific theatre, defending Singapore in the early part of the war and, as part of the final push, driving Japan out of Burma. It played a crucial role in defending the city of Darwin in Australia from attacks by the Japanese. This country was not alone in using the Spitfire. I recall that the Soviet Union ordered 1,000, and they were used, in smaller numbers, admittedly, by the Americans and the Yugoslav Air Force. After the war they were still in production and were seen regularly in India, Ireland, Holland and Egypt, which all made good use of them.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen was right to say that the role played by the Spitfire in the battle of Britain ensured that it would leave an indelible mark on the collective consciousness. Although, as the hon. Member for Aldershot said, they were fewer than the Hawker Hurricane—a plane that suffered far greater losses in the battle of Britain—it is the Spitfires' role that has been preserved in the country's collective memory, and rightly so.

However, let it be a true memory, because we were not alone in fighting the Nazis in the 1940s. The United Kingdom gave refuge to those fleeing fascism, and welcomed those, wherever they came from, who were willing to help defeat it. I hope that when the monument opens we shall not forget the 30 Australian, 30 Belgian, 84 Canadian, 90 Czech and Slovak, 13 French, two Caribbean, 10 Irish and 135 New Zealand pilots, the 30 from Southern Africa and, of course, the 147 Poles, who shot down more than 200 enemy aircraft.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt a fantastic speech, to which I was listening with enthusiasm. I was waiting to hear whether the hon. Gentleman would add to his list of those who should be recognised by the memorial the factory workers who built the Spitfires. Workers such as my grandmother spent many hours in factories. They were asked to work longer hours—six and seven-day weeks—to make sure that Britain's war production was kept up. Should they not also be recognised in the memorial?

Brendan O'Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I did make the point earlier in my speech that the memorial would be for the workers, designers, test pilots and everyone involved in the Spitfire's success. I absolutely concur with what he says.

I will conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen for securing the debate, and for the work that he is doing to secure a permanent memorial to the Spitfire and all those who designed, tested, built, flew, repaired and maintained that iconic aircraft. I and my hon. Friends wish him extremely well in his endeavour.

3.28 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to debate under your stewardship, Mr Davies—and particularly on this occasion. Regrettably, I do not have any stories to tell about R.J. Mitchell's connection with my constituency or with Liverpool, but there is a story about a Spitfire that crashed in October 1942 in Birkenhead park. It flew over the Mersey and the pilot, who had baled out, landed on the Liverpool maternity hospital. It took until 2007 to recover the Spitfire. It was said that the engine was still in beautiful condition, which is a tribute to its engineering.

Hon. Members have referred to many aspects of the matter, and I want to comment on the speech of the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith). I thank him for bringing this important matter before the House, and for his tribute to the people of Southampton; they deserve it. He referred to the role of women in the factories and the whole range of people who were involved in building and servicing the Spitfire.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) talked about the Spitfire being an iconic symbol of these islands, about people's endeavour in fighting Nazism and fascism, and about the role of women in manufacturing Spitfires. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) talked about his and, more importantly, his mother's passion for the Spitfire. We will have to take his word for it that he flew the Spitfire with sobriety; I am sure that he did. The hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) talked about how the Spitfire helps with bonds between servicemen and servicewomen across the country and made reference to 43 Fighter Squadron commemorating 100 years at Stirling castle. There is no better way to tell the story of the Spitfire than by looking at the role of those people in that. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies) joined us all in supporting this proposal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) asked clearly and unambiguously for the money right up. He, too, talked about Southampton's proud role in the story of the Spitfire and its deep bonds with it, and about how he is looking forward to seeing the monument over Southampton water. The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) said that he, too, looks forward to going down to have a look at the Spitfire over Southampton Water. All those contributions were fantastic. This is a matter of substance, honour and pride, about which many Members spoke in detail, and I have tried simply to echo what they said.

As the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute indicated, people of a certain age, including me, used to watch the black and white movies of the 1940s and '50s. Those were part of my staple diet on a Sunday afternoon after my lunch. One of the pictures he referred to was "The First of the Few", which was released in this country in 1942. Its title in the United States was "Spitfire", and it was released there in 1943, just days after the main actor, Leslie Howard, who played R. J. Mitchell, was himself shot down by the Luftwaffe. It is perhaps fair to say that that picture was the first memorial or monument to the Spitfire. However, no matter how iconic it might be, the Spitfire needs more than a pictorial monument.

The story of the Spitfire is replete with stories of bravery, commitment, honour, valour, stubbornness, will power, camaraderie, self-deprecation and, above all, modesty. How else could people have got through without all those virtues and that approach to duty? The story of the Spitfire is legendary, but legends are often untrue—not this one. If anything, it has been underplayed. We all have family members who fought or were injured or killed in the two world wars, and who may have died thereafter as a result of the trauma. They command—that is not a word that they would use, but they do—our attention, our thanks and our commitment to their memory. Who could argue with that? None of us would argue with that.

Many of the comings and goings of the battle of the Atlantic—a literal *nom de guerre* given to it by Winston Churchill—occurred in my home town of Bootle and in

[Peter Dowd]

Liverpool. The battle was conducted from Derby House and was the longest of the last war. It started on the day war broke out and concluded on the day the war finished—it was five years, eight months and five days. At Pier Head in Liverpool we have a memorial to those who were involved in the battle of the Atlantic and a monument to a brave man, Johnny Walker, who went across the seas after U-boats and is one of the most successful U-boat hunter commanders in history.

There are quite rightly monuments elsewhere, but we have a monument in Merseyside, symbolically next to the water from which many never returned, to celebrate their memory. As the monument says, they have no grave but the sea. I say “celebrate” because I, for one, do celebrate those who fought for our freedom against the most evil of regimes. Those who lost their lives in the battle of Britain and other air combat, and those who were willing to give their lives freely, are equally important and also deserve a monument to celebrate their sacrifices. The Spitfire personifies those men and women. It was a stalwart of the war and beyond, as were those who built, serviced and flew it.

The National Spitfire Project website sums up the issue as follows:

“Even after the bombing of the Supermarine factory, the people of Southampton continued to produce the Spitfire, dispersed to locations throughout the city, for the duration of the war. The Spitfire and Southampton are inseparable and it is the attitude of perseverance, ingenuity and patriotism that really does embody the Spirit of the Spitfire.”

We really do need a Spitfire monument, and it needs to be near the fulcrum of its design and build; near where, under siege and bombing, brave people fought on in more ways than one. I do not think that is too much to ask. It should be a monument that does our nation proud, does our democracy proud and, more importantly, does our heroes and the people of Southampton and its environs proud. There are only a few of the few left. Time is not on their side. We really should try to stop the clock now and, with good will, help to resolve this issue.

3.36 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. What a wide-ranging, erudite and evocative debate we have had. It is always a pleasure to hear colleagues on both sides of the House speak with passion about issues they really care about. I particularly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), who, as we heard, is an RAF man himself, on the vigour with which he promoted the National Spitfire Project.

We have heard from many colleagues with connections to both the RAF and the Spitfire. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), had an anecdote, and I came very close to having my own Spitfire anecdote to contribute. I visited Dover last Monday, which was the 100th birthday of Dame Vera Lynn. It was planned that that anniversary of a very British icon would be marked with a fly-past by two other British icons: two Spitfires. Sadly, that was put off for 24 hours by similarly iconic British weather, which closed in at the last minute and prevented anything from leaving the ground, so it all happened on Tuesday

and I missed it. That is a shame, because although, as a London MP, I have seen Spitfires go overhead on several occasions on days of national commemoration, it would have been nice to be a little closer.

The National Spitfire Project is of particular significance in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen and, as we have heard, across the city of Southampton, which played such an integral part in the birth of that iconic fighter plane. But its significance is not limited to Southampton—as many colleagues said, R. J. Mitchell’s exceptional design, powered by the mighty Merlin engine, was instrumental in winning the battle of Britain—so I endorse everything that my hon. Friend and others said about the national and international importance of remembering the plane.

I represent a very international constituency, so I welcome the comments from both sides of the House about the plane’s significance, not just to the British but in Europe and across the Commonwealth. It was wonderful to hear many people remind us of the multinational nature of the corps that took to the skies to defend Britain. Friends and allies joined British pilots in flying these planes with such courage and bravery. We also heard from my hon. Friend about the courage and bravery of the people of Southampton, who displayed great stoicism in the face of the Nazi onslaught on the city as they continued to produce this plane that was so integral to our war effort. I admire him for his involvement in the National Spitfire Project and congratulate everyone who got it to where it is today. I wish them continued success.

Let me turn to the money and the call that my hon. Friend made for money to be granted from the proceeds of LIBOR fines. As hon. Members will be aware, LIBOR funding has been allocated to supporting a wide range of armed forces and emergency services charities and good causes. Since 2012, in fact, more than £700 million of LIBOR funding has been allocated. That includes nearly £20 million at the last autumn statement alone, which is being used to support museums and memorials.

The shadow Minister mentioned doing our heroes proud. It is worth noting that more than £15 million has been allocated towards RAF museums and memorials, including the Battle of Britain memorial, the Lincoln Bomber Command memorial, Bentley Priory Museum and the Battle of Britain bunker at Uxbridge.

At the autumn statement, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor confirmed that, to mark the 100-year anniversary of the RAF, £2.4 million of LIBOR money is being provided to the RAF for its RAF100 programme, allowing many other events to take place. Some of that money is being committed to the RAF Museum to prepare for 2018 to tell the compelling story of those 100 years of the Royal Air Force, helping to share that story with more and more people as the human connection in terms of the generation of people who were around at the time is gradually lost. It was touching to hear some of the personal memories from within people’s families of those connections. It will be more and more important that we support the RAF in telling the story and keeping it alive, to ensure that down the generations people are aware of the RAF’s role in guaranteeing us the security and freedom that we are privileged to enjoy today and perhaps have had cause to reflect on more in the past few days than in usual times.

That is alongside a wide range of other projects. Money has also gone towards helping former and current armed forces personnel and their families, air ambulances and children's hospitals. All in all, more than £260 million has been committed in this Parliament, and more than £700 million in total since 2012. As the Chancellor confirmed in August 2016, any further money from LIBOR will continue to be used to support military and emergency services charities and other related good causes that demonstrate the very best value.

Let me turn to the application process for those funds, if I may take the debate in a more prosaic direction for a moment. With regard to the possibility for further applications to the fund, the last round ran in August and September last year and generated more than 550 expressions of interest. The Chancellor has yet to confirm whether there will be further opportunities to apply for support from LIBOR fines. With £700 million paid out to date, the funds remaining are dwindling and we do not anticipate further significant receipts from the Financial Conduct Authority. However, if there are, we will publish any future LIBOR public funding opportunities in the usual way. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen and those he is working with on the project will want to monitor the usual channels, such as gov.uk, for such opportunities carefully.

Despite the inspiring flights of oratory this afternoon, my Treasury feet are—predictably, perhaps—very much on the ground, and never more so than when I turn to the issue of governance and how funds are allocated, which is important to touch on. The allocation of LIBOR funding follows a robust governance process and adheres strictly to the mandated minimum standards for Government grants, which were introduced last year following the Government's response to the report by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on Kids Company. We all remember the nature of that news at the time.

Under the current LIBOR governance process, each applicant is required to submit an application form, which is assessed by an independent team of grant-making experts, checked with the Charity Commission and reviewed by the Government's new grants advice panel before final consideration by the Treasury. Each application is considered both individually and holistically for any impact across its particular sector. Specifically, the assessment team examines the governance of the charity or organisation, working closely with the Charity Commission to do so. The team also does a full assessment of the feasibility of a project, its value for money and any risks to its delivery.

I know that some of that has been touched on in conversations between Treasury officials and my hon. Friend. We are always happy to give more information about how the process can be followed and helpful steers on how that path can be taken, if that is of use to those involved with the project. In summary, I want to thank my hon. Friend.

Sir Gerald Howarth: The LIBOR fund, which was developed by our right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), was a splendid initiative that has done a tremendous amount of good work. I was rather involved in the Bomber Command memorial, which was put together by a tiny group of people. This is a

stunning and long overdue memorial to commemorate the 55,573 men who gave their lives in Bomber Command. In the end, Prime Minister David Cameron knocked a few heads together in Whitehall and we got some money to cover the costs of policing on that day of three quarters of a million pounds, which otherwise would have had to have come from the charity itself.

I suggest to my hon. Friend the Minister that it might be a good idea to be slightly ahead of the game. This is quite an emotional and iconic issue. It is not just a question of pounds, shillings and pence; it is also a question of our national identity and, in the centenary of the Royal Air Force, marking what was a special, iconic contribution to the maintenance of the freedom of these islands.

Jane Ellison: I assure my hon. Friend that that has not been lost on me this afternoon. Rarely have I sat through a debate with such genuine passion felt across the House. His point about timeliness and the anniversary is well made, and as I said, we have already made moneys available to mark that for the RAF. I look forward to seeing some of those projects come to maturity. His point is extremely well made. I assure him that I will make the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is responsible for sport, tourism and heritage, fully aware of both the project—I am sure she is aware of it already—and the ambitious plans to mark our heritage; and, indeed, of the passion expressed for the project today in Westminster Hall.

I hope that all hon. Friends will understand that the process for allocating LIBOR funding must be transparent and objective. There is a process that all bids must take, so although I know that friends and colleagues would wish me to go further, sadly I cannot commit further at this stage.

Dr Whitehead: I appreciate that the Minister is in some difficulty as far as allocating funds off the cuff is concerned, and I would not advocate a further banking scandal in order to try to release more funds for that purpose. Will she indicate, today or in future, and in particular to my colleague the hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Royston Smith), whether she can think of any other avenues in her area of competence that might be used to facilitate the process of, shall we say, coughing up for this monument? I am sure that she will be happy to undertake that with the hon. Gentleman for the good cause that we have all talked about this afternoon.

Jane Ellison: I am more than happy to commit to talk to my colleague in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, who is the lead Minister on heritage, about the debate and to relay that request. I will reflect on whether there is more we can do in due course to direct my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen to other sources of funding that might be available. I will reflect on whether it is possible for me to do that subsequent to the debate, or indeed to ask another Minister to do that from sources other than LIBOR funding.

However, I reassure all colleagues that, should further LIBOR funding opportunities arise, any application from the National Spitfire Project that falls within the published scope will be given full consideration along

[Jane Ellison]

with other applications. In the meantime, I extend my good wishes to my hon. Friend and all involved with this project in its noble aim of creating a lasting memorial to a truly British icon.

3.50 pm

Royston Smith: I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions, which were made on a cross-party basis. To ever achieve anything, it is better to have everyone lined up in a row, rather than anyone thinking, “It’s not a great idea.” To have the support of Members from across the House has been really helpful, and I am grateful to everyone for that. I am grateful to the Minister for her words of support. I am heartened by her encouragement to continue and to put in an application in the way that she describes. I will pass that back to the trustees of the project.

It is interesting that in some debates people start to repeat the same things over and over again, whereas in this debate we could probably have talked for hours and never needed to repeat any of the anecdotes that we all have or the stories that we hold so dear about something as iconic as the Spitfire. I think that says as much about how important the Spitfire is and how important it has been in our nation’s history as anything else could.

Why now? To further commemorate 100 years of exemplary service and commitment of our Royal Air Force personnel, both past and present. Why the Spitfire? Because the Spitfire was, as one person described it, a symbol of defiance, unity and hope, and because the war would have ended very differently but for the iconic Spitfire and the brave pilots who flew it and, as everyone has said, those who maintained it, built it, designed it and test flew it. Why Southampton? Because the symbol of freedom that the Spitfire has become was designed, built and test flown there. In a world divided and troubled, the Spitfire reminds us of a time when we stood up against all the odds and against evil—and we prevailed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered funding for the National Spitfire Project.

Hereditary Peers

3.52 pm

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on hereditary peers in the House of Lords.

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. I hope right hon. and hon. Members will leave quietly. This is an important debate, and I am sure we should give the right hon. Gentleman the courtesy of being heard. If Members could leave quietly it would be much appreciated.

Mr Hanson: As a fellow member of the Justice Committee in another life, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I suspect the right hon. Gentleman has detected a certain discourtesy. May I assure him that none was intended whatever? I am sure he has brought a really important debate, and I assure him that he will be listened to with great interest, as always.

Mr Hanson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman; I knew perfectly well that that would be the case.

I start by welcoming the Minister to his place and by saying what the debate is not about. It is not about abolishing the House of Lords; we will have views on that—I have always voted to abolish the Lords—but the debate is not about the abolition of the Lords. It is not about the role of bishops sitting in the House of Lords or not; we might debate at some point whether the Church of England or other faiths should be represented, but it is not about that. It is not about how we appoint peers to the House of Lords—whether by Prime Ministers, commissions or in other ways. It is not about the method of appointment or the existence of the House of Lords per se; we can debate and discuss the second Chamber and whether we need one or not another time.

The debate is about a simple question: should the hereditary principle be present in our legislative Chamber in the 21st century? That question is simple. Should we perpetuate the current anomaly, by which 92 hereditary peers are chosen to sit in Parliament by each other—or on occasion, as last week, the whole House—on the basis of whom their ancestors were, rather than personal merit? Should those individuals remain in this Parliament?

I know that the Minister is a historian; in fact, only this week I bought a copy of his book, “Bosworth” for further discussion. He will know that history is about change and campaigning for change, so I simply ask him to look at this issue, as I know he will have done and will do in future. If I said that we were going to discuss the Russian Parliament, and if members of that Parliament were the grandchildren of Lenin, for the simple reason that they were his grandchildren, I suspect that he would make noises to the Russian embassy to improve its parliamentary democracy.

If I spoke to the Minister about the South African Parliament, and there were people there for the simple reason that their grandfather was Nelson Mandela, I think the Minister would ask the South African Government what was going on with their democracy. I know that you take a great interest in European matters, Mr Davies. Last Saturday was the 60th anniversary of the founding of the European Union. If I came to this

Chamber and said that there were people in the European Parliament simply because their fathers—in most cases—were signatories to the treaty of Rome in 1957, I think we would all have something to say about that.

However, in the Houses of Parliament today, we have people still in the House of Lords for no reason other than their great-grandfathers, great-great-grandfathers or a further distant relative served some purpose at some time for the Government of the day and received a peerage that was then handed down week in, week out, year in, year out to their ancestors. That matters because, even within that, election to be one of the 92 hereditary peers is restricted to people who previously sat in this Parliament as a hereditary peer. As a historian, the Minister will know that that is not a tenable basis for democracy across this country or any other. That matters; it is not a game. It is about a seat in Parliament. It is about the right to vote on legislation, to hold Ministers to account, to express an opinion and to make choices on behalf of somebody. The question is who that somebody is.

Lord Lyell, who sat in this House as a hereditary peer, sadly died earlier this year. A by-election was held last week, in which the only candidates could be hereditary peers whose families had served the state or royalty or somebody in the past. Of those who could apply, 27 did. None of my constituents could apply; perhaps Lord Mostyn, who owns Mostyn Hall in my constituency and who was a candidate for that election, was at one point from my constituency, but none of my constituents could apply. I am not sure many of your constituents could, Mr Davies, and I am not sure many of the Minister's could.

However, 27 people applied, and it was restricted to those people. I will give a flavour of some of the candidates, if I may: the 5th Baron Bethell, an old Etonian; the 5th Baron Biddulph, who owns 1,000 acres on the banks of the Tweed; the 4th Baron Gainford, aged 92, who promised in his manifesto not to attend the Lords casually; the 7th Baron Hampton; the 3rd Baron Hankey; the 7th Baron Harlech, another old Etonian; the 8th Earl of Harrowby, another old Etonian; Viscount Hood who—surprise, Mr Davies; which school did he go to?—went to Eton. I have no objection at all to people who go to Eton being elected to the Houses of Parliament. The former Prime Minister, the right hon. David Cameron, went to Eton, and I have no objection to him getting into this Parliament.

However, it is wrong in the 21st century to have a small pool of people for the 27 candidates who had, for example, given service to the previous monarch and included the 4th Earl Lloyd-George; the 4th Viscount Mountgarret; Lord Somerleyton; and the Earl of Stockton, whose father was Prime Minister. The relatives of two former Prime Ministers and lots of people from Eton were fighting for a place in Parliament, in an election in which none of my constituents could stand.

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

Welcome to the Chair, Mr Pritchard. In the by-election that followed the sad death of Lord Lyell, the whole House of Lords could vote, because he was one of the specially promoted of the 92 remaining hereditary peers. Some 346 votes were cast out of a potential 803 for a seat in this Parliament.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on

securing this debate. We have an absurd situation where the upper House is about 200 Members larger than our House. Does he agree that a simple, easy way of helping to restore the balance would be to scrap all the hereditary peers in one fell swoop, at least as an initial step, so that purely appointed peers are left?

Mr Hanson: The hon. Gentleman is seven minutes ahead of me in my speech. That is a very good point. I do not see this as a party political argument; I see it as a matter of central democracy. I will return to that point later.

Lord Colgrain, who won the election last week, won with 143 votes and will take his seat in the House of Lords in due course. The turnout was 346, and as I have said, the total electorate is 803. The winning share of the total vote was 17%, and the turnout—even in this election, among such highly tuned political minds as the electorate of the House of Lords—was only 43%.

Lord Colgrain is a Conservative peer; I hold no objection to that. His peerage comes from the 1st Baron Colgrain, who died in 1954. I have no objection to him having a grandfather who worked for a bank and was president of the British Bankers' Association, director of the National Provincial Bank and involved in London Assurance. I have no objection to that being his ancestor; that is a matter for him and his family. What I have an objection to is him being allowed to be on the ballot paper in an election in which only 27 people could participate as nominators and only 346 people ultimately voted to give him a seat in this Parliament.

Lord Colgrain has said that he wants to bring his experience of farming and finance to his membership of the Lords—fine. He is a governor at £34,000-a-year Sevenoaks School—fine. However, if we look at the hereditary peers, they are not drawn from the range of society that we might want reflected in this great, diverse Parliament that we have here today. That might seem ludicrous, but let me look at Lord Thurso, who was elected last year. Members will also know him as John Thurso. He served as a Member of this House for 14 years. He got elected when he was thrown out of the House of Lords with Labour's first tranche of hereditary peers in 1999. He had a miraculous blood transfusion and removed his blue blood to stand as an ordinary mortal, and he got elected. At the last general election, he lost his seat in Parliament to a member of the Scottish National party. He was ejected from this House, yet Lord Thurso could stand at the first opportunity in a hereditary peer by-election.

The electorate in that case was a massive three electors—the three other Liberal Democrat hereditary peers. The election was due to the terrible death of Lord Avebury, whose work I had a lot of admiration for. The three electors for this post in Parliament were the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, the relative of the former Prime Minister; the Earl of Glasgow; and Lord Addington. There were six other candidates for this three-vote election: Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor, the great grandson of a former Prime Minister; Lord Calverley; the Earl of Carlisle; Lord Kennet; Earl Russell; and Lord Somerleyton. I have no objection to any of those individuals *per se*, but they obviously did not have the weight to carry the three voters, because in an election with 100% turnout, Lord Thurso got elected with 100% of the vote.

I put it to the Minister that if we were in a foreign democracy, staring across the vast ocean and looking at

[*Mr Hanson*]

the United Kingdom in the 21st century, and said, “Here we have an election where only people whose great-great-great-grandparents or other relatives were peers can stand. Here we have an election where only three people can vote, and here we have an election where 100% of those three people voted to put one person into the House of Lords,” we might look on with ridicule. If it were a foreign country, we might be looking at representations in the United Nations, sanctions for lack of democracy or pressure on that Government.

It is well and good, I hear you say. We removed in 1999 all but 92 hereditary peers from the House of Lords, and those 92 remained as a guarantee for the second stage of Lords reform. The Minister will know that the second stage of Lords reform is a long time coming. Irrespective of that, we have an opportunity to look at what we can do now.

If we look at this from outside, coldly, we see that of the 92 hereditary peers, 91 are male and only one is female. Again, I have no objection to their belonging to certain political parties, but 48 are Conservatives, 32 are Cross Benchers, four are Labour, four are Liberal Democrats, two are non-affiliated and one represents the UK Independence party. That is hardly diverse. What do they bring, in terms of diversity, to our society, apart from their accident of birth and their status?

How do these hereditary peers get their titles? I will give but three examples. Lord Abingdon’s ancestor, James Bertie, was awarded the title of Earl of Abingdon for his loyalty to the royalists during the English civil war. His father had the title of 2nd Earl of Lindsey, which he would have inherited if it was not for King James II. Lord Fairfax of Cameron is an ancestor of Thomas Fairfax, who was granted his title because he was one of the first Englishmen to go to Scotland to swear allegiance to the new King James I. I do not know about you, Mr Pritchard, but I happen to think that in the 21st century, we owe more to our democracy than to give a seat in Parliament and a vote on my constituents’ issues to someone whose ancestor happened to be the quickest person to get to Scotland from London at that time.

Lord Thurlow’s ancestor, Edward Thurlow, was granted his title in 1792. He was a Tory MP for Tamworth and Solicitor General in the Government of Lord North. That might be fine. When Lord North was in power, we had only just lost America, and yet today I believe the Minister will stand and defend—I may be wrong, and I hope I am—the idea that the ancestor of someone who was given their peerage just after we lost America should be able to make decisions that affect the people I represent. I have fought elections since 1987, winning some and losing some, to get a seat in this Parliament, and yet on the basis of a handful of votes, Lord Thurlow can sit here.

Perhaps the worst example of all, which cuts me to the quick, is the current Conservative peer Earl Attlee. He inherited his peerage as the grandson of one of the greatest Prime Ministers of all time, Clement Attlee, who fought for a Labour Government and for massive social change. Now, through the hereditary peerage, his grandson, Earl Attlee, sits in the other place and votes in a way that I know his grandfather, although I never had the privilege of meeting him, would not approve of

or endorse. He would not want his grandson to vote in that way, yet under the ludicrous system that we have, that is what happens.

Following the general election, there were five by-elections before the one last week, so this is happening all the time. I say to the Minister in the four or so minutes in which I will continue to speak before handing over to him that the Government have a choice. As in all things, the Government have a choice. They could allow this to continue. They could say, “We are going to wait until we have reform of the House of Lords. We will not do anything until we get wholesale reform of the Lords.” I suspect that that is what the Minister may say today. We could, however, adopt one of two other solutions.

The noble Lord Grocott, who sits in the House of Lords as a life peer and who sat in this House for many years as your neighbouring Member of Parliament, Mr Pritchard, in Tamworth—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Telford.

Mr Hanson: Yes. Bruce Grocott was the Member for Lichfield and Tamworth originally and then came back as the Member for Telford in due course. Lord Grocott has introduced in the other place the House of Lords Act 1999 (Amendment) Bill, which says that we should stop the elections for hereditary peers now. It is a reasonable measure. Had it been implemented in 2015, the five by-elections to which I referred, plus last week’s by-election, would not have happened. This point relates to the conclusion of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter): these peers could perhaps die off or retire and not be replaced. Lord Grocott has a live Bill in the other place. It has been discussed and debated and, surprisingly, hereditary peers tried to talk it out, but it is an option for the Minister to consider.

The Minister will know that I have in this House tabled a formal Bill, the House of Lords (Exclusion of Hereditary Peers) Bill, which adopts Lord Grocott’s proposal to allow an end to hereditary peer elections now, and includes a sunset clause date for when the hereditaries will be removed from the other place. I have given them notice that on a day in two and a half to three years’ time they will cease to be Members of that place—of the Houses of Parliament.

The Minister therefore has three choices. He could certainly leave the situation as it is, but he could also look at just stopping the by-elections or at using a sunset clause. There may be other options that I have not thought of, because those two seem to me very sensible and logical.

To go back to the contention of the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, if the Government have decided that there will be fewer Members of Parliament—some 600—after the next election, which it is in the Government’s gift to do, but there are now some 843 Members of the House of Lords, of whom 92 are there because of their ancestors, not because of their own intrinsic merits, I think that it is time for change, and there is the potential for change there. I am talking about removing the peers and reducing the House of Lords membership. As I said in my opening comments, without abolishing the Lords, changing the method of election, touching the bishops or doing

anything else, we could remove 92 peers in a very simple way by accepting Lord Grocott's Bill or, indeed, my own.

I pray in aid the Lord Speaker, Lord Fowler, who said in *The House* magazine that reform had been "hanging over the House like a cloud".

He insisted that there was no way the Lords could defend its current size of more than 800 peers when the Prime Minister was set to reduce the size of the Commons to 600 MPs:

"I don't think that we can justify a situation where you have over 800 peers at the same time as you're bringing down the Commons to 600 MPs."

He said:

"What we have to do first is to literally decide 'what's the number?'"

I want today to help the Minister, the Lord Speaker and the Houses of Parliament; the number could be, at the very least, 92 fewer by removing the hereditary peers or giving them notice and stopping their election, or, if the Minister wishes to maintain that policy, keeping them as they are.

As I said, the Minister is a historian. He has the chance today to make history. If he does not make history today, he will wake up one day and find himself on the wrong side of history. He should take the chance now, grab it, make a name for himself and remove hereditary peers from the House of Lords.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I thank you, Mr Pritchard, and Mr Davies for chairing the debate so effectively and efficiently. I also thank the right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) for raising this matter today. I am incredibly flattered that he has bought my book on Bosworth—I would sign it for him if that would not devalue the copy. I began my postgraduate research at university by looking at the new Tudor nobility—creations to the nobility—in the mid-15th century. If I had thought then that more than 15 years later I would be here today, responding on the Government's behalf on the hereditary peerage, I would have worn a wry smile.

I do not doubt the right hon. Gentleman's conviction and passion when he talks about this subject. I was there for his speech on 19 October in the House of Commons during the Opposition day debate on the House of Lords. I know that his private Member's Bill ran out of time last Friday and that he brought a ten-minute rule Bill to the main Chamber in April 2016. I was going back through his political career just to test his commitment to and consistency on the issue of the House of Lords, which we are debating today. I can go as far back as when he was a 26-year-old candidate standing in Eddisbury on the Labour party's 1983 manifesto, in which it stated very clearly that it would take action to abolish the House of Lords as quickly as possible and, as an interim measure, introduce a Bill in the first Session of Parliament to remove its legislative powers. All credit to the right hon. Gentleman for remaining consistent throughout his career and in his voting pattern to the manifesto commitment that he stood on in 1983.

With that in mind, I am sure that he will respect my decision to stick to the manifesto commitment that I

stood on in 2015. I would like to place this on the record. It is on page 49 of the Conservative party manifesto. We stated:

"While we still see a strong case for introducing an elected element into our second chamber, this is not a priority in the next Parliament. We have already allowed for expulsion of members for poor conduct and will ensure the House of Lords continues to work well by addressing issues such as the size of the chamber and the retirement of peers."

We added:

"We will ensure that the House of Lords fulfils its valuable role as a chamber of legislative scrutiny and revision".

Mr Hanson: I am not asking the Minister to break that manifesto pledge. Everything I have said would fit in with that pledge. I have talked about allowing retirements and not having elections. I am not asking for a change in elections; I am just asking him to look at retirements.

Chris Skidmore: The right hon. Gentleman makes a particular point about a manifesto commitment, but he ignores the fact that it is not a priority for this Government.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): My hon. Friend is a very able Minister for the Constitution, which is a subtle change of title from the previous Minister for Constitutional Reform—I am glad that an element of conservatism is seeping through the Cabinet Office. Surely the greater constitutional abomination of the other place at the moment, rather than the hereditary peers, is its recent tendency to attempt to defy the Salisbury convention.

Chris Skidmore: There have clearly already been debates and issues raised about the primacy of the elected Chamber. It remains the Government's commitment that the primacy of the elected Chamber must remain paramount. Many peers have reflected the fact that that is an important consideration. With the article 50 Bill becoming the article 50 Act, we saw that peers understand the primacy of the elected Chamber, and we hope that that arrangement will continue.

I would like to dwell on what reform has meant over the past couple of years. As we have seen in the past, if reform of the House of Lords is to succeed, parliamentarians in both Houses must be able to work constructively together to make progress. It is clear from recent debates on the matter in the Lords that there are strong feelings on both sides. Although there might be agreement on certain issues, there is not yet clear consensus on the way forward.

The Committee stage of Lord Grocott's Bill, to which the right hon. Gentleman referred, which would have removed the by-election system for replacing hereditary peers, clearly demonstrated that there was a level of disagreement and not a clear consensus on the way forward. With that in mind, and with so many other pressing legislative priorities to deliver over this Parliament—not least the fact that article 50 will be triggered tomorrow—the Government do not consider comprehensive reform of the Lords to be a priority. That is in line with our 2015 manifesto commitment.

Dr Poulter: I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will acknowledge that the manifesto commitment was to look at the size of the House of Lords and at some of its composition. There was a commitment to reforming the Chamber; clearly, a Chamber that has 200 more

[Dr Poulter]

Members than the House of Commons presents an issue. We recognise that the House of Commons is currently too large with 650 Members, so we are reducing the number to 600.

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As I have stated, the second part of the manifesto commitment was to

“ensure the House of Lords continues to work well by addressing issues such as the size of the chamber and the retirement of peers.”

That is not to say that the Government are unsympathetic to the case put forward by the right hon. Member for Delyn. In the last Parliament, under the previous Administration, the Government introduced a Bill that would have made 80% of the eligible membership of the House of Lords elected. Both he and I were in the same Lobby on Second Reading of that Bill, which would indeed have removed hereditary peers. It was ultimately unsuccessful, not because of a lack of commitment to reform, but because of a lack of political consensus on the form that reform should take and the process by which it should be enacted. However, that does not mean that we cannot make pragmatic and measured progress today, above all by achieving the consensus that was lacking in 2012.

To return to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), the Government are clear that we want to work constructively with Members and peers to look at the pragmatic ideas for reducing the size of the Lords that can command broad consensus, just as we attempted to do in the last Parliament. On certain measures we worked with both Houses to introduce some focused, important reforms. With Government support, the House of Lords Reform Act 2014 enabled peers to retire permanently for the first time and provided for peers to be disqualified when they do not attend or are convicted of serious offences. Already more than 50 peers have chosen to take that step of eventual retirement. We also supported the House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015, which provided the House with the power to expel Members in cases of serious misconduct, as well as the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015.

I believe that by making pragmatic, incremental reforms that can command consensus, real progress can be made. The right hon. Member for Delyn mentioned being on the right side of history. Looking at the historical processes of constitutional change, we see that those are often developed, constructed and effectively delivered by measured and manageable reform.

Mr Hanson: Will the Minister please say after me—that it is on the record—that the current UK Government support the principle whereby three people can vote for a Member of Parliament? Will he just say that for me? That is what he is saying.

Chris Skidmore: A debate in Westminster Hall is not the place for hypothetical questions, and it is certainly not the place for hypothetical answers. The UK Government are determined to enact the Conservative party's 2015 manifesto commitments, which clearly state that Lords reform is not a priority in this Parliament, but that where we can work constructively to address the size of the House and the retirement of peers, we will do so.

It is by making pragmatic, incremental reforms that command consensus that progress can be made. That is why the Government welcome the work of the Lord Speaker's cross-party Committee of Back-Bench peers—the right hon. Gentleman mentioned him—to explore practical and politically viable methods by which the size of the House of Lords can be reduced. On 20 December 2016, the Speaker in the House of Lords announced that he was establishing the Lord Speaker's Committee

“to examine the possible methods by which the House could be reduced in size.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 December 2016; Vol. 777, c. 1541.]

That followed a debate on 5 December in which the House of Lords unanimously agreed that its size should indeed be reduced.

The Committee's remit is to

“explore methods by which the size of the House can be reduced, commensurate with its current role and functions.”

Specifically, it is instructed

“to examine practical and politically viable options that might lead to progress on this issue; analyse their implications; and set out any outstanding questions that may need to be answered in order for any proposals to command broad consensus across the House.”

Following its deliberations, there was a consultation exercise that closed on 20 February; I am sure that right hon. and hon. Members have taken the opportunity to respond to that. The Committee will offer advice to the Lord Speaker on potential next steps. It is expected to conclude its work by early summer.

The Committee considers that its remit requires it to work within the following constraints: first, that there is no change to the House's role and powers or to the primacy of the Commons, and that deals with the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) made; secondly, that Members continue to be appointed, but with a ceiling on the total size of the House; thirdly, that there is no increase in the cost of the House; fourthly, that there is a guaranteed percentage or minimum number of Cross-Bench peers; and fifthly, that no single party is to have a political majority. I note that in the questions that were put as part of that consultation exercise, the Committee sought suggestions about how to achieve two overarching aims: first, to reduce the House from its current size to a target number or range; and secondly, to keep the House at that target size or range afterwards. It stated:

“In considering different options, it may be helpful to factor in the following points.”

One of those includes:

“Any consequential implications for the Lords Spiritual (the Bishops), the future of hereditary peers in the House, and automatic appointments of certain office-holders.”

I am sure the right hon. Member for Delyn has taken the opportunity to make his views heard as part of that consultation.

Although there may be no consensus on this matter—the right hon. Gentleman is right to have predicted that the Government are committed to looking at measured and manageable reform, but that comprehensive reform of the House of Lords is not a priority in this Parliament—we look forward to hearing the independent Committee's recommendations and to future discussions with colleagues across both Houses about where and when that consensus might be found. May I just say that it has been a delight to have this opportunity for discussion and debate

today? It is important that these views are aired and put on the record and that I, as the Minister responsible for the policy, can come to the House to defend the Government's position. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government policy on hereditary peers in the House of Lords.

Rare Diseases Strategy

4.26 pm

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered implementing the UK Strategy for Rare Diseases.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. Since taking over as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions in 2015, I have had the great privilege of meeting and helping patients, children and their parents and families. To explain the enormity of the situation, one in 17 people will be affected by a rare disease at some point in their life. That equates to approximately 3.5 million people in the UK. There are currently between 6,000 and 8,000 rare diseases that have been identified, with patients affected at all ages. However, for those who have a known rare disease, the picture is slightly better than for those whose disease is not known. Many children and adults who I have met do not have a diagnosis. That is both deeply distressing and prevents adequate care from being provided fully. It results in a wide range of issues for patients and parents, who are often desperate to find the answers. Despite the scale of the issue, unfortunately a significant proportion of people with a rare, genetic or undiagnosed condition still do not have access to adequate care and treatment.

Given the enormity of the problem, the Government published their rare diseases strategy in 2013. It was heralded by the rare diseases and medical communities as a major breakthrough. While symptoms vary from condition to condition, there are a number of issues that patients and families affected by rare diseases face collectively—for example, the difficulties associated with accessing a timely and accurate diagnosis and the appropriate co-ordination of care. The publication of “The UK Strategy for Rare Diseases” should have heralded a new era of treatment and care for rare diseases patients in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Containing 51 commitments, the strategy aims to ensure that health and social care systems across the nations provide those living with rare conditions with the highest quality of evidence-based care and treatment, regardless of where they live in the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this important issue to Westminster Hall for consideration. There are some 60 different types of muscular dystrophy, and 1,000 children and adults for every 1 million of the population are affected—70,000 people are affected by a muscle-wasting condition in the UK. Does he share my concern that our current strategy helps those who live a life of suffering because of those terrible diseases, and does he believe that we are offering the best, or enough, support to their carers at this time?

Ben Howlett: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed rare diseases many times in this Chamber. I pay tribute to his work and that of his party on pushing this agenda in Northern Ireland; that also has implications for England. I agree with what he said and I will come on to evidence given to the all-party group—he mentioned a range of different things—including that of Muscular Dystrophy UK. I hope hon. Members find that report and the evidence that we refer to beneficial.

[Ben Howlett]

Without wishing to go into too much detail about the 51 recommendations, given the limited time that we have, the UK strategy aims to “ensure no one gets left behind just because they have a rare disease”.

Features include setting a personal care plan for every patient, bringing together health and social care services; ensuring that patients, their families and carers have the information that they need and are listened to and consulted; and improving diagnosis and intervention and strengthening research to improve personalised approaches to healthcare for those with a rare disease.

The four countries in the UK were given a deadline of 2020 to implement the commitments. Although the Health Departments in the devolved nations have all published country-specific implementation plans to reflect their respective health services, structures and priorities, the Department of Health in England has not yet co-ordinated a plan for England.

At this point, I want to pause to thank all the charities and organisations across the country—including the Centre for Rare Diseases in Birmingham, the Birmingham children’s hospital, Lupus UK and Muscular Dystrophy UK—that have not only submitted evidence to our report, but done so in advance of this debate. Although I cannot name a million and one organisations, given the limited time, I—and, I think, the whole Chamber—wish to thank them for all their work on helping patients with rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions.

As has been referred to, between October 2016 and January 2017, the all-party group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions conducted an inquiry into the implementation of the UK strategy for rare diseases in England. It held three hearings with the Department of Health and its arm’s length bodies. More than 300 patients, family members, patient organisations, clinicians and industry representatives also submitted evidence. I thank all those who did so and all colleagues who took part in the evidence sessions, which were very interesting. Overall, the findings were that the strategy is working well and being implemented effectively in some areas. However, where the strategy is failing to be implemented, the problems it was designed to fix are in some cases getting worse or, at best, failing to get better. I will detail the findings of our report and ask the Minister a number of questions.

I was pleased with the response to a question I asked during Health questions last Tuesday. The Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood)—she is sadly unavailable for this debate, but I thank the Minister here today for stepping in at short notice—said that

“the UK strategy for rare diseases needs to be translated into an implementation plan”.—[*Official Report*, 21 March 2016; Vol. 623, c. 772.]

She also said that that was one of her prime commitments, and I was pleased to hear that from her at the Dispatch Box. However, the evidence we received for the report suggested that the Department of Health does not intend to develop an implementation plan and believes that NHS England should assume responsibility for doing that, so will the Minister confirm who will introduce the implementation plan, as promised last week?

NHS England also suggested in evidence that it does not intend to develop an implementation plan and has neither the remit nor the capacity to influence all 51 commitments in the strategy. Given that evidence, will the Minister commit to finding a way either for the Department of Health to deliver that agenda or for NHS England to be given direction to do so?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being gracious in giving way. He will be aware of the neuromuscular complex care centre that was set up in Queen Square in London in September 2014. Will he encourage the Minister to visit that centre to see the benefits of co-ordinated, specialist, multidisciplinary care delivery that could be replicated across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Ben Howlett: I am sure that the Minister heard that and will pass it on to the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon.

We also saw evidence of poor communication between the organisations responsible for implementing individual commitments and other stakeholders involved in the strategy. What plans does the Minister have to better co-ordinate that communication? Many patients do not have access to the appropriate treatment or information about their condition, and the barriers to accessing information about a condition begin as soon as a diagnosis is made. Unfortunately, that leads to patient care continuing to be poorly co-ordinated.

I know that the Minister is a superb champion for those with rare diseases, and given the rare condition that the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, has, I hope that he provides more information about the Government’s commitment from last week. Hopefully they can commit to the Department of Health developing a comprehensive implementation plan that describes actions for its arm’s length bodies in particular. An implementation plan would offer direction to bodies involved in rare disease patients’ care, so that they can take action to improve the services that patients need. It would help patients to understand what progress is being made and to ask the right questions when it is not. It would also help to ensure that the needs of rare disease patients and their families are considered in decisions about patient care and access to treatments taken by bodies involved in the strategy.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I welcome the recommendations in the strategy, although I am concerned that the recent announcement on capping NHS drug prices will influence implementation. Muscular Dystrophy UK has said that it would have a major impact on drugs for muscular dystrophy and other rare diseases. Newcastle is fortunate enough to be home to the John Walton Muscular Dystrophy Research Centre, but support could be improved further by providing specialist psychological support for people with muscle-wasting conditions. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that such support needs to be an integrated part of service provision for muscular dystrophy and other rare diseases?

Ben Howlett: I am really pleased that the hon. Lady raised that point, and I again pay tribute to the work done by Muscular Dystrophy UK to support patients. A key recommendation from our inquiry addressed the fact that part of the rare diseases strategy suggests that we should look at things on a much more integrated level. Patients are not just the medical condition that is attributed to them; they are also an entire person, who is part of a collective family. The rare diseases strategy has implications not just for those individuals, but for their families, carers and so on, across the board. We have seen a number of instances where the rare diseases strategy is simply not doing what it should have been doing, so I hope that in the Minister's summation he will address taking a holistic approach, rather than just looking at the individual.

Further recommendations in the APPG report include that NHS England should be more proactive in implementing the commitments it can influence and dedicate more resources to improving the co-ordination of care, as the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said. It recommended that the Department of Health should improve its processes to both engage and communicate with stakeholders in the strategy. It also recommended that the Department of Health and the UK National Screening Committee should work together to establish robust programmes for identifying and preventing rare diseases, and that training for frontline medical staff on rare diseases and their impact on patients should become widely available and incentivised. The APPG is very much encouraged by the number of programmes that have been developed in response to the strategy that complement its aims, such as the 100,000 Genomes Project. Those programmes are amazing in themselves; none the less, those developments should not necessarily be considered as actions resulting from the UK strategy for rare diseases.

The time to act is now. I am sure that the Minister can guess my final point, which is about the changes to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's highly specialised technologies programme. Commitment 13 of the strategy—lucky for some—is to ensure “that there are appropriate procedures for evaluating the costs and benefits of treatments for patients.”

NICE's recent decision to implement an upper funding threshold for its HST programme, made despite widespread condemnation from the rare diseases community, conflicts with that aim. The upper limit will vary according to the lifelong impact of the technology on the patient, varying from £100,000 per quality-adjusted life year for treatments that deliver less than 10 QALYs to the patient in their lifetime, up to a maximum of £300,000 for treatments that deliver more than 30 additional QALYs to the patient in their lifetime.

Unfortunately, the programme has been beset by delays. Only four medicines for the treatment of rare diseases have been evaluated since the HST programme began, averaging just one a year, despite a capacity for three treatments a year. The four medicines evaluated to date have been shown to bring tremendous value to the patients eligible to receive them. They are life-saving, life-lengthening treatments with the potential to lift the burden on whole families of a rare genetic condition.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate and for his leadership on the issue. On that particular point, does

he agree that, as well as being a kick in the teeth for the rare and ultra-rare disease community—families, medical staff and charities—the plans make no sense? They have no bearing on the effectiveness of the drugs, which surely should be the basis for decisions, and they threaten new drugs that could change and save people's lives, as well as some of the drugs that we joined families, medical staff and campaigners to get in the first place.

Ben Howlett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and pay tribute to him for his work on rare diseases over the years. One of the first events I ever went to in Parliament was on rare diseases and was hosted by him. I could not have put it better myself. I will come later to my view that the issue needs to be thought about in a more timely way, potentially in a consultation and through some sort of implementation plan, which has been missing. It will impact not just people with muscular dystrophy, for example, but all those with the different conditions that he has championed in the past.

The four medicines evaluated to date have shown tremendous benefits to patients, and are life-saving and life-extending treatments. They are some of the most powerful and effective treatments for rare diseases ever seen, and the highly specialised technology evaluation committee recommended them for funding in England, but none of those life-changing medicines would have been able to raise the lower threshold significantly, and none would have been approved under the new regime.

If implemented, the plans will significantly affect patients with rare diseases and their ability to access life-changing treatment, at a time when we should be expanding access routes rather than limiting them further. The changes contradict the positive recommendations made in the accelerated access review and will restrict any attempt through the industrial strategy to position the UK as a centre for the development of innovative medicine. England already has extremely slow and limited access to treatments for rare genetic conditions; further narrowing of access routes will shut the door to innovation for our community of patients and families. It is unacceptable to implement such drastically damaging proposals just 18 days after they were announced. I therefore join the sector in calling for a pause in implementing the proposals and for a consultation and impact assessment.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kindness in giving way once again. The John Walton Muscular Dystrophy Research Centre was named after a peer, now sadly deceased, who also founded Muscular Dystrophy UK and saw over a long lifetime the importance of the UK's role in innovative science and research techniques, and its economic benefits to the research sector and, more widely, our international reputation. The changes proposed to NHS England will do much to undermine that.

Ben Howlett: I think the sector agrees on that point, from patient groups to the constituents whom the hon. Lady represents, as well as all the people with an undiagnosed condition who might access the services of that facility in future and many others throughout the country. The Government need to rethink the implementation and ultimately introduce an impact assessment on that basis.

[Ben Howlett]

I know that several hon. Members want to speak, so I will conclude by welcoming the commitment and dedication of this Minister and the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, in providing a solution to our long-standing problems with the implementation of the rare diseases strategy in England. Following the publication of our report, I hope that the Minister will be able to provide clarity on the questions that I have asked. The UK is doing superb work and leading internationally on rare diseases.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. My constituent Will Newman contacts me regularly about his granddaughter Ellie, who lives outside my constituency. He wanted me to come to this debate and thank my hon. Friend and the Minister for the work that they are doing. We think that rare diseases do not affect many people, but those whom they affect, they affect hugely. Does he, like me, take heart from the Prime Minister's words in September? She said at Prime Minister's questions:

"We are committed to ensuring that patients with rare conditions get access to the latest medicines". —[*Official Report*, 7 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 334.]

As she also said, we are taking the necessary steps to get those to them.

Ben Howlett: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is a great champion for his constituents. I share his hope in the Prime Minister's commitment, made at an early stage in her office, and in a Minister who obviously understands rare diseases, having one herself, and who has made a clear personal commitment to resolve the issue. Having worked alongside the Department of Health for many years, I have been wanting to see this come to fruition. I am glad that we now have a leadership commitment in place to deliver it for the first time, at least in my memory of working alongside the NHS.

The UK is doing superb work and leading internationally on rare diseases. I hope that our all-party parliamentary group's report will make a significant difference and help to steer the Department of Health to a place conducive to both the Minister's requirements and ours. I look forward to hearing his response.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before I call Margaret Ritchie, I will give some guidance. I am sure that hon. Members are aware that the spokesman for the Scottish National party will have five minutes, as will the shadow Minister. The Minister will have 10 minutes. This debate is due to finish at 5.30.

4.45 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on his thoughtful contribution and on securing this important debate. He has given leadership on the issue, drawing on his professional field and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group, for which we are particularly grateful.

Those who suffer from rare diseases struggle for recognition, funding and resources, but rare diseases collectively are not rare; there are over 6,000 of them, and many Members here have constituents who are among the 3 million people throughout the UK affected by such diseases. The range of rare diseases is wide, but they have in common an impact on the lives of those who suffer from them and on those of their families and carers. In October last year, I chaired the annual general meeting in Northern Ireland on Behçet's disease, a very rare disease that affects sufferers with listlessness and muscular atrophy. They cannot get close to a level of diagnosis that comes with a clear medical plan for dealing with their particular disease.

Having a rare disease presents its own unique challenges. The testing experience of ill health is exacerbated by the difficulty of diagnosis and the subsequent struggle to access medicine and treatment. Other sufferers of rare diseases in my constituency have told me of the need for a co-ordinated approach to diagnosis and implementation of a treatment plan across all medical disciplines, which is sometimes sadly lacking.

I come to the issue from a Northern Ireland perspective. The hon. Member for Bath referred to an implementation plan for the nations and regions within the UK. A constituent who has a rare disease, as does her son, suggested to me that they originally received a considerable level of co-ordinated treatment here in Great Britain, but not in Northern Ireland. That issue must be addressed under our own singular plan.

Of course, proving the safety and effectiveness of treatments and medicines is an added difficulty in rare diseases with complex data, or perhaps even a dearth of data. I echo the vision of the Northern Ireland Rare Disease Partnership: no one should be disadvantaged because of the rarity of their condition. People with rare diseases should be able to expect access to the safe, effective and affordable drugs and treatments that they need.

Other hon. Members have mentioned muscular dystrophy in their interventions, specifically Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which affects more than 2,500 children and adults in the UK. Assisted ventilation is required to help older Duchenne patients to breathe, which necessitates 24-hour care, and some patients undergo a tracheostomy procedure. I have heard worrying reports that medical centres that conduct clinical trials for Duchenne muscular dystrophy and other muscle-wasting conditions are facing a lack of capacity and resources and are having to turn studies away, which risks thwarting the development of promising new drugs and the search for effective treatments that the hon. Member for Bath referred to.

As a Member of Parliament who represents a constituency in Northern Ireland, I was pleased that the then Northern Ireland Executive published their rare diseases implementation plan in October 2015, some two years after the report here was published. The plan identified four priorities: Northern Ireland's participation in the 100,000 Genomes Project; a commitment to review communications and information; a review to establish a Northern Ireland rare diseases registry; and training needs analysis for medical professionals. The next steps, of course, are to monitor the outcomes of those reviews and to listen closely to the people who are directly affected by the actions of the Department of Health. One of my principal regrets is that we do not

currently have a Northern Ireland Executive; civil servants are monitoring the issues but do not have the authority or directives to drive policies forward.

The founding principles of the NHS—that care should be free at the point of delivery and in accordance with need—must be observed. This debate is important because we need to find ways to ensure that those who suffer from rare conditions, for which proving safety and effectiveness is not easy, are not disadvantaged simply because their condition is rare or because the statistics are complicated. The Northern Ireland Rare Disease Partnership told me yesterday that it is not convinced that the latest efforts in that regard from NICE and NHS England are the final answer or even a good answer. It wants NHS England and NICE to look at the testimony of patients who are directly affected, and think about what “need” actually means in today’s world. It cannot just mean paracetamol for headaches; it must mean life-saving or life-altering treatment.

I fear that delays in the progress of implementation will be another unacceptable result of the political situation that we currently face. It is important that we have a political driver—a political authority—to implement our rare diseases strategy fully. I will continue to be guided by the judgment and first-hand knowledge of constituents who have a rare disease, and to measure the success of our local strategy by their experience of how it is implemented.

4.53 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing this debate and on his excellent work as chair of the all-party group.

My interest in this subject has been stimulated by visiting a number of key research sites in and around Cambridge, where vital work is being done to develop new treatments. The Sanger Institute has the world-famous and world-leading 100,000 Genomes Project and works closely with the adjoining European Bioinformatics Institute. Because of Brexit, both institutes face major problems with retaining key staff and ensuring data flows, although that is a debate for another day. We also have the National Institute for Health Research’s biomedical research centre, which is led by Dr John Bradley and based at Addenbrooke’s hospital.

I recently joined Dr Bradley and Professor Lucy Raymond, professor of medical genetics at Cambridge, to celebrate Rare Disease Day at an illuminating roundtable with patients and practitioners. We heard case studies that highlighted some of the very difficult challenges that patients with rare diseases face, including practical difficulties with the benefits system. I was particularly struck by meeting a patient who suffered from lupus. She explained that she had good days and bad days—something that the welfare system just cannot cope with, making her already difficult life even harder. The message that I came away with—apart from the important links to the genetic sequencing work being done at the Sanger and the need to identify the right people to test—was that research into rare diseases not only helps with those diseases, but leads to discoveries with a much wider application.

I will focus my comments on new treatments and on how to ensure ready access to them. As we have heard, this debate is very timely because it comes hot on the heels of recent NICE guidance that introduces a financial cap for access to new medicines. NICE is proposing an upper limit for costs per quality-adjusted life year, above which it will not recommend funding for highly specialised technology treatments. That decision could have a profound impact on people affected by rare diseases in the UK. On Thursday, when I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on the matter, he replied that

“decisions about individual medicines are taken by a body such as NICE, where clinical judgment is to the fore, rather than being subject to political pressure”.—[*Official Report*, 23 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 966.]

None the less, I am glad to have the opportunity to raise the matter today. I agree that it should be for NICE to decide, but this is a significant change from medical efficacy to financial rationing. Such a highly political change should be debated here, not outsourced.

We must listen to what charities such as Alzheimer’s Research UK and Cancer Research UK are saying. They warn that lives will be lost because of this new rationing system. I was particularly struck by the words of the MPS Society, which provides support to people affected by mucopolysaccharide diseases. It said that the decision by NICE and NHS England

“will affect the most vulnerable in UK Society and confirms that children and young adults with ultra-rare diseases going forward are economic pawns in a failing NHS and cheaper dead than alive.”

Those are very strong words. They are not mine, but they show how people feel, and I am sure that the Minister will have noted them.

Genetic Alliance UK said:

“NICE, in close collaboration with NHS England, are sending a clear message that they are unwilling to fund new innovative treatments for rare diseases. This is a real slap in the face for patients and families with rare diseases, and contrary to the founding principles of the NHS.”

It has also suggested that, as we have already heard, none of the four rare disease medicines that have so far been approved would have been approved under the new proposals, which it believes will cause a

“drastic reduction in access to innovative treatments for very rare diseases in England”.

It is also worth mentioning that the guidance will have an impact not only on people affected by rare diseases, by closing off their access to innovative treatments, but on the UK’s vital life sciences sector more broadly, as it risks curtailing investment in new medicines. As the BioIndustry Association says, it sends

“an immediate, stark, negative signal to the global life science investors and companies that the UK needs to attract in the Brexit era.”

The reaction from patient groups, as well as from industry, demonstrates the broad concern about the adverse impact that NICE and NHS England’s decision will have on patients. The UK strategy for rare diseases published in 2013 has the laudable aims of raising awareness of rare diseases and improving diagnosis, research and access to services for people affected, but there is a real risk that those aims will be undermined by the new guidance.

[Daniel Zeichner]

I echo the calls from the hon. Member for Bath and other hon. Members for the Department of Health to publish an implementation plan for the UK strategy for rare diseases, because until we see a coherent plan, progress on the strategy's objectives will continue to stall. As the all-party group has rightly summarised:

"An implementation plan... is a tool for delivery, coordination, collaboration, communication and monitoring."

Such a plan would also enable stakeholder groups to have a clear idea of which institutions they could work with to influence the implementation of the strategy.

We have already heard today that the Minister responsible for public health and innovation, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), has made a personal commitment that the UK rare diseases strategy should be translated into an implementation plan. I applaud her for that commitment, but I hope the Minister will confirm that the Department will follow through on it, because last year the then Health Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), stated in a written answer:

"There are no plans to consult on the implementation plan".

The Government have described the UK strategy for rare diseases as

"a long term strategic vision for improving the lives of all those with rare diseases and conditions"

and have committed

"to ensuring that patients with rare and ultra-rare diseases in England are able to access effective treatments."

I fear that recent decisions will mean that access to those effective treatments will be shut off. The Government must act urgently if they want their strategy to move beyond paper and reach the patients and people it aims to help.

4.59 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Pritchard, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for securing the debate, for his informative speech and indeed for the work that he has undertaken with the all-party group.

As we have heard, rare disease affects considerably more people than we would at first imagine, with over 3 million people across the UK likely to suffer from a rare disease at some point in their lives. The Scottish Government's implementation plan for rare diseases in Scotland recognises this fact in its title: "It's Not Rare to Have a Rare Disease".

My own constituency has had, as I am sure every other constituency has had, several fairly high-profile rare disease cases. These cases attract media attention and affect entire communities, not just the family directly affected; often, communities have to raise funds to help with treatments and raise awareness. Such a case was that of Kirsty Reid from Whitburn. In 2015, after being diagnosed with pseudomyxoma peritonei—it is one of those conditions where the acronym, PMP, is slightly easier to say—Kirsty raised over £7,000 to help others diagnosed with the rare condition, which affects only two people per million.

We also have a charity called Shavon's Journey, which was set up in 2012 following the death of Shavon Morton from Grangemouth after a long fight with aplastic anaemia, a condition in which bone marrow does not produce sufficient new cells to replenish blood cells. I could go on with other examples, but I think we all get the point—rare diseases touch the lives of many, and therefore the importance of raising awareness, and of improving diagnosis and ultimately the services and treatments to sufferers, cannot be overstated.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing this debate. The Teddington Trust, which is jointly run by one of my constituents, supports people living with xeroderma pigmentosum, who lack the DNA repair mechanism necessary to repair damage caused to the skin by exposure to ultraviolet sunlight. Does my hon. Friend join me in commending the work of the Teddington Trust and the work of many other rare disease charities in supporting those living with rare diseases and keeping rare diseases on the political agenda?

Martyn Day: I do indeed join my hon. Friend in commending the work of so many good charities and organisations in this field.

The Scottish Government's implementation plan, which I have mentioned, sets out the Scottish approach to delivering the UK strategy commitments. Key to the plan is recognising the importance of timely and accurate diagnosis, and allowing treatments to start as soon as possible. The Scottish Government have substantially increased access to new medicines, particularly for cancer, due to reforms and investment in recent years, which has led to a marked increase in uptake of orphan, ultra-orphan and end-of-life medicines.

Last year, the Scottish Government launched a review of the way drugs are assessed for NHS use, which was led by the former NHS Fife medical director, Dr Brian Montgomery. His review looked at how changes made to the Scottish Medicines Consortium process in 2014 had affected access to medicines for rare and end-of-life conditions. The review's recommendations set out how the process for appraising medicines can be made more open, transparent and robust, and the Scottish Government have committed to implement all 28 of its recommendations, such as a new approval pathway, outwith the standard SMC process, for these high-cost medicines for very rare conditions.

The Scottish Government's peer-approved clinical system, or PACS, has helped to give patients and clinicians a better say in which new medicines are approved by the SMC for use in NHS Scotland, particularly those used for rare or life-limiting conditions. PACS was first piloted in Glasgow in 2015 and has been successfully rolled out across Scotland, and a second tier of PACS will now be introduced to replace and build on the existing individual patient treatment request system. A new national appeals process will be introduced through this new tier of PACS, which will include consideration of equity of access with other parts of the UK as a material part of the decision-making process.

It is also perhaps worth saying at this point that the Scottish Government are happy to work with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, and indeed

with any other countries, to improve access to medicines in Scotland and to obtain a fair price from the pharmaceutical industry. I emphasise that last point, because we now need the pharmaceutical companies to do their bit by bringing forward fairer prices for new medicines, so that access can be as wide as possible.

Finally, we know that the Health Secretary has said that he does not expect the UK to remain within the European Medicines Agency, which raises a number of concerns about potential delays in new drugs reaching patients in the UK. Sir Alasdair Breckenridge, who was the chairman of the UK's drug regulator—the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency—for almost a decade, said last month:

“The UK market compared to the European market of course is small and they may decide not to come to the United Kingdom. So therefore there will be delay in getting new drugs—important new drugs, anti-cancer drugs, anti-infective drugs—for patients in the UK.”

He is not alone in saying that; David Jefferys, vice-president of Japanese drugs firm Eisai, has also warned that UK patients could face delays of up to two years. I would be grateful if the Minister could advise in his response to the debate how these dire warnings can be prevented from becoming a reality.

5.4 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Pritchard.

I welcome this important debate and I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) for securing it and for his excellent introduction to it, although I am sorry that I missed the start of his speech because it started four minutes early before my hon. Friends and I were in our places.

I also thank other hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon, including the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), the spokesman for the Scottish National party, who all made excellent and insightful speeches.

As others have said, here in the UK one in 17 people will be affected by a rare disease at some point in their life, which equates to approximately 3.5 million people in the UK. It cannot go unsaid that those 3.5 million people have a wide range of symptoms, which vary from condition to condition, some of which we have heard about this afternoon. It is clear that there are common experiences that people with these conditions all share. As Rare Disease UK has estimated that it takes on average four years for a patient to receive a diagnosis, it is clear that there are many missed opportunities to help those people living with rare diseases. Each and every person who suffers from a rare disease deserves the necessary support to live a fulfilling life.

That is why it was welcome that in 2013 the coalition Government published their UK-wide strategy for rare diseases, which was seen as heralding a new era in the treatment and care of rare disease patients across all four home nations. The 51 recommendations are all to be welcomed, as they each take us a step further in addressing concerns about the care and treatment of rare diseases, and the strategy's aim is to make sure that no one gets left behind just because they have a rare disease. It is an aim that Labour welcomes wholeheartedly.

Most of my contribution to this debate will focus on the issues with the implementation of the strategy, but I will take a moment to mention some of the positives. It is welcome to see that the National Institute for Health Research has launched the Rare Diseases Translational Research Collaboration—I will use the acronym, RD-TRC, as it is much easier to say—which aims to empower patients to engage and become involved with research and research funding decisions. To date, the NIHR has invested £4 million in the RD-TRC, and the programme is expected to continue for another five years, with a £5 million investment.

Work has also been done by Public Health England on data recording, to bolster diagnosis and early intervention, and we have also seen Health Education England collaborate with the National School of Healthcare Science to produce two educational videos for healthcare professionals, in order to raise awareness of the problems faced by families who have a child with an undiagnosed condition and the importance of considering whether it is a rare disease. All this work is to be welcomed and should not go unnoticed.

Yet the sticking point in all of this, and the reason why we are here today to debate this issue, is that the Government are digging their heels in and not getting on with drafting an implementation plan, while the other home nations' Health Departments are making significant strides. That betrays not only those patients living in England who wish this strategy to be properly implemented but the strategy itself, which stated that all four home nations must see the vision behind the strategy become a reality by 2020. It also undermines all the excellent work that I mentioned previously to implement the recommendations.

The strategy was published in 2013 and we are now just three years from the date set for the vision to be realised. However, the all-party group that the hon. Member for Bath so ably chairs has discovered that the Department of Health does not intend to publish an implementation plan, believing that it should be published by the NHS. Yet the NHS has said that it does not intend to do this either, as it does not have responsibility for other arm's length bodies of the Department of Health. I want to ask the Minister why. I want to know why we are seeing patients and their families caught in this dispute between the NHS and the Department of Health. This situation cannot continue; there are people suffering right now who need this strategy to be implemented correctly.

I have briefly mentioned the report by the all-party group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions on the lack of an implementation plan, but I know that it covers other issues as well, and I will take a moment to touch on some of them. One of the main issues raised was the lack of communication between organisations responsible for implementing the various aspects of the plan, and the failure to provide patients, families, doctors, industry experts and patient organisations with updates on progress of the strategy. That is deeply worrying, as it is important that people are made aware of the issues that affect them so personally. Therefore, it is not surprising that the all-party group heard from more than 300 patients that widespread disillusionment and disappointment had become the common feeling about the strategy, despite the optimism felt when it was published five years ago. The sting in the tail is that there are

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

implementation plans for the strategy across the UK, with the exception of here in England. I share the frustration of the many others who are affected by the Government's complacency. The Department's rationale for not providing updates on progress is that patient organisations can disseminate information to patients and families, but it sadly fails to grasp that those organisations and charities are often very small and do not have the resources to pull together updates and send them out.

Also, issues that have not been worked on since the strategy was published have been identified, including prevention and identification of rare diseases, improving care pathways and failing to implement structures that would facilitate collaboration between the four home nations. In his response, I would be grateful if the Minister could provide us with an update on those points and tell us what his Department plans to do to see the recommendations through.

The strategy is now five years old, and although there has been work to see it realised, it has not gone far enough. The failure here is that the Department of Health in England is not fulfilling its duty to draft an implementation plan to realise the visionary goals in the strategy, which undermines the work already under way and hinders any future work. The Minister must set that right, and I hope he plans to do so today. He has the power to rectify the situation and he cannot be complacent when it comes to supporting people living with rare diseases.

We are not talking about a handful of people; many of our own constituents are being failed by the Government, and all they ask for is that the Department of Health do what Departments in the other home nations are doing and provide an implementation plan to enable the strategy to be fully realised and make the impact it was intended to have. I once more thank the hon. Member for Bath. I hope that the debate will make the Minister think again about the Government's opposition to taking responsibility for a plan, and that he will honour the whole vision of the strategy, instead of cherry-picking from it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): If the Minister does not use all the time allocated—10 minutes is a guide, but clearly there is more time on the clock—it will allow me to call the hon. Member for Bath for a brief winding up, but that is entirely in the Minister's gift.

5.12 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): Mr Pritchard, I am grateful for your generosity and guidance. You are chairing the debate admirably, as usual. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) and the other members of the all-party group on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions on securing the debate and on producing a timely and informative report. My hon. Friend rightly pointed out that the Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Innovation would have been the Minister responding to the debate, but I am sure he will understand why she cannot be here: she was invited to accompany the Prime Minister elsewhere today. I regret, for him, that that proved an invitation hard to resist. It has, however, given

me the opportunity to learn more about rare diseases and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. I hope to be able to address some of the comments that he and other hon. Members have made.

As has been acknowledged, the UK strategy for rare diseases was published in 2013 and set out a high-level framework that aimed to improve the lives of those affected by rare diseases. The Government remain committed to implementing the strategy by 2020 and are aware that the real test of success will be tangible improvements experienced by patients with rare diseases and their families. Last month's publication of the all-party group report is a timely reminder that there is still much to do, as has been mentioned by all speakers today. However, it is important not to forget just how much we have achieved.

NHS England has been actively working to raise the priority given to rare diseases. In particular, advances in genomics are already having a positive impact on patients with rare diseases. NHS England has embarked on a world-leading project to establish genomics in mainstream healthcare, establishing a network of 13 genomic medicine centres that will underpin the delivery of genetic medicine over the years to come. The Government have also made a clear commitment to developing genomics, and that is best demonstrated by the £500 million investment in the 100,000 Genomes Project, which is the biggest national sequencing project of its kind in the world.

The full potential for genomics can be realised only with continued research into rare diseases, and the National Institute for Health Research has established a Rare Diseases Translational Research Collaboration to make maximum use of its significant research infrastructure. I welcome the support given by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), to that initiative. It is supported by a £20 million investment and has already recruited more than 15,000 patients to support 56 projects related to rare diseases.

I am pleased to say that the UK is a recognised leader on many rare diseases. We are an active member of the International Rare Diseases Research Consortium and have been actively involved in the establishment of 24 European reference networks—ERNs—for rare disease, six of which we are leading on. I was at an informal meeting of EU Ministers early last week, where our role in punching above our weight for the ERNs was widely acknowledged.

An important element of our plans will be to continue to look for ways in which the UK can work with international partners. The all-party group, along with hon. Members present in the debate and a number of external groups in the rare diseases community, have raised concerns about the perceived impact of the planned changes to the methods used by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence for the evaluation of highly specialised technologies. That is one of a set of proposals being introduced by NHS England and NICE following the recommendation in last year's Public Accounts Committee report on specialised services that the Department of Health and our arm's length bodies should better consider affordability when making decisions, including on rare diseases. NICE and NHS England have consulted on the proposals, and I can assure hon. Members that they have listened carefully to the responses and made substantive changes.

The planned changes to NICE's methods, as amended following the consultation, recognise the unique position of patients with very rare diseases and the need to pay a premium for their treatments. The changes introduce a clearer framework for the assessment of drugs for very rare diseases, which will better enable commercial discussions between NHS England and the pharmaceutical companies, in line with the recommendations of the accelerated access review. The consultation originally proposed the introduction of a threshold of £100,000 per quality-adjusted life year. In response to feedback, that single threshold has been replaced by a sliding scale, which means it will be possible for transformative treatments that offer significant health gains to be approved up to £300,000 per QALY. That is 10 times greater than NICE's threshold for treatments considered by its mainstream technology appraisal process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath can speculate, but I gently say to him that it is not possible to predict how likely any individual new drug is to be recommended by NICE under the changes in the future, and we cannot retrospectively apply the new framework to past decisions. Furthermore, it is important to stress that even when NICE is not able to recommend a drug for the full patient population, NHS England may still be able to fund a drug for a subgroup of patients who will most benefit from treatment.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) referred to the co-operation of Scotland, along with the other devolved nations, in collaborative work. We acknowledge and welcome that, and we acknowledge that Scotland has published an implementation plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath referred to four examples of drugs that NICE had approved for use for rare diseases in England, and they are available for use in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) asked about that. In particular, Translarna was approved for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which she referenced. I gently say to the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk that those four drugs are not yet available in Scotland—at least, not according to my briefing—other than one that is available for restricted use. Although we wish to continue co-operating with Scotland, the system in England has some advantages thus far.

I am confident that the planned changes create a framework that will enable truly transformational new drugs for patients with rare diseases to be made available where companies are willing to set prices that fairly reflect the added benefit they bring.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) on securing this debate. I welcome the progress that the Minister has described, but one thing that has been touched on in several speeches is the difficulty people have as a result of the nature of rare diseases. When they are trying to get a diagnosis in the first instance, medical practitioners often have no experience of the disease. As he develops his speech, or as the Department develops the policies and framework for delivering more services, will consideration be given to how that knowledge can be more widely spread?

Mr Dunne: The right hon. Gentleman anticipates something that I will come to shortly in my speech, but we acknowledge that challenge and we recognise that

there will continue to be concerns among patient groups and Members. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bath in particular will understand that the proposed changes are intended to put in place a fairer, more transparent framework for the evaluation of technologies for very rare diseases as they are developed.

I want to respond specifically to the challenge posed by my hon. Friend and the shadow Minister on the real need to ensure that the commitments set out in the UK rare disease strategy are fully realised. It is right that last week in the House, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Innovation made a personal commitment to that effect in her response to my hon. Friend's oral question, and I am happy to reiterate that commitment today. I can confirm to the House that I have agreed with the chief executive of NHS England that by the end of this year he will deliver an implementation plan for those of the 51 commitments of the UK strategy for rare diseases for which NHS England has lead responsibility. For those commitments that fall outside NHS England's remit, the Department will work collaboratively across stakeholders to contribute to the implementation plan. I am sure my hon. Friend will agree that the development of that plan will be a significant step in the journey.

Ben Howlett *indicated assent.*

Mr Dunne: I welcome my hon. Friend's acknowledgement of that. We are absolutely clear that we need to ensure that the proposals are used to drive real action and make tangible improvements for patients affected by rare diseases. It is not only about having a plan but about ensuring that the plan has effect for sufferers of these conditions. That is why we have recently reconfigured and strengthened the governance arrangements and formed a more streamlined UK rare disease policy board to monitor and co-ordinate progress in implementing the strategy.

In addition, we have strengthened the patient voice with the appointment of two patient representatives to the policy board. To make our work more transparent, a broad online stakeholder forum will operate in collaboration with the policy board to allow a more meaningful dialogue with the rare disease community. The rare disease policy board will be supported by clearly defined task and finish groups to examine progress objectively and to consider in particular the diagnostic odyssey that my hon. Friend referred to, which can be so frustrating for those who are still unable to determine their condition. That issue is a considerable worry for anyone affected by a rare disease, who will be familiar with the problem.

I will conclude slightly ahead of schedule by confirming that the lives of patients with rare diseases can be improved only by means of concerted and co-ordinated action. I take this opportunity to reaffirm the Government's aims to drive real improvements in the care and treatment of those affected by rare diseases by working with stakeholders to deliver the standard of care and treatment that all patients deserve and to ensure that the implementation plan for England is delivered by the end of this year.

5.25 pm

Ben Howlett: I will be brief. I thank the Minister for his response. The news about the implementation plan

[Ben Howlett]

being brought in before the end of the year is incredibly welcome, and I thank him for taking leadership on that. That is a message to go back to my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood) while she is with the Prime Minister. I appreciate that it is potentially a lot nicer to be with the Prime Minister than here. Nevertheless, the Government's position is welcome.

I thank all Members for contributing to the debate. I particularly thank the hon. Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie), for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for their supportive comments. The time is now. The all-party parliamentary group, working with Genetic Alliance UK and Rare Disease UK, which provide the secretariat to the APPG, will be monitoring the progress that the Minister, the Department and NHS England make over the next few months. Progress will be incredibly welcome. The Minister referred to the highly specialised technology change and explained how the consultation has operated,

and I appreciate that, but I reiterate that there is concern within the sector. The Ministers may be able to reassure people that that concern is being taken into consideration.

For a long time I have said that the accelerated access to medicines review might be a good pathway for rare diseases in the future. The work that the former Minister for Life Sciences, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman)—he is now chair of the Prime Minister's policy unit—has done and continues to do will be incredibly important. Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for chairing the debate. I thank the Minister for updating the House, and I also thank Members and all those who gave evidence and support to the APPG in its inquiry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered implementing the UK Strategy for Rare Diseases.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 28 March 2017

TREASURY

Fourth Anti-money Laundering Directive

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Government have opted in to the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) provisions within the European Commission's proposal to amend the fourth anti-money laundering directive. These provisions require sharing of data from registers between Financial Intelligence Units and law enforcement authorities, which we consider falls within the scope of Article 87 of the treaty on the functioning of the EU. As such, the Government believe these are JHA obligations and therefore the UK's JHA opt-in is triggered. We have informed Council of that fact.

The Government have decided to opt in to these provisions as they improve data sharing between financial intelligence units. This is an important and necessary part of our anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing regime.

[HCWS567]

UK's Counter-terrorist Asset Freezing Regime (1 April to 30 June 2016)

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAFE 2010), the Treasury is required to report to Parliament, quarterly, on its operation of the UK's asset freezing regime mandated by UN Security Council resolution 1373.

This report covers the period from 1 April 2016 to 30 June 2016.¹ This report also covers the UK implementation of the UN ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida organisations asset freezing regime (ISIL-AQ) and the operation of the EU asset freezing regime in the UK under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 which implements UNSCR 1373 against external terrorist threats to the EU. Under the ISIL-AQ asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011. Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAFE 2010.

Annexes A and B to this statement provide a breakdown, by name, of all those designated by the UK and the EU in pursuance of UN Security Council resolution 1373. The one individual subject to a designation, which has been notified on a restricted and confidential basis, under sections 3 and 10 of TAFE 2010 is denoted by "A".

The table available as an attachment online sets out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter ending 30 June 2016:

Legal proceedings

On 15 June a hearing was held at the Court of Appeal in relation to the Treasury's decision to revoke and not quash the designation of Moazzam BEGG. The hearing was in respect of a protective costs order of the appellant.

Annex A: Designated persons under TAFE 2010 by name² Individuals

1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI
2. Imad Khalil AL-ALAMI
3. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER
4. Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOUB
5. Manssor ARBABSIAR
6. Usama HAMDAN
7. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN
8. Mohammed KHALED
9. Parviz KHAN
10. Musa Abu MARZOUK
11. Khalid MISHAAL
12. Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED
13. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI
14. Ali Gholam SHAKURI
15. Qasem SOLEIMANI
16. A (restricted designation)

Entities

1. Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)
2. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)
3. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)
4. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
5. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)
6. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)
7. Sendero Luminoso (SL)

Annex B: Persons designated by the EU under Council regulation (EC)2580/2001³

Persons

1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
2. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
3. Ibrahim Salih AL YACOUB*
4. Manssor ARBABSIAR*
5. Mohammed BOUYERI
6. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*
7. Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED*
8. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*
9. Ali Gholam SHAKURI*
10. Qasem SOLEIMANI*

Groups and entities

1. Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO)
2. Al-Aqsa E.V.
3. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade
4. Babbar Khalsa
5. Communist Party of the Philippines, including New People's Army (NPA), Philippines
6. Devrimci Halk Kurtulu Partisi-Cephesi—DHKP/C (Revolutionary People's Liberation Army/Front/Party)
7. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)*
8. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)*
9. Gama'a al-Islamiyya (a.k.a. Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya) (Islamic Group—IG)

10. Hamas, including Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassem
11. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
12. Hizbul Mujahideen (HM)
13. Hofstadgroep
14. Islami Büyük Dogu Akincilar Cephesi (IBDA-C) (Great Islamic Eastern Warriors Front)
15. Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF)
16. Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (a.k.a. KONGRA-GEL)
17. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
18. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
19. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*
20. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)*
21. Sendero Luminoso (SL) (Shining Path)*
22. Teyrbazen Azadiya Kurdistan (TAK)

¹ Financial institutions update HM Treasury on individual account balances annually. The figures in the first row of the table are based on account balances which were last reported to HM Treasury on 30 September 2015. At the end of each quarter HM Treasury will adjust the figures to reflect any accounts that have been frozen or unfrozen in that quarter.

² For full listing details please refer to <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/current-list-of-designated-persons-terrorism-and-terrorist-financing>

³ For full listing details please refer to www.gov.uk

* EU listing rests on UK designation under Tafa 2010

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-28/HCWS562/>.

[HCWS562]

UK's Counter-terrorism Asset Freezing Regime (1 July to 30 September 2016)

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (Tafa 2010), the Treasury is required to report to Parliament, quarterly, on its operation of the UK's asset freezing regime mandated by UN Security Council resolutions 1373 and 1452.

This report covers the period from 1 July 2016 to 30 September 2016.¹ This report also covers the UK implementation of the UN ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida asset freezing regime (ISIL-AQ) and the operation of the EU asset freezing regime in the UK under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 which implements UNSCR 1373 against external terrorist threats to the EU. Under the ISIL-AQ asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011. Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under Part 1 of Tafa 2010.

A new EU asset freezing regime under EU regulation (2016/1686) was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous Al-Qaida and ISIL (Da'esh) listings. Once a designation is made under this regime it will appear in the table below.

Annexes A and B to this statement provide a breakdown, by name, of all those designated by the UK and the EU in pursuance of UN Security Council resolution 1373.

The table available as an attachment online sets out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter: 1 July 2016 to 30 September 2016

Legal proceedings

On 8 August 2016, the designation of one individual referred to in previous reports as "A" was lifted by the court with effect from 11 March 2016.

Annexe A: Designated persons under Tafa 2010 by name²

Individuals

1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI
2. Imad Khalil AL-ALAMI
3. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER
4. Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOUB
5. Manssor ARBABSAR
6. Usama HAMDAN
7. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN
8. Mohammed KHALED
9. Musa Abu MARZOUK
10. Khalid MISHAAL
11. Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED
12. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI
13. Ali Gholam SHAKURI
14. Qasem SOLEIMANI

Entities

1. Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)
2. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)
3. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)
4. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
5. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)
6. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)
7. Sendero Luminoso (SL)

Annex B: Persons designated by the EU under Council regulation (EC) 2580/2001³

Persons

1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
2. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
3. Ibrahim Salih AL YACOUB*
4. Manssor ARBABSAR*
5. Mohammed BOUYERI
6. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*
7. Khalid Sheikh MOHAMMED*
8. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*
9. Ali Gholam SHAKURI*
10. Qasem SOLEIMANI*

Groups and entities

1. Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO)
2. Al-Aqsa E.V.
3. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade
4. Babbar Khalsa
5. Communist Party of the Philippines, including New People's Army (NPA), Philippines
6. Devrimci Halk Kurtulu Partisi-Cephesi—DHKP/C (Revolutionary People's Liberation Army/Front/Party)

7. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)*
8. Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)*
9. Gama'a al-Islamiyya (a.k.a. Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya) (Islamic Group—IG)
10. Hamas, including Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassem
11. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
12. Hizbul Mujahideen (HM)
13. Hofstadgroep
14. Islami Büyük Dogu Akincilar Cephesi (IBDA-C) (Great Islamic Eastern Warriors Front)
15. Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF)
16. Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (a.k.a. KONGRA-GEL)
17. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
18. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
19. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*
20. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)*
21. Sendero Luminoso (SL) (Shining Path)*
22. Teyrbazen Azadiya Kurdistan (TAK)

¹ Financial institutions update HM Treasury on individual account balances annually. The figures in the first row of the table are based on account balances which were last reported to HM Treasury on 30 September 2015. At the end of each quarter HM Treasury will adjust the figures to reflect any accounts that have been frozen or unfrozen in that quarter.

² For full listing details please refer to <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/current-list-of-designated-persons-terrorism-and-terrorist-financing>

³ For full listing details please refer to www.gov.uk

* EU listing rests on UK designation under TAFE 2010

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-28/HCWS562/>.

[HCWS564]

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

London Borough of Tower Hamlets

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): In line with the statement I made on 16 March 2017, and giving due consideration to representations made by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets on 22 March 2017, I am informing the House that I am exercising my powers under section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 and revoking the directions of 14 December 2014 in relation to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

This will end the role of commissioners in the council and hand back executive functions to the executive Mayor.

From 1 April 2017 I am putting in place a further general direction for a period of 18 months to 30 September 2018. The general direction includes requirements that the council:

- delivers all outstanding actions in their best value action plan and sets up a best value improvement board as outlined in the Mayor's letter of 1 March 2017;
- provides me with quarterly reports against their best value action plans for a further 12 months;
- carries out an independent review of delivery at the end of this period; and
- abides by the best value duty, as with all councils.

The new direction allows for continued oversight of electoral administration.

I am placing a copy of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House and on my Department's website.

[HCWS569]

Neighbourhood Planning Bill: EVEL

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I am pleased to announce the publication of analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to Government and non-Government amendments made to the Neighbourhood Planning Bill during its passage through the House of Lords.

The English votes for English laws process applies to Public Bills in the House of Commons. To support the process, the Government have agreed that it will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify the Bill or any of its provisions for the purposes of English votes for English laws. Bill provisions that relate exclusively to England or to England and Wales, and which have a subject matter within the legislative competence of one or more of the devolved legislatures, can be certified.

The memorandum provides an assessment of Government and non-Government amendments made to the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, for the purposes of English votes for English laws, ahead of Commons consideration of Lords amendments. The Department's assessment is the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill. I have deposited a copy in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS566]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces' Pay Review Body 21017

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): The 2017 Report of the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body (AFPRB) has now been published. I wish to express my thanks to the Chair and members of the Review Body for their report.

The AFPRB recommendations are to be accepted in full and will become effective from 1 April 2017. Copies of the AFPRB report are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS560]

NATO's Enhance Forward Presence

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): At the Warsaw summit in 2016, NATO allies agreed to enhance the alliance's deterrence and defence posture in response to the growing threats the Euro-Atlantic region faces, including Russian belligerence. The UK is leading the work necessary to deliver an alliance that is capable and credible of responding to all threats. We took the decision to provide one of the four defensive, but combat-capable, battlegroups that NATO is now deploying to the Baltic states and Poland to defend NATO. This enhanced forward presence (eFP) demonstrates allies' solidarity, determination, and ability to act by triggering an immediate allied response to any aggression.

The main body of our fighting forces will arrive in Estonia and Poland in the coming weeks.

We are providing the framework battlegroup of around 800 military personnel in Estonia, with around 200 additional troops from France and Denmark: French forces will join us in 2017 and Danish forces in 2018. The 5 RIFLES is providing the majority of the UK military personnel for the first rotation, and we are also deploying armoured infantry equipped with warrior armoured fighting vehicles, artillery, tactical unmanned aerial vehicles, and a small troop of Challenger 2 main battle tanks.

Our battlegroup will contribute to regional defence and security. We will actively support the Estonian defence force's 1st Infantry Brigade in its role deterring aggression, and we will conduct joint exercising and training with Danish, French, Estonian, and other forces in the region to build a strong multinational battlegroup.

Based on our close bilateral relationship, we are also sending a British light cavalry squadron of 150 Light Dragoons to Poland. This force will fall under the US eFP battlegroup in Poland, and we will work closely with our Polish and US allies to deter aggression against NATO territory.

We are prepared in case our forces are tested by Russia, including through cyber-attacks and false media reports. We are taking all necessary steps to protect our personnel. We will ensure that our forces maintain the highest standards of conduct, and if it is found that a false allegation has been made against an individual or group of British Service personnel, the UK Government will ensure that the matter is publicly refuted and, where possible, provide clear attribution of the originator.

Our forces in Estonia are a proportionate response to the changed security environment in eastern Europe, as demonstrated by Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine. The eFP deployments send a strong message of NATO's strength and unity as well as its commitment to defend Poland and the Baltic states.

The UK has been transparent with Russia about our eFP plans; Vice Chief of Defence Staff General Sir Gordon Messenger discussed them with his counterpart, Colonel General Zhuravlev when they met in Moscow last month, and eFP has also been briefed to Russia at the NATO-Russia Council level.

[HCWS563]

EDUCATION

Department for Education Agencies

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): Today I am announcing the creation of a single funding agency for education and skills (excluding higher education), bringing together the Education Funding Agency and Skills Funding Agency. The new single funding agency will sit within the Department for Education and be operational from April 2017.

The creation of a new single agency—to be called the Education and Skills Funding Agency—will complete the process started in November 2014 when we appointed a single Chief Executive for both agencies. Since then significant progress has been made in bringing the two agencies together through shared services and close working arrangements.

Creating the ESFA will bring benefits to the individuals and organisations we support as well as to the taxpayer. It will enable a single, joined-up approach to funding and regulation to improve accountability.

We will be working closely with our staff, unions, stakeholders and the education sector to finalise and deliver our plans for the new agency.

[HCWS559]

HEALTH

NHS Pay Review Body

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 30th Report of the NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm 9440) and is attached.

We welcome the 30th report of the NHS Pay Review Body.

The Government are pleased to accept its recommendations for a 1% increase to all "Agenda for Change" pay points from 1 April 2017 and the high cost area supplement minimum and maximum payments. This will be in addition to incremental pay for those that are eligible.

The recommendation that Health Departments should ensure that annual pay awards do not have unintended consequences in reducing the take-home pay of staff whose pay award causes them to cross pension contribution thresholds, will be considered as part of the four-yearly valuation of the NHS pension scheme, a process which will determine the appropriate level of employer and employee pension contributions from April 2019.

The Government will consider all the observations and report progress to the NHS Pay Review Body in due course.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-28/HCWS565/>

[HCWS565]

Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (Review Body)

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 45th report of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm 9441) and is available as an attachment online. I am grateful to the chair and members of the DDRB for their report.

We welcome the 45th report of the DDRB.

The Government are pleased to accept its recommendations for a 1% increase for 2017-18 to:

the national salary scales for salaried doctors and dentists. This will be in addition to incremental pay for those that are eligible;

the maximum and minimum of the salary range for salaried general medical practitioners;

pay, net of expenses, for independent contractor general medical and dental practitioners;

the general medical practitioners trainers' grant;
 the flexible pay premia included in the new junior doctors' contract; and
 the value of the awards for consultants—clinical excellence awards, discretionary points and commitment awards.

The Government also accept the DDRB's recommendations that the supplement payable to general practice specialty registrars should remain at 45% of basic salary for those on the existing UK-wide contract and that the rate for general medical practitioner appraisers should remain at £500.

The Government accept the recommendations to report to the DDRB on doctors and dentists taking early retirement and reasons for this.

The Government note the recommendation for giving further consideration to pay targeting by specialty and geography.

The Government also note the DDRB's observation that there is at present insufficient evidence about aspects of our workforce of salaried general medical practitioners.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-03-28/HCWS568/>

[HCWS568]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Europol Regulation Opt-in

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): On 14 November 2016 the Government announced their intention to opt in to the new Europol regulation. After a debate in the House of Commons in December which supported the Government's position, we communicated that decision to the European Commission on 16 December. The European Commission confirmed the participation of the UK in the new Europol regulation via a Commission decision ((EU) 2017/388) dated 6 March 2017.

Opting into the new regulation means that the UK will remain a full member of Europol when the new regulation comes into force on 1 May. It also demonstrates our commitment to work together with our European partners to fight crime and prevent terrorism now and when we leave the EU.

[HCWS558]

JUSTICE

Justice Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): The Ministry of Justice robustly monitors all commercial contracts. In January, officials in my Department notified EMS, the provider of the electronic monitoring service, of an increase in the number of alerts that are raised when the electronic monitoring equipment worn by an offender or suspect is tampered with.

This was investigated by EMS and G4S, the suppliers of straps and tags used to electronically monitor offenders and suspects with a curfew.

At the end of February G4S informed the Ministry of an issue with faulty straps. Ministers were informed of this issue on 14 March.

The monitoring functions of the tags themselves are not affected and the security features within the tags have been working correctly. I can assure the House that there has been no risk to the public.

We understand that the number of affected straps is small. Only straps that have entered the system since October 2016 are affected. This is the point at which the batch of potentially faulty straps entered circulation. G4S has been testing straps. That testing indicates that around 1% (115) of the 11,500 straps in use today are faulty.

If no tampering with the tag has been registered, they have operated as normal. Where a strap is faulty, however, there is a risk that it could incorrectly register that somebody has tampered with it.

There is a small chance that some enforcement action may have been taken against an offender or suspect in response to a false report of a tamper. It does not mean an individual will have been automatically sent to custody. A single tamper alert without any additional evidence of an escalation of risk is likely to result in an alternative outcome, such as a warning letter. So it is unlikely that a first tamper on its own will result in an offender being recalled. The Ministry is working with G4S and EMS to investigate that further. The issue is also being brought to the attention of the courts.

As a result of this issue, all potentially faulty straps will either be removed or replaced. This process is underway. In the interim, we will continue to monitor and respond to tamper alerts ensuring that where it is appropriate to do so enforcement action is taken.

G4S has introduced further quality checks with the strap manufacturer to ensure that no more faulty straps enter the supply chain. The taxpayer will bear no cost for the faults.

[HCWS561]

Petitions

Tuesday 28 March 2017

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Closure of bank in Odiham

The Humble Petition of the people of North East Hampshire,

Sheweth,

That Lloyds Bank have proposals to close the Odiham High Street branch on 8 March 2017; that this high street branch is particularly highly valued; especially by older residents and small business owners who often pop in to manage their finances; and that if accounts are moved to Fleet, this becomes a four hour return journey by public transport, which is clearly not in the best interests of our community

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges HM Government to take all possible steps to urge Lloyds Bank to reconsider this decision and to make sure that the banking industry considers the social implications of their actions

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.—[Presented by Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Official Report, 21 February 2017; Vol. 621, c. 991.]

[P002016]

Observation from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

The Government thank Ranil Jayawardena MP for his petition on the closure of the Lloyds Bank branch in Odiham and Steve Double MP for his petitions on the closure of the Lloyds Bank branches in Mevagissey and St Blazey.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment of the residents of Mevagissey, St Blazey and Odiham at the closure of the Lloyds branches. Although the Government can understand their concerns, decisions on opening and closing agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. Banking service providers will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies and the Government does not seek to intervene in these decisions.

In March 2015, the major high street banks, consumer groups and the Government signed up to an industry-wide agreement to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services.

This agreement—the Access to Banking Protocol—commits the banks to:

- work with local communities to establish the impact of the branch closure, prior to its closure

- find suitable alternative provision to suit individual communities

- put satisfactory alternative banking services in place before a branch is closed. Options for this will include free to use cash machines, the proximity of alternative branches, and Post Office branches and mobile banking arrangements.

The British Bankers' Association appointed Professor Russel Griggs to carry out an independent "one year on" review of the Protocol. The review was published in November 2016 and made a number of recommendations to improve how the Protocol operates. The Government welcome the review and are pleased to see the industry commit to further improvements to protect those affected by closures. While the decision to close a branch remains a commercial judgement for banks, the impact on communities must be understood, considered and mitigated where possible.

Residents may find it helpful to know that, in January 2017, the Post Office announced that it had reached an agreement with the banks that will allow more banking customers to access a wider range of services at the Post Office than ever before. The new arrangement allows individual and small business customers to withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at all 11,500 Post Office branches in the UK. While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office's extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. The Post Office estimates that 99% of personal and 75% of business customers will be able to carry out their day to day banking at a Post Office as a result of the new agreement.

If other banks in the wider local area have more extensive facilities, the people of North East Hampshire and St Austell and Newquay may wish to consider moving to an alternative bank; if so, they may be interested in using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. More information about CASS is available at: www.currentaccountswitch.co.uk.

Closure of Lloyds bank in Mevagissey

The petition of residents of Mevagissey,

Declares that on 10 November 2016 Lloyds announced it will be closing its branch in Mevagissey; and further that this is a very well-established, much-used branch, with many elderly or vulnerable customers who would have no alternative if this branch were to close.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to call upon Lloyds to reverse its decision or put alternative provision in place for those who need it most.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Steve Double, Official Report, 28 February 2017; Vol. 622, c. 268.]

[P002019]

Observation from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

The Government thank the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Ranil Jayawardena) for his petition on the closure of the Lloyds Bank branch in Odiham and the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for his petitions on the closure of the Lloyds Bank branches in Mevagissey and St Blazey.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment of the residents of Mevagissey, St Blazey and Odiham at the closure of the Lloyds branches. Although the Government can understand their concerns, decisions on opening and closing agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. Banking service providers will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies and the Government does not seek to intervene in these decisions.

In March 2015, the major high street banks, consumer groups and the Government signed up to an industry-wide agreement to work with customers and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures and put in place alternative banking services.

This agreement—the Access to Banking Protocol—commits the banks to:

- work with local communities to establish the impact of the branch closure, prior to its closure

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If other banks in the wider local area have more extensive facilities, the people of North East Hampshire and St Austell and Newquay may wish to consider moving to an alternative bank; if so, they may be interested in using the Current Account Switch Service (CASS). The switch service is free to use, comes with a guarantee to protect customers from financial loss if something goes wrong, and redirects any payments mistakenly sent to the old account, providing further assurance for customers. This means that customers are more able than ever to hold their banks to account by voting with their feet, and that banks are incentivised to work hard to retain their existing customers and attract new ones. More information about CASS is available at: www.currentaccountswitch.co.uk.

Closure of Lloyds bank in St Blazey

The petition of residents of St Blazey,

Declares that on 10 November 2016 Lloyds announced it will be closing its branch in St Blazey; and further that this is a very well-established, much used branch, with many elderly or vulnerable customers who would have no alternative if this last bank in the village were to close.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to call upon Lloyds to reverse its decision or put alternative provision in place for those who need it most.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Steve Double, *Official Report*, 28 February 2017; Vol. 622, c. 268.]

[P002018]

Observation from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

The Government thank the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Ranil Jayawardena) for his petition on the closure of the Lloyds Bank branch in Odiham and the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for his petitions on the closure of the Lloyds Bank branches in Mevagissey and St Blazey.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment of the residents of Mevagissey, St Blazey and Odiham at the closure of the Lloyds branches. Although the Government can understand their concerns, decisions on opening and closing agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. Banking service providers will need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategies and the Government does not seek to intervene in these decisions.

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**not later than
Tuesday 4 April 2017**

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