

**Wednesday
26 April 2017**

**Volume 624
No. 141**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 26 April 2017

House of Commons

Wednesday 26 April 2017

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Mr Speaker: On today's Order Paper, it is noted that on 20 May 1917, Major Valentine Fleming DSO, C Squadron, the Queen's Own Oxfordshire Hussars, the Member for Henley, was killed in action near Epéhy, France. On 7 June 1917, Major Willie Redmond, 6th Battalion the Royal Irish Regiment, the Member for Clare East, died of wounds received during the Battle of Messines, Belgium. We remember them today.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Effect on Wales

1. **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on Wales of the UK leaving the EU. [909709]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): At this last Welsh questions before the general election, I should like to pay tribute to two Welsh stars. Josh Griffiths of the Swansea Harriers was the first Briton to cross the finishing line at the London marathon at the weekend. In particular, I want to pay tribute to Matthew Rees, who helped a fellow runner during the closing stages of the marathon.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that, as we negotiate our exit from the European Union, we will work to secure a deal that benefits all parts of the United Kingdom. Wales is a vibrant, dynamic, innovative country and is well placed to make a success of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Stephen Kinnock: Brexit could have a negative impact on jobs in Wales, so the proposal to build a category C prison in my constituency is welcome in principle. However, it is difficult to understand why the Baglan Energy Park has been selected as the site for the prison. It is even more difficult to understand why the Prisons Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), has not had the courtesy to reply to my letter of 23 March. Will the Secretary of State please encourage his friend the Minister to check his in-tray? Will he also guarantee that our local community will be fully and properly consulted about the siting of this prison?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There are record employment data in Wales, with unemployment at a record low, and the prison will provide a further boost to his constituency. The answer to his question is quite straightforward: the site was selected in consultation with, and with the support of, the Welsh Government.

15. [909723] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Wales has a number of technological hotspots, around Cardiff and elsewhere. Does my right hon. Friend not think that, after Brexit, they will benefit from the bilateral trade deals that we will be able to make with the United States and Canada, as well as with the European Union?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend regularly shows a great interest in Wales and he obviously knows a lot about the Welsh economy. He mentions the high-tech sectors. We have seen the expansion of General Dynamics, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and I visited a couple of weeks ago. On that same day, we both handed over the Red Dragon super-hangar to Aston Martin. These are real jobs that are being created by real investors creating new opportunities.

13. [909721] **Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): In leaving the European customs union, Welsh manufacturers and farmers will lose the solid protections offered by the bloc. Why does the Secretary of State not come clean today and admit that it is the Tories' intention to sell Welsh producers down the river in order to open up markets for the bankers of London?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that exports from Wales have grown significantly, by 6.2%, over the past year. That is something that we welcome. He will also recognise the data that I highlighted earlier about record levels of employment and record low levels of unemployment. On that basis, he will recognise that we want the freest possible open trading arrangements in support of Welsh farmers, because we maintain an active relationship with them—

Mr Speaker: We are extremely grateful to the Secretary of State, but we have a lot of colleagues trying to get in today.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that the rural areas of Wales will be placed front and centre in a post-Brexit Britain?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does on supporting the rural economy, particularly in his constituency. We maintain a close relationship with both the farming unions in Wales, and most of those meetings take place in his constituency. That demonstrates the active relationship that we have with key stakeholders as well as with the Welsh Government.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): If the Secretary of State has such a close relationship with the farming unions, how does he respond to their request for a full assessment of the impact on Welsh agriculture if we

have to fall back on World Trade Organisation tariffs? Is it not obvious that 40% tariffs would destroy Welsh agriculture?

Alun Cairns: I am disappointed with the hon. Gentleman's approach. He is assuming the worst-case scenario. We are having this general election in order to have strong and stable leadership in the challenging negotiations ahead. There are 27 EU nations that will be challenging everything as we negotiate to leave the European Union. Strong and stable leadership is needed now more than ever before.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen on listening to Welsh farmers, will he tell us why the Government are refusing to agree with the Farmers Union of Wales? Why will powers on agriculture not be devolved to the Welsh Government post-Brexit? Will he come clean on that?

Alun Cairns: I am sure the hon. Lady will recognise that we engaged closely with the FUW and the National Farmers Union before drafting the great repeal Bill White Paper. They had active input directly to me and other Cabinet colleagues. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs also met the farming unions to consider the matter, and they are absolutely supportive of the position we have taken in the White Paper.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that she is prepared to walk away from the negotiating table without a trade deal with the EU, and the Foreign Secretary has said that no deal would be no problem. Yet no deal, as we have heard, could see tariffs of 30% to 40% on Welsh dairy farmers and meat producers, and 10% tariffs on Welsh car manufacturers. Is it not the case that this Tory Government are prepared to play fast and loose with the Welsh economy, with an extreme Tory vision of Brexit that would put Welsh jobs and livelihoods at risk?

Alun Cairns: I do not recognise the basis of the hon. Gentleman's question. We want the freest, most open trading agreement, and it seems to me that the real investors, who are creating real jobs, are taking us towards our ambition. We have seen major investment by Nissan in Sunderland, major investment by Toyota in Derbyshire and major investment in my constituency by Aston Martin. That demonstrates their confidence in our vision as we leave the European Union.

2. **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on Wales's trade with EU countries of the UK leaving the EU. [909710]

7. **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for Wales's trading opportunities of the UK's decision to leave the EU. [909715]

10. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What assessment he has made of the implications for Wales's trading opportunities of the UK's decision to leave the EU. [909718]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): The UK, including Wales, remains the same outward-looking, globally minded country we have always been. International businesses, such as Aston Martin, choose to invest in Wales as a result of the great work done by the Department for International Trade and the Wales Office, working hand in glove with the Welsh Government. That shows that Wales continues to be a great investment destination.

Hywel Williams: Welsh food and drink exports to the European Union will face eye-watering tariffs on leaving the single market. Will the Minister simply guarantee that, as part of a World Trade Organisation deal, the home market will not be flooded with cheap food imports such as Australian sheepmeat?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is again guilty of peddling scare stories. The fact of the matter is that when it comes to lamb, for example, New Zealand currently does not even meet its quota to the European Union—only 70% of the New Zealand quota is currently maintained. He should have some confidence in Welsh agricultural produce, rather than talking down the prospects of the economy.

Hywel Williams: I would have a great deal more confidence if the Minister answered the question. On Monday I visited one of the largest and most successful high-tech businesses in Wales, which told me that, post-Brexit, it is hoping against hope to be able to export to its European partners, as at present, without all the red tape and expense of being outside the customs union. Why are this hard-Brexit Government so determined to make life more difficult for our key exporters?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman again highlights the negativity that surrounds the issue, but it is a negativity that I do not recognise, that is not recognised by businesses in Wales and that is certainly not highlighted by the investment decisions made by businesses in Wales. Businesses in Wales are investing and are looking to a global future. We will secure the greatest possible access to European markets, although we are also looking to global trade deals that will ensure Wales is part of global growth as well as maintaining European markets.

Wendy Morton: Wales has huge potential in terms of exporting and trading opportunities, and the Department for International Trade is an important tool for companies in Wales that are looking to expand overseas. How are the Minister and his Department ensuring that Wales is central to the work of the Department for International Trade?

Guto Bebb: The Department for International Trade is a crucial component of the way in which we support Welsh businesses, and the Wales Office is working closely with that Department. We had an export conference in Cardiff on 6 March, which was extremely well attended, and the opportunities available to Welsh businesses, both within the European Union and globally, were highlighted. That meeting was a huge success.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: My hon. Friend will agree that there is much common ground between Cornwall and Wales with the opportunities that Brexit presents for the

export of high-quality goods and services across the globe. What advice can he share with businesses across my constituency as we begin the negotiations to leave the European Union?

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for the question. She correctly says that Wales and Cornwall have a lot in common, not least in terms of language. Businesses in Cornwall should do the same as those in Wales: engage with the Department for International Trade; look at the opportunities to go on trade missions; and identify new markets. Opportunities are there for businesses from Cornwall and Wales, and we need to exploit those.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): What guarantees can the Minister give companies such as Airbus, which rely on British employees moving and working across Europe, when we leave Europe?

Guto Bebb: The guarantee we can offer to any company that wants to work across Europe is that this Government will listen to them and act on their behalf. We have absolutely no interest in doing anything other than fully supporting companies such as Airbus, which is such a key component of the economy of north-east Wales.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): To enhance trade across the whole of Wales we need to have proper infrastructure in our ports. Will the Minister congratulate the Welsh Government on putting in additional funds? Will he work with them to ensure that places such as Ynys Môn remain at the heart of the British Isles, because of both their close proximity to Ireland and their trade with the rest of Europe?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he says, and I am pleased that the Secretary of State visited the port of Holyhead with him. He is also right to highlight the fact that Wales is in a fortunate position: we have two Governments that can work for the benefit of our economy. Co-operation between the UK Government and the Welsh Government for the development of ports such as Holyhead is crucial to the way forward after Brexit.

Great Repeal Bill

3. **George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of provisions of the great repeal Bill on Wales's devolved competences. [909711]

4. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of provisions of the great repeal Bill on Wales's devolved competences. [909712]

5. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of provisions of the great repeal Bill on Wales's devolved competences. [909713]

11. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of provisions of the great repeal Bill on Wales's devolved competences. [909719]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): To provide the greatest level of legal and administrative certainty upon leaving the European Union, the Government will replicate the current frameworks. In parallel, we will begin intensive discussions with the devolved Administrations to identify where common frameworks should be retained. We expect the outcome of that process to be a significant increase in the decision-making power of the devolved Administrations.

George Kerevan: Accepting the Minister's request to be positive, may I ask him whether he agrees that the best way forward for Welsh and Scottish farmers is for the responsibility for financial subsidy arrangements to be transferred to the Welsh and Scottish Assemblies post-Brexit?

Alun Cairns: Naturally, the UK Government will continue to engage positively with the Scottish Government, as well as with the Welsh Government. However, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that protecting the integrity of the UK market must be fundamental to that discussion, because clearly the Scottish farmers will sell more to the UK than they will elsewhere.

Kirsten Oswald: Wales has consistently voted to make the National Assembly responsible for the governance of its own country and to transfer responsibilities away from Westminster and closer to the people in Wales. Will the Secretary of State give a concrete guarantee that there will be no attempt to undermine devolution in relation to any of the devolved Governments?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight one achievement of this Parliament: passing the latest governance legislation, the Wales Act 2017, which enhanced powers even further in a range of areas. It demonstrates our stance on devolution, which is to trust the people.

Margaret Ferrier: Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party will defend against the power-hungry Tory Government's plans in the White Paper to use the great repeal Bill to undermine devolved government by not passing on powers from Brussels. What guarantees can the Minister make to ensure that all powers are repatriated to Wales and Scotland in the devolved competences and not absorbed by the Westminster machine?

Alun Cairns: As powers are repatriated from the EU, it is vital that we provide industry and communities with as much certainty and security as possible. We need to protect the integrity of the UK market, and we need to work with the devolved Administrations to construct common standards and common frameworks to support that single market.

Gavin Newlands: After a decade of Tory rule in Westminster, it is clear that the Government have given up on Wales. They have refused to devolve the responsibility for rail infrastructure, as both Plaid Cymru and the Silk commission suggested, and in paragraph 4.2 of the great repeal Bill White Paper they have pledged to snatch the transport powers currently held by Brussels away from the people of Wales. Will the Secretary of State tell us what exactly he is doing to ensure that the people of Wales, and their interests, are not forgotten?

Alun Cairns: The Government will continue to engage with the Welsh Government, but we will also continue to engage with stakeholders. The stakeholders across agriculture, business and commerce have supported the standpoint we want to take with the great repeal Bill, which is to replicate the powers on a temporary basis until we can come to an agreement with the devolved Administrations on where those powers should ultimately lie in the interests of the UK market.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the setting of business rates in Wales is now devolved. Does he share my concern that the small business rate relief scheme in Wales is less generous than the one in England?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I can well remember walking recently along the High Street in Prestatyn, where business rates were highlighted as a major concern for some of the small shops. He is right that the setting of business rates is devolved but, of course, in the recent Budget my right hon. Friend the Chancellor enhanced the Welsh settlement significantly as a result of his support for small business rates in England; I hope the Welsh Government will use that money to support small businesses in Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I have been an MP for only two years, but during that short time I have seen two Secretaries of State and five shadow Secretaries of State for Wales fob off my country with crumbs from the Westminster table. Now, the Government are preparing to claw back devolved powers. When will the present incumbent announce a Wales Bill that brings power back to Wales?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady will appreciate that we have said with the great repeal Bill White Paper that no decisions currently taken by the Welsh Government will be removed from them. We expect that the repatriation of powers from the European Union will extend the Welsh Government's powers significantly, but there is of course a process to work through in order to provide the stability and certainty that industry needs.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): May I thank all Labour MPs, and particularly the Welsh Labour MPs, for their support?

The Welsh Labour Government tell me that the Joint Ministerial Committee is not listening or responding to the voices of the devolved Administrations. It is not fit for purpose. Does the Secretary of State agree that the JMC should be given statutory powers so that the great repeal Bill will not in any way rewrite or override devolution as set out in the recent Wales Act?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the time she has spent as shadow Secretary of State for Wales.

I underline the importance of the role played by the Joint Ministerial Committee. Having been at the Committee's meetings, I know that an awful lot of discussion takes place in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom. There may well be the potential for it to be developed further, but a statutory footing is not the answer.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The chapter in the Brexit White Paper on securing trade deals with other countries contains no mention of Wales whatsoever. What influence will the Secretary of State give to the Welsh Government to do something about that so that Wales is not just an afterthought, as it is under the Tories?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Welsh Government are represented on the Joint Ministerial Committee. I have made it a determination to engage proactively with the stakeholders in Wales, because they share a view that is not always consistent with that of the Welsh Government. Through my office, they have had a direct input into the great repeal Bill White Paper.

Industrial Strategy

6. Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to ensure that the Government's industrial strategy benefits Wales and other parts of the UK equally. [909714]

8. Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to ensure that the Government's industrial strategy benefits Wales and other parts of the UK equally. [909716]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): We are delivering a bold, long-term industrial strategy that is truly UK wide and builds on our strengths and prepares us for the years ahead. It is important that the economy works for everyone, delivers good, skilled, well-paid jobs, and creates the conditions for competitive, world-leading businesses to prosper and grow across the UK. That, we are doing.

Craig Williams: The industrial strategy and the Cardiff city deal demonstrate the strong and stable Government the people of south Wales need. Alongside the compound semiconductor catapult in Cardiff, the industrial strategy and city deal are delivering sustainable high-tech jobs. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Guto Bebb: I could do nothing other than agree with my hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion for Wales's capital city. The city deal is an example of the Westminster Government working with the Welsh Government for the benefit of Wales, and the semiconductor centre is an example of a world-class resource in which Wales leads the globe. We can contribute so much more with the support of the UK Government, working with the Welsh Government.

Mr Vara: Will the Minister outline what response he has had from businesses and organisations across Wales since the launch of the industrial strategy consultation, and how is he ensuring that Welsh interests are front and centre of the strategy as it goes forward?

Guto Bebb: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The response from stakeholders across Wales has been truly superb. The engagement that the Wales Office has had with businesses and industry across Wales has been second to none. The response to the industrial strategy is very clear: businesses and industry want us to support

research and innovation, and to invest in digital infrastructure. Those are exactly the types of priorities that we have in our industrial strategy.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) is right to be concerned about possible unequal treatment under his Government's industrial strategy for Wales because there has been silence about Bridgend and Ford compared with what has been said about Nissan and the north-east. Will the Minister guarantee from the Dispatch Box that Ford in south Wales will get exactly the same treatment as Nissan in the north-east?

Guto Bebb: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that Ministers and officials have been in regular discussions with Ford at Bridgend. Indeed, those discussions are ongoing and constructive, and they involve the Welsh Government as well. Our aim and intention is to ensure that Bridgend remains a car producing area.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): The Welsh Labour Government have proved that lasting economic success comes only through continued investment in Welsh industry and infrastructure. Is there any chance of progress on the electrification of the Great Western Railway to Swansea, the north Wales growth plan and the HS2 hub in Crewe before purdah kicks in?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Lady is right that investment in infrastructure is absolutely crucial for the future of the Welsh economy. That is why the Welsh Government should get on with work on the M4 in south Wales and improve the A55 in north Wales. In relation to rail infrastructure, electric trains will be on their way to Swansea before the end of the year. More importantly, the commitments that we have in Crewe will be absolutely crucial to the development of north Wales. We had a meeting yesterday with the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) and my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) to ensure that north Wales benefits from these investments.

Mr Speaker: We are immensely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I call Mr Stephen Crabb.

14. [909722] **Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Although, over the past seven years, we have given new powers and new money to the Welsh Labour Government precisely so that they can get on and improve transport in Wales, we have seen near zero progress on big projects such as improving the M4 around Newport. Who does my hon. Friend think is responsible for holding back Wales, and what should voters do about it on 8 June?

Guto Bebb: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. The fiscal framework that has been agreed between the UK and Welsh Governments has been described as a game-changer by Gerry Holtham. It means that, unlike during the 13 years when Labour was in government in this place, Wales is no longer underfunded. The people of Wales should look at the M4 and the A55, and point the finger of blame at the Labour Government in Cardiff.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The Under-Secretary of State says that there will be electric trains going out of Swansea, but there will not be an electrified line. When will he get on with electrifying the line from Cardiff to Swansea, ensuring additional infrastructure investment for the Valleys line, including my line at Ogmore?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that £500 million has been put towards the city deal in Cardiff, which will be crucial for the electrification of the South Wales Valleys line. We have also done work on the Severn tunnel. Let me say one thing to the hon. Gentleman: I will take no lessons from a party that electrified not a single mile of rail track in Wales in 13 years.

Hendry Review

9. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the date of publication for the Government response to the Hendry review on tidal lagoons. [909717]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I have been in close discussions with Cabinet colleagues about our response to the Hendry review, which we are actively considering. Any potential energy project that can contribute to a clean, secure and diverse energy mix for the UK is worthy of serious consideration. Projects of this scale must also meet the essential requirement of delivering value for money for the taxpayer.

Neil Parish: The Henry report very much supports a tidal lagoon in Swansea, which has the second highest rise and fall of tide in the world. We should be harnessing that tide. Does the Secretary of State see that as part of the Conservative manifesto for this general election?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is right to recognise that natural resources in Wales can play a significant role in the energy mix of not only Wales but the UK. We would like this type of project to succeed, but of course it needs to be value for money for the taxpayer.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Why are the Government so reluctant to embrace Wales's equivalent of North sea power: tidal energy, which is entirely predictable, eternal and free, and would provide a bonanza of jobs?

Alun Cairns: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that it was this Government's early actions in 2015 that led to planning permission being granted for the project that he highlights. As I said, we would like this type of project to succeed, but it must be value for money. Above all, we need strong and stable leadership to provide the economic security to pay for any such project.

Industrial Strategy

12. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to ensure that the Government's industrial strategy benefits Wales and other parts of the UK equally. [909720]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier to my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) and for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara).

Andrew Stephenson: Does the Minister agree that the UK-wide industrial strategy highlights the importance of linking north Wales with the northern powerhouse?

Guto Bebb: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We have a great relationship with my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy), the Minister for the northern powerhouse. A north Wales growth deal is essential for north Wales because the northern powerhouse needs north Wales, and north Wales needs the northern powerhouse. We will ensure that that happens if we are re-elected.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Warm words build no roads and no railways. We have had enough of warm words from this Government. What we want is investment in north Wales. For the first time, show us the money.

Guto Bebb: I am disappointed by the comments of the hon. Gentleman, who was at the meeting with me yesterday with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones). More importantly, he should highlight, for example, the huge investment in the new Berwyn prison in Wrexham, which is creating jobs and has been seen as an example of how to do public sector investment in Wales and the UK.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

West Midlands: Economy and Public Services

Q1. [909819] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the (a) performance of the economy and (b) adequacy of provision of public services in the west midlands; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The economy in the west midlands is performing well. Businesses are continuing to invest, and since 2010 employment in the west midlands has risen by 180,000. That is because the Conservatives in government have safeguarded the economy. As a result—my hon. Friend asks about public services—there are more doctors and more nurses in his hospitals, because you can only have strong public services when you have the strong and stable leadership that delivers a strong economy.

Michael Fabricant: I think what this nation needs is a strong and stable Government. But is it not the case that thanks to devolution, we will not only have—I hope—strong and stable government after the general election, but strong and stable leadership in the west midlands if the right choice is made on 4 May?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, because on 4 May, people in the west midlands have the opportunity to elect a strong local leader who will oversee £8 billion of investment. In Andy Street, I think that they have absolutely the man who has the local knowledge, the business experience, and the commitment to the west midlands to deliver for the whole west midlands. Of course, on 8 June, people in the west midlands will then have the opportunity to elect the strong and stable leadership of a Conservative Government. Working together, strong Conservative leadership in the west midlands and strong Conservative leadership in government will deliver for the west midlands.

Engagements

Q2. [909820] Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 26 April.

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

Richard Drax: In 2015, a group called the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory incredibly drew up a plan to disband MI5, disarm the police and scrap our nuclear deterrent. Would my right hon. Friend allow anyone who endorsed such a plan to write her manifesto or, indeed, serve in her Cabinet?

The Prime Minister: My answer to that is a resounding no, I would not. I commend my hon. Friend, who has a proud record of defending our country. He raises an important point because, of course, the Leader of the Opposition has chosen just such a person. The plan to disband MI5, disarm our police and scrap our nuclear deterrent was endorsed by the right hon. Gentleman's policy chief and even by his shadow Chancellor. At the weekend, we saw the right hon. Gentleman again refusing to say that he would strike against terrorism, refusing to commit to our nuclear deterrent and refusing to control our borders. Keeping our country safe is the first duty of a Prime Minister. The right hon. Gentleman is simply not up to the job.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): This is the last Prime Minister's Question Time of this Parliament, so I think it would be appropriate if we all paid tribute to those colleagues who have decided to leave the House. I thank them for their service to democracy in this country. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for the way in which you have presided over this House and sought to reach out to the wider communities in this country.

When I became Leader of the Opposition 18 months ago—[HON. MEMBERS: "More!"] If Conservative Members wait a moment, I will explain what I am about to say. When I became Leader of the Opposition, I said that I wanted people's voices to be heard in Parliament, so instead of just speaking to hand-picked audiences who cannot ask questions, I hope the Prime Minister will not mind answering some questions from the public today. I start with Christopher, who wrote to me this week to say, "In the last five years, my husband has had only a 1% increase in his wages. The cost of living has

risen each year. We now have at least 15% less buying power than then.” Where is Christopher and his husband’s share in the stronger economy?

The Prime Minister: May I first join the right hon. Gentleman in commending those colleagues who are leaving the House for the service they have shown to their constituents and to Parliament over the years? I also say a huge thank you to the staff of the House of Commons and of Parliament who support us in the work that we do in this Chamber and elsewhere.

By the way, I note that the right hon. Gentleman did not take the opportunity to stand up and say how he would actually stand up for the defence of our country. Once again, he missed that opportunity. I note what he is saying about wages increasing. I see today that he is talking about paying for extra wage increases in the national health service. First of all, we should recognise that around half of staff working in the national health service, because of progression and basic pay increases, will actually see, on average, a pay increase of 4%.

What we know, and what I can say to Christopher, is that he will have a choice at the next election between the strong and stable leadership of the Conservatives, which will secure our economy for the future, and a Labour party that would crash our economy, which would mean less money for public services, with ordinary working families paying the price.

Jeremy Corbyn: Is not the truth that many people are being held back by this Government, who have slashed taxes for the rich, and held back or cut the pay of dedicated public servants?

Andy, a parent, is concerned about how his children are being held back. He asks why, “despite the fact they have worked consistently since leaving school, all three of my children, who are now in their mid-20s, cannot afford to move out of the family home.” Is this not a crisis that many people are facing all over the country? Do we not need a housing strategy that deals with it?

The Prime Minister: First of all, let us look and see what happened under a Labour Government on housing. Under the last Labour Government, house building starts fell by 45%. Under the last Labour Government, house purchases in England fell by 40%. The number of social rented homes under a Labour Government fell by 420,000. Under the Conservatives, we have seen more than twice as much council housing being built than under the last Labour Government. That is the record of a Conservative Government delivering on housing and delivering for ordinary working families.

Jeremy Corbyn: The last Labour Government delivered a decent homes standard for every council home in the whole country, and it is something we are proud of—we are very proud indeed of that achievement. Under the Prime Minister’s Government, house building has fallen to the lowest level since the 1920s. More people homeless, more people on waiting lists, more people overcrowded, more people unable to pay the rent—that is the record of the Tory Government.

Our children are being held back by Conservative cuts. Laura, a young primary school teacher, wrote to me this week to say, “I’m seeing a decrease each year in available cash to provide a quality education to the

children in my class and an increase in reliance upon our parent teachers association.” Is the Prime Minister still denying the fact that funding for each pupil is still being cut?

The Prime Minister: What I would say to Laura is that we said we would protect school budgets, and we have. We have seen record levels of funding going into schools in this country. At the election on 8 June, people are going to have a very clear choice. They will have a choice between a Conservative Government that have delivered 1.8 million more good and outstanding school places for children across this country, and that believe in parents having choice with a range of schools providing the education that is right for every child and a good school place for every child, and a Labour party under the right hon. Gentleman. He believes in “one size fits all; take everybody down to the lowest common denominator; take it or leave it”; we believe in encouraging aspiration and helping people to get on in their lives.

Jeremy Corbyn: Labour is not slashing school budgets. Labour is not putting money into pet projects. We want every child—every child—to have a decent chance in a decent school. We do not want an education system that relies on begging letters from schools to maintain employment and books in the classroom.

Many people feel that the system is rigged against them. Maureen wrote to me this week—[*Interruption.*] I say to Conservative Members that if I was you, I would listen to what Maureen has to say—I really would—because she writes, with a heavy heart, “We have been treated disgustingly. Most of us women born in the 1950s will not be receiving our pension until we are 66, with no notification of this drastic change. We have worked for 45 years and have accrued more than enough to be paid our pension. People want what is rightfully theirs.” Maureen asks, “What can be done to help the WASPI women?”

The Prime Minister: What I would say on the issue that Maureen has raised is that the Government have taken steps to help these women. Extra funding has been made available and we have ensured that there is a limit to the period of time that is affected in relation to these changes. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about pensions and pensioners looking to the future, then once again there will be a very clear choice at this election—a clear choice between a Labour party that in government saw an increase to the basic state pension of 75p in one year, and a Conservative Government whose changes to pensions mean that basic state pensioners are £1,250 better off. But you only get that with a strong economy, and what do we know about Labour? Only yesterday, we saw that we had finally emerged from Labour’s economic crash. What we now see is a Labour party that would do it again: crash the economy, more debt, more waste, higher taxes, fewer jobs. That does nothing for ordinary working families or for pensioners.

Jeremy Corbyn: Millions of WASPI women will have heard that answer, as they will have heard the other questions I have put that have not been answered today. I simply say this: Labour will guarantee the triple lock. Labour will treat pensioners with respect and we will not move the goalposts for people looking forward to retirement.

Sybil, who witnessed the Labour founding of the national health service, which made healthcare available for the many, not just the few, wrote to me this week, and she says, "I am 88 and have had a wonderful service from the national health service, but nowadays I am scared at the thought of going into hospital." With more people waiting more than four hours in A&E, more people waiting on trolleys in corridors, and more delayed discharges thanks to the Tory cuts, is not Sybil right to be frightened about the future of our NHS so long as this Government remain in office?

The Prime Minister: Let me just say to the right hon. Gentleman that our national health service is now treating more patients than ever before. We are seeing more people having operations; we are seeing more doctors, more nurses, more midwives, more GPs, and record levels of funding in our national health service. But that is only possible with a strong economy and only possible with a strong and stable Government. Of course, over the coming weeks we are all going to be out there campaigning across the country, as I will be, on our record on the national health service.

I noted this week that the shadow Home Secretary has been campaigning in her own personal way. She has directed her supporters—her followers—to a website called "I Like Corbyn, But..." which asks:

"how will he pay for all this?"

"But". It also says:

"I heard he wants to increase taxes".

"But".

"I've heard he's a terrorist sympathiser".

"But".

"his attitudes about defence worry me".

"But". They are right to be worried. Unable to defend our country; determined to raise tax on ordinary workers; no plan to manage our economy: even his own supporters know he is not fit to run this country.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about the national health service and Sybil's concerns. The NHS has not got the money it needs; the Prime Minister knows that. She knows that waiting times and waiting lists are up; she knows there is a crisis in almost every A&E department. Maybe she could go to a hospital and allow the staff to ask her a few questions.

Strong leadership is about standing up for the many, not the few, but the Prime Minister and the Conservatives only look after the richest, not the rest. They are strong against the weak and weak against the strong. Far from building a strong economy, schools and our NHS are being cut, people cannot afford homes, and millions cannot make ends meet. That does not add up to a stronger economy for anyone. The election on 8 June is a choice between a Conservative Government for the few and a Labour Government who will stand up for all of our people.

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the NHS, perhaps he should talk about Labour's custodianship of the NHS in Wales. There is somewhere that the NHS has been cut, and that is in Wales under the Labour party.

The right hon. Gentleman is right: in something over six weeks we will be back at these Dispatch Boxes. The only question is: where will we be standing? Who will be Prime Minister of this great country? He says that the

choice is clear, and it is. Every vote for him is a vote for a chaotic Brexit; every vote for me is a vote to strengthen our hand in negotiating the best deal for Britain. Every vote for him is a vote to weaken our economy; every vote for me is a vote for a strong economy with the benefits felt by everyone across the country. Every vote for him is a vote for a coalition of chaos, a weak leader propped up by the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish nationalists; every vote for me is a vote for strong and stable leadership in the national interest, building a stronger and more secure future for this country.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. The exchanges between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition have been unprecedentedly comprehensive. We wish to hear questions from Back Benchers.

Q3. [909821] **Ben Howlett** (Bath) (Con): Thanks to this Conservative Government, the west of England has received billions of pounds of investment in transport infrastructure. On frequent visits to Bath by the Transport Secretary and the Prime Minister, I have raised with them the issues of congestion and air pollution, as well as the need for a feasibility study on the long overdue A36-46 link road to the east of Bath. Does the Prime Minister agree that the only way to secure that vital infrastructure project is for Bath residents to give me a renewed mandate on 8 June?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that he has been campaigning tirelessly on that issue on behalf of his constituents. I understand that Highways England is already considering a number of options to divert traffic away from Bath, as he suggests. Of course, it is this Conservative Government who have increased annual Government infrastructure investment, but that is only possible with a strong economy, which is only possible with a strong and stable Conservative leadership. A vote for any other party is a vote for wrecking our economy and for a coalition of chaos, which would do nothing for my hon. Friend's constituents, for whom I hope he will continue to be able to work tirelessly.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister give a clear and unambiguous commitment to maintaining the triple lock on the state pension?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that under this Conservative Government we have seen pensioners benefit to the tune of £1,250 a year, as a result of what we have done to the basic state pension, and I am clear that under a Conservative Government pensions and incomes will continue to increase.

Angus Robertson: I asked the Prime Minister a pretty simple yes/no question and she failed to answer it, so pensioners right across this land are right to conclude that this Tory Prime Minister plans to ditch the triple lock on the state pension. Too many women already face pensions inequality, and the Tories will not even guarantee the pensions triple lock. The only reason they will not do so is that they want to cut pensions. Is not the message to pensioners: you cannot trust this Prime Minister or the Tories with your pension?

The Prime Minister: I say to everybody, as I have just said, that the party that has, in government, improved the lot of pensioners across this country is the Conservative party. Under a Conservative Government, pensioner incomes would continue to increase. The right hon. Gentleman talks about inequality for women. The change in the structure of the state pension introduced by this Government is going to improve the lot of female pensioners in the future; it is going to be much better for them. One thing that pensioners in Scotland will know, as will other voters in Scotland, is that if they believe in the Union, there is only one way to vote, and that is Conservative.

Q5. [909823] Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): My local clinical commissioning group is planning to downgrade the A&E at Huddersfield Royal infirmary and move it to Halifax. That has been dictated by a disastrous private finance initiative deal. I have been fighting these appalling plans alongside the community campaign group Hands Off HRI, which is led by Karl Deitch. Will the Prime Minister join me in praising the community campaigners, led by Karl? Does she agree that patients should not be suffering as a result of the catastrophic PFI deals signed by the last Labour Government, and will she ensure that communities such as mine have their voices listened to properly?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised this issue with me previously, and I know that he has been a tireless campaigner on it. He has been a strong voice for his local constituency and he has put his case persuasively to Ministers. He is absolutely right: Labour's disastrous PFI deals are costing the NHS more than £1 billion every year. The choice at the election will be clear. Do the people of Colne Valley want his strong voice for their local A&E, and the ear of a strong Conservative Government who are continuing to keep our economy strong and investing in our national health service, or do they want the Leader of the Opposition and his coalition of chaos—less money for our public services, less money for our national health service, fewer doctors, fewer nurses and worse healthcare for our constituents?

Q4. [909822] Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley), for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Newport East (Jessica Morden), for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami), for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) are all proven champions for their local steel communities. Does the Prime Minister agree that their ongoing presence in this place is vital for the future of our British steel industry?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is standing down at the election, and he has said that that is due to his "significant and irreconcilable differences" with the leadership of his party. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying to help Back Benchers to be heard. Please help the Chair to help Back-Bench Members.

The Prime Minister: What is important for the steel industry in this country is that this Government have taken action to support it. I was very pleased, when I

visited Wales yesterday, to be able to visit a company that works with the steel industry galvanising steel products. The company talked about the greater amount of work that it is seeing and the improvements in the steel industry. This Conservative Government have taken steps to support the steel industry and will continue to do so.

Q8. [909826] Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): With the consultation on the Greater Manchester spatial framework now closed, I would like to thank the 3,600 Cheadle residents who signed my petition. It called for the green belt in Cheadle Hulme, Heald Green and Woodford to be protected and for much needed homes to be built on brownfield land instead. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that we must press for brownfield sites to be identified and redeveloped, and that protections for our precious green spaces can only be maintained under a strong Conservative Government?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on this issue. I know that she has been a strong campaigner and a strong champion for her constituents in Cheadle. I can assure her that we are very clear that the green belt must be protected. What we have set out in the White Paper is that boundaries should be altered only when local authorities have fully examined all other reasonable options, such as making use of brownfield sites, as she herself has suggested. I know there was a great deal of interest in the consultation on the Greater Manchester spatial framework. I commend my hon. Friend for the work she did to gather the views of her constituents in Cheadle, and I am sure that those views will be taken into account as the response is developed.

Q6. [909824] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Over the past six months, it has been announced that 2,000 jobs will be lost in York. Yesterday, Nestlé announced 300 job losses, 156 of them in my constituency, which is devastating for workers, their families and the community. Jobs, not products, are being exported to the EU, and as ever, York's skilled jobs are being replaced by low-wage, insecure work. In the light of the special deal at Nissan in Sunderland, will the Prime Minister meet me, trade unions and the company to strike a special deal to save these jobs and avert the losses both now and in the future?

The Prime Minister: First, the hon. Lady is right to raise this issue of the announcement from Nestlé, which arose, as she says, only yesterday. We should be clear that Nestlé has itself been clear that this is not a decision that was affected by leaving the European Union—it says it has made it irrespective of that—but of course it is a worrying time for the workers and their families at Nestlé in both York and Newcastle. I can assure her that we are already in contact with the company to understand its plans and the next steps. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will speak with senior Nestlé representatives later today. The Department for Work and Pensions of course stands ready to put in place its rapid response service to support any workers made redundant by helping them back into employment as quickly as possible, and there are various ways in which Jobcentre Plus can help. What is important is

that we ensure that the support is there, and as I have said, the Business Secretary will be speaking to Nestlé representatives later today.

Q9. [909827] **Byron Davies** (Gower) (Con): Record employment, the national living wage, strong national defences and keeping our promises on Europe—these are just some of the achievements that we can be proud that this Government have delivered. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only a vote for strong and stable Conservative leadership in the national interest on 8 June will continue to deliver on the economy, defence and a deal with Europe, and that the only way to enable businesses, such as the Gower Brewery, and residents in Gower to continue to thrive is by re-electing a Conservative MP for the second time?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He has of course, since his fantastic, historic election in Gower, been a really powerful voice for his constituents, but also, indeed, for the needs of Wales more generally. I have already referred to the fact that I was in Wales yesterday, and had the opportunity to speak to people in business and to meet voters and hear their concerns, but my hon. Friend goes absolutely to the heart of the matter when he says that what is necessary is a good Brexit deal. That is crucial for businesses, it is crucial for jobs and it is only achievable by a strong and stable Government. Every vote for me and the Conservatives, and for Conservative candidates at local level, will strengthen our hand in those negotiations.

Q7. [909825] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Yesterday, the Scottish Tories' shameful defence of the rape clause failed because their claim that third-party reporting is in place is not true. Will the Prime Minister confirm that no organisation in Scotland has yet signed up to help women fill in an eight-page "Why my child is a product of rape" form, and with DWP staff not trained either, is the Prime Minister seriously going into this UK-wide election with this unworkable and immoral policy?

The Prime Minister: This is an incredibly sensitive issue, and that is why we have looked at it very carefully. We consulted very carefully on it, and we have put in place a series of sensitive measures for when such cases arise. I think it is important, however, that we look at what lies behind this, because underpinning this policy is a principle of fairness, and we know that what the SNP want to do is actually to scrap the policy in its entirety. We believe that people who are in work have to make the same decisions as those people who are out of work, so that people who are on benefits should have to decide whether they can afford more children, just as people in work have to make such a decision.

Q10. [909828] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): York is a fantastic place to live, work and start a business, but transport infrastructure is key if the city is to fulfil its economic potential. Dualling the northern ring road, a new railway station at Haxby and upgrading the A64 will all help to secure York's future, so will the Prime Minister continue to improve infrastructure, secure a strong economy and deliver for regions such as Yorkshire?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We have been able to invest in York, with £1.6 million this year for transport improvements, £2.2 million for highways maintenance and £1.3 million to support the sustainable i-Travel York initiative, but we can invest in infrastructure only if we have the strong and stable leadership that secures a strong economy. That is what the choice in June will be. It is very clear: a strong economy, guaranteeing investment in York and across the country under the Conservatives, or bankruptcy and chaos with Labour.

Q11. [909829] **Stephen Timms** (East Ham) (Lab): As the Prime Minister knows, fixed odds betting terminals cause immense harm in communities. On taking office, she authorised a review of maximum stakes and all the evidence was collected by the end of last year. Why do we still not have a result? Will she today show some leadership and reduce the maximum stake on these appalling machines to £2?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that a number of hon. Members have raised concerns about this issue. We did indeed have the consultation and there will be a Government response to it. Of course, that response—*[Interruption.]* "Get on with it," we are told. We are now in a situation where these things will be published after the purdah period and after the general election, so the right hon. Gentleman will have to wait for that response. Obviously we recognise the concern over this issue and we will respond in due course.

Q14. [909832] **Iain Stewart** (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Should the Prime Minister find herself in the vicinity of Milton Keynes over the next few weeks, may I suggest a visit to Milton Keynes university hospital, where she will find rising clinical standards and investment going in, with a new ward, a new medical school and a new cancer treatment centre?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I think I will be visiting communities around the whole country over the next few weeks. I congratulate the staff at Milton Keynes university hospital on achieving that rating. As my hon. Friend said, it was backed up by considerable investment. As we know, between 2015 and 2020 more than half a trillion pounds is being spent on the NHS in England. That is only possible because we have safeguarded the economy over the past seven years. As I have said previously today, that will only be possible in the future if we secure the strong and stable leadership our country needs. As I said, in Wales Labour has been cutting the health budget.

Q12. [909830] **Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I invite the Prime Minister, instead of going to Milton Keynes, to visit me in Southampton and take a tour of Southampton's schools. If she does, she will find that those schools are in despair about the cut in pupil funding of 10% in Southampton, which is £475 per pupil or equivalent to the loss of almost 400 teaching jobs across the city. She will also find one school that is inviting parents to clean the school toilets—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has got his point across with considerable force.

The Prime Minister: It is perfectly possible that I will find myself in Southampton over the coming weeks. As I have said before in this House, there is general agreement that the current funding formula is not fair. Labour did nothing in 13 years of government to address that. It is important that we get it right and we will respond to the consultation in due course. What is good news for schools in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is that 7,000 more children are now in good or outstanding schools in his constituency. Under our proposed reforms, overall funding for schools in his constituency would rise.

Mr Speaker: As he steps down after 44 years' service in the House, I call Sir Alan Haselhurst.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend assure me that her second Government will have high regard for matters of great concern to the Saffron Walden constituency, namely improved railways with extra track capacity, in line with the West Anglia and Great Eastern taskforce reports; the spread of fast broadband to rural communities; and an airspace regime that prioritises noise reduction?

The Prime Minister: May I first pay tribute to my right hon. Friend not just for his service to his constituents over the years, but for his service to the House when he took the Chair as Deputy Speaker? He has been a stalwart and a champion of the people of Saffron Walden over the years—for 40 years, as you said, Mr Speaker.

My right hon. Friend is right to raise issues of infrastructure spending. We included £40 million for the east of England in the Budget, but, as I think he implied in his question, such spending is only possible with the strong economy that comes from a strong and stable Government, and for Saffron Walden that will mean the election of a Conservative Government on 8 June.

Q13. [909831] **Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP):** My constituent, Mr Buchanan, has suffered several serious strokes and requires extensive care. He was deemed to have missed his appointment for an Atos assessment when Atos arrived early for the appointment and his carers had not yet helped him to get up. As a result, his benefits were stopped. Why is the Government's welfare regime punishing vulnerable people like my constituent?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that we have a system that properly assesses people who apply for benefits. As the hon. Gentleman has said, and as other Members will know, there have been issues relating to the way in which the system has operated. The Department for Work and Pensions has been looking very carefully at it to ensure that it makes proper assessments and delivers the right results for people.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend realise that I am standing down after 34 years because of her? I am standing down because I am confident that the country will be safe after the election under her strong and stable leadership. Does she agree that seizing the opportunities presented by regaining control over our laws, our money, our borders and our trade will be more important than the

terms of any exit deal and that, if we are to secure a reasonable deal, we must accept that no deal is indeed better than a bad deal? To deny this signals that no price is too high, no concession too grovelling to accept—a recipe for the worst possible deal.

I wish my right hon. Friend, all hon. Members and this House I love Godspeed.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for the tremendous contribution that he has made throughout his years as a Member of the House, not only on behalf of his constituents but during his time as a valued Minister in a Conservative Government. He has rightly highlighted the importance of the decision that was made last year by the people of the United Kingdom, and I commend him for the role that he played in the referendum campaign.

It is right that we get on with the job of delivering Brexit and making a success of it, which means having a strong hand in negotiations. The only way to ensure that that is the case—for the people of Hitchin and Harpenden and for the whole UK—is to ensure that a Conservative Government is elected on 8 June.

Q15. [909833] **Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP):** We do need a strong Prime Minister to lead this nation, but we need the countries of this nation to have a strong voice as well. Does the Prime Minister agree that those who abstain from taking their seats in the House—those who are denying the people of Northern Ireland the formation of a Government—are denying their constituents a say in the future of this country? We, however, will not allow that to happen.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is, of course, important for the constituents who elect Members of Parliament to feel that those Members of Parliament are able to do their job—to bring their concerns to the House and to play a full part in the Chamber. The right hon. Gentleman is also right to stress that we want to ensure that every part of the United Kingdom has a strong voice, which is why it is so important that we continue to work for the restoration of the devolved Administration of Northern Ireland.

Sir Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The Prime Minister has shown considerable leadership in adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism. Does she believe that it is the duty of all party leaders in the house not just to pay lip service to it, but to do something about it, and does she share my disgust that a former Member of this House, criticised by the Home Affairs Committee for his anti-Semitic utterances, is now the official candidate in Bradford East—for the Liberal Democrats?

The Prime Minister: May I first pay tribute to my right hon. Friend—my chum in this House—for all the service he has given, and not just for his service in this House: he had a considerable record in local government before he came into this House? He has also in his time and the work he has done on anti-Semitism performed a very important role: he has had a relentless drive to stamp out anti-Semitism and, indeed, intolerance in all its forms in our communities, and he should be proud of his record and the work that I know he will continue to do as a champion on this issue.

My right hon. Friend is right to highlight Bradford—of course, he has a particular knowledge of that city—and I think that people will be rightly disappointed to see the Liberal Democrats readopt a candidate with a questionable record on anti-Semitism. It is important that all parties maintain the strongest possible censure of all forms of intolerance and send that message to our communities.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In the nine months that the Prime Minister has held office, she has closed the door on desperate child refugees and ignored the plight of those suffering under the crisis in health and social care, and she is responsible for the shameful rape clause. Twenty years ago, she berated the Conservative party for being the “nasty party”, but her party has never been nastier. The legacy of this Parliament—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Whatever the strength of feeling, the hon. Gentleman must be heard.

Tim Farron: The legacy of this Parliament is the utter, abject failure of Her Majesty’s official Opposition to effectively hold her Government account for any of this. Is it not time that Britain had a strong, decent, new Opposition?

The Prime Minister: First, let me pick up the point the hon. Gentleman made on child refugees. This Government have a proud record on supporting refugees from Syria. We have been the second biggest bilateral donor to the region, to support millions of refugees and educate children, as I saw when I visited Jordan recently, and of course we have also supported some of the most vulnerable refugees, including children, by bringing them here to make a new life in the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman talks about a decent Opposition; I find it difficult to hear those words coming from his mouth when we have just heard that his party has selected a candidate with questionable views on anti-Semitism.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): It has been an immense privilege to serve the people of Cannock and Burntwood and of Aldershot for the past 34 years. I arrived here in 1983, when one formidable and determined female Conservative Prime Minister was transforming the country’s economic fortunes, and I depart as another is determined to restore to this country the status of a sovereign nation state embracing the rest of the world. As I, too, bid my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister Godspeed for a resounding victory on 8 June, may Aldershot make one final plea in these troubled times: please will she ensure that Her Majesty’s armed forces are properly funded, manned, equipped and housed to defend and protect the people of this glorious sceptred isle, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: Once again, may I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done in this House representing two different constituencies over 34 years? One of the underlying themes of his time in this House has been his passionate championing of, and consideration for, our armed forces, and I can assure him that on 8 June people will have a very clear choice between the Leader of the Opposition, who refuses to defend our country, and a Conservative Government who will continue to support our armed forces.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): May I ask the Prime Minister why she is running scared of the televised leadership debates? May I suggest that she hold a televised debate in the Easington colliery miners welfare centre, where she can see the consequences of seven years of her policies on housing, of the cuts to policing and of 500 people at Walker’s losing their jobs? Perhaps she could then explain to the people there, if that is possible, why she has any mandate to seek their support for re-election.

The Prime Minister: I have been in televised debates with the Leader of the Opposition week in and week out since I took over as Prime Minister, and I will be taking the fine record of this Conservative Government across all parts of this country. The hon. Gentleman talks about housing. Twice the number of council houses were built under the Conservatives as were built under Labour. There has been record funding for our national health service and our schools, and pensioners on the basic state pension are £1,250 a year better off. That is the proud record of the Conservatives and a record that we will continue after 8 June.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): It is good to be back—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] To be honest, it is good to be anywhere. Doctors and nurses at Russells Hall hospital saved my life in January, but each year in the UK, 44,000 people are less lucky. Will my right hon. Friend look at what measures we can take to reduce deaths from sepsis, including awareness raising, a national registry to properly record the burden of sepsis and effective commissioning levers to incentivise best practice? The UK Sepsis Trust estimates that such measures would save 50,000 lives over the next Parliament.

The Prime Minister: It is fantastic to see my hon. Friend back in his place. I hope that he will have noted the welcome that he got from across the House. He is absolutely right to bring our focus on to the devastating condition of sepsis. Every death from it is a tragedy, but as we know, something like 10,000 deaths a year could be avoided through prevention, early diagnosis and treatment. We need to get better at spotting sepsis across the NHS, and the Department of Health is already beginning work on a new sepsis action plan. We are having a new public awareness campaign and we expect a NICE quality standard to be published later this year. With the passion that my hon. Friend now brings to this campaign, I am sure that he will continue to make his voice heard on this important issue.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham)—who will be much missed in this House—had a debate on contaminated blood, in which he called for an independent, Hillsborough-style panel to get to the truth. The Prime Minister has praised the independent panel approach as a way to open up the door to justice, so will she join Labour and the Scottish National party in committing to setting up such a process in her party’s manifesto?

The Prime Minister: Last July, we committed £125 million of extra funding for those affected by the contaminated blood tragedy of the ’70s and ’80s. That is more than any previous Government have provided. We published

some proposed reforms last year, and we are now consulting on a new measure to allow the people affected to benefit from higher annual payments, but I can reassure everybody that everyone will receive, at a minimum, what they receive now as a result of the proposed changes. The Department of Health will respond to the consultation in due course.

Dame Angela Watkinson (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It was a privilege to win back the seat of Upminster in 2001 for the Conservatives. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House why the good people of Hornchurch and Upminster should continue to vote Conservative at the coming election?

The Prime Minister: First, I should like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the contribution that she has made, not just for her constituents but in the time she served in the Whips Office in this House, for example. I am happy to tell the voters of Hornchurch and Upminster that every vote for me and the local Conservative candidate will strengthen our hand in the Brexit negotiations to get the best deal for this country, every vote for me and the local Conservative candidate will be a vote for a stronger economy and every vote for me and the local Conservative candidate will be a vote for a strong and stable leadership in the national interest, compared with the coalition of chaos that we would see under the Labour party.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): What assurances can the Prime Minister give to the 3.8 million people who voted UKIP at the last election that if she is Prime Minister after 8 June, the United Kingdom will become a sovereign country again, living under our own Parliament and making our own laws?

The Prime Minister: I will give an assurance to all those people who voted for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union—and to all people across the country, regardless of how they voted, who now want to see this Government getting on with the job of Brexit and making a success of it—that we want to see control of our borders, control of our laws and control of our money, and that that is what we will deliver.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: In wishing the right hon. Gentleman all the best for the future, I call Sir Simon Burns.

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I thank you for that? May I tell my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that, for 30 years, I have had the privilege and the honour to represent the great people of Chelmsford? May I tell her that the great people of Chelmsford are perspicacious and that they have always wanted a Government who provide strong defences, a strong economy and strong leadership? May I also tell her that it is the Conservative party under her strong leadership that will deliver for this country for the next five years?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for the significant contribution that he has made for his constituents in Chelmsford, in this House and in government over his period of time here. He is absolutely right to say that his constituents will be looking for strong defences, a strong economy and the strong leadership that will build a more secure future for this country, and it is only a Conservative Government that can provide that.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): In this Brexit world, the Prime Minister is desperate to obtain trade deals with anybody or nobody, so the International Trade Secretary went to the Philippines this month, where he appeared with the President and said that he wanted a strong relationship based on “shared values”. Can the Prime Minister identify for the House what shared values she has in common with President Rodrigo Duterte?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that, as we leave the European Union, we want to ensure that we are a truly global Britain and that we have trade deals around the rest of the world. The reason that we want those trade deals—as well as the strong, secure, deep and special partnership with the European Union on trade—is so that we can ensure prosperity across the whole of this country and jobs for ordinary working families.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will now take points of order. [*Interruption.*] We will come to points of order in a moment, but right hon. and hon. Members deserve an attentive audience. If, inexplicably, some right hon. and hon. Members are leaving the Chamber, perhaps they could do so quickly and quietly.

Points of Order

12.59 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Because Question 1 was closed, there was no opportunity to follow up that particular point about the west midlands. Is it possible to put it on the record that, if there had been an opportunity, Labour Members—certainly I and other hon. Members from the west midlands—would have restated that public services have been crippled in the west midlands as a result of the Tory cuts? That should be said, as there was no opportunity to respond to the Prime Minister's answer.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point with force. It will be recorded in the *Official Report* and may then, if he so wishes, be more widely disseminated.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the hon. Gentleman.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You and I are familiar with the syndrome of pre-election tension that afflicts this place. You are concerned for the wellbeing of Members, particularly the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney), but I believe that what we have seen today is a sudden outbreak of parliamentary Tourette's. The rumour is that something known as a "Crosby chip" has been implanted in the brains of Conservative Members that compels them to say "strong and stable" every 18 seconds and "coalition of chaos" every 38 seconds. Can we inquire into whether the affliction is permanent or one that can be cured?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am not sure it is a matter for the Chair. I can only say, I think without fear of contradiction, that in my time in this place I have never been pre-programmed, or otherwise, by anyone.

Chris Bryant: You used to be quite different from the way you are today.

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to raise a serious point. You rightly referred earlier to today's Order Paper, which commemorates two Members of this House who were killed in the first world war—that is the right thing for us to do. This short Parliament has seen two members of our community killed: Jo Cox, our colleague, and Keith Palmer, who was defending us. I am sure the whole House would want to add their thanks to those expressed earlier to all the police officers who work on the estate.

Jo Cox will have a shield up in the Chamber by the time the next Parliament gathers. No Parliament can bind its successors, but it seems to me and, I think, to quite a lot of Members on both sides of the House, wholly appropriate that Keith Palmer should also have a shield up in the Chamber. He was not a Member of Parliament, but he was one of us. He was our shield and defender. Surely if there are any voices out there who say that this Chamber should just be for Members, those voices should be rejected. There must be a permanent reminder of what Keith did for us.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of which I had no advance notice—I make no complaint whatsoever about that. It is right that these matters should be considered by a number of people, and it would be wrong and disrespectful to other individuals who should be consulted for me simply to say, "Yes, it's going to happen." Am I, however, entirely open to the hon. Gentleman's proposition? I most certainly am. Not all precedents in every matter have to be observed. There is scope for innovation; otherwise nothing would ever change. Keith Palmer will always have a very special and perhaps unique hold on the affections and respect of Members of this House, so I think that that discussion can continue. Perhaps I can most appropriately say, having heard the hon. Gentleman's view and having expressed a response not unsympathetic, that I would be interested to hear the views of my parliamentary colleagues. I am absolutely up for doing just that.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I certainly agree with the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) in that respect.

I am mystified by the point of order from the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick), who said that there was no opportunity to follow up on a closed question. There was an opportunity; he just did not take it. Surely he can stand and, depending on whether he catches your eye, Mr Speaker, be called on a closed question. It is just that the follow-up must relate to the substantive question on the Order Paper.

Mr Speaker: That is correct. I do not want to have a long debate about this. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) was standing. I did not seek to call a supplementary on the closed question. The Chair makes a judgment about the best means by which to progress the business of the House and to maximise the opportunities for participation at Question Times in general and at the heavily subscribed Prime Minister's Question Time in particular. I had, of course, given thought to that matter in advance, and I decided that I would move from the closed question to the engagements question from Mr Richard Drax. Believe me, I had made the mental calculations about numbers, and I think it was the right judgment.

There was not an opportunity on the closed question. More widely, I would simply say that colleagues might have noticed that, on this occasion and conscious of the very large number of people wanting to contribute, I ran proceedings on somewhat longer than normal. There is no debate offering the opportunity for valedictory speeches at the end of this Parliament, as there was at the end of the last Parliament. I make no complaint about that; I am simply saying that there is to be, as I understand it, no such opportunity. I thought that the mood of today was that as many Members as could reasonably be called should be called, perhaps particularly, although not exclusively, with regard to those who have announced their intention to leave the House. We ran on a bit, to which I reply, "So what?"

Mr Winnick: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In order that there should be no misunderstanding, because the right hon. Member for New Forest West

(Sir Desmond Swayne) gave the strong impression that I was not standing, I was desperately trying to catch your eye. If I may say so, the right hon. Gentleman and I have all the differences in the world, I am sure, but I have always looked on him as a person of integrity. I would be most grateful if he would clarify the position.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I confess that I was not looking at the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) at the time. I accept entirely that he was standing, so I withdraw my earlier comment.

Mr Speaker: Very gracious. We have it on the record that the hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) was standing and seeking to catch my eye.

Chris Bryant: And you didn't call him.

Mr Speaker: Well, I did call 35 Members. I will take one further point of order—[*Interruption.*] Order. We really then ought to proceed.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has had a good crack today, but we will give him another go.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I merely want to correct the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), who I think was referring to me when he mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karl McCartney). Of course I am Lichfield. Although there has been considerable speculation about what might be on my head, a chip is not one of them.

Mr Speaker: It is very reassuring to have a bit of additional information. Head inspection, so far as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is concerned, may be available to Members, but it is not available to those who observe our proceedings from elsewhere. I do not want them to feel excluded.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sure I speak for my colleagues who are standing down when I thank you very much for allowing us the opportunity to express our appreciation for the honour our constituents have done us and to the Prime Minister for staying as long as she did. As you know, I have always been a staunch supporter of maintaining conventions, but on this occasion your stretching of the convention was rather a good idea. Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman. We have known each other a long time, and I wish him all the best for the future.

Construction Industry (Protection of Cash Retentions)

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

1.9 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to safeguard, and for the release of, cash retentions in the construction industry; and for connected purposes.

When I secured this ten-minute rule Bill slot, I genuinely hoped it was going to be the start of new legislation, but unfortunately the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was apparently so scared of what I was proposing that she called a general election. [*Laughter.*] Joking apart, this topic is very important.

A cash retention is the deduction of a portion of an agreed value of a contract—in effect, a cash bond. That cash is withheld by the main contractor to cover any snagging defects in an agreed maintenance period of one or two years. Usually the subcontractor will remedy defects at their own cost, as per the contractual terms and conditions, with the expectation of the retention being released promptly at the end of the contract period. That is where problems arise, when the retentions are not released in a timely manner, for various reasons—even worse, they may not be released at all.

The most common reason for non-release is a company going into liquidation, and so, for example, a Wirral-based company lost £240,000 over a five-year period due to insolvencies. A Scottish plumbing firm has lost £150,000 of retentions over five years, which is a huge amount for a small or medium-sized enterprise—SME. We must also bear in mind that Scottish plumbers have also been hit by the Pensions Act 1995, with the section 75 multi-employer pension debt issue. Some company owners are already at risk of personal insolvency, so the retentions issue is just another distraction that is not required. One SME steelwork contractor with an annual turnover of £3 million has retentions of £150,000, which is 0.5% of turnover. Given how low profit margins can be at the downstream end of the construction industry, that is a considerable sum.

Having worked in the construction industry, I understand the origins of the retention system and, to be fair, I also know how hard it sometimes can be to get a subcontractor back on site to address snagging issues. The reason for that is often that they have moved on to another job and so the resources are not immediately available. That said, it is seldom that subcontractors would not fulfil their obligations, and so when they do so they expect the money to be released when it is due to them. If they comply, why should they not receive the money in a timely manner? I ask the House: why, in the 21st century, are we dealing with unprotected cash retentions?

The loss of cash retentions comes with a human loss attached. According to the then Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, a survey of SMEs found 25% stating that a debt of

“£20,000 or less is enough to jeopardise their business prospects.”

[Alan Brown]

As I have highlighted, retention losses are often much higher than £20,000, which means: thousands of jobs lost or facing an uncertain future; fewer opportunities to recruit new apprentices and for companies to invest in training; and a risk of individual bankruptcies following calls by banks on directors' personal guarantees to pay off loans.

This Government continually acknowledge a productivity problem in the UK, yet we have smaller companies struggling with cash flow, stressed and having to put man hours into chasing up these cash retentions. Surely resolving this issue can only improve productivity, in terms not just of the man hours saved through not having to chase up the retentions, but of money released for investment in new equipment or job creation, which will further improve productivity. The issue of late payments has been understood by this Government, with action taken, but the release of retentions is the missing link in this payment chain and action has yet to be taken on it. To further illustrate the seriousness of this, I point out that in 2015 small firms across the UK lost almost £50 million-worth of retentions because of insolvencies up the supply chain. That money could have been re-invested, and a client somewhere along the line has to pay for the lost revenue. Approximately £3 billion-worth of retention moneys are withheld at any one time. I repeat that this can affect productivity, cash flow and profits.

In addition, the uncertainty of retention release means that banks do not allow borrowing against sums due to companies. That is not a new issue; it has been known about for a long period. The Banwell report, prepared for a Government 53 years ago, recommended the abolition of retentions, and 23 years ago the Latham report, a joint construction industry and government report, recommended that cash retentions should be at least protected in a trust account. We operate a tenancy deposit scheme to protect individuals in the private renting sector, yet for some reason there has still been no will on the part of Governments to do something with these construction "deposits".

In 2002 and 2008, the Business Select Committee recommended phasing out cash retentions because they were outdated and unfair to small firms. When this issue was raised in a debate in Westminster Hall in January 2016, the Minister confirmed that there would be an evidence-based review, to be completed by the end of that year. I was a member of the Enterprise Bill Committee when we were told:

"It is fair to say that there is absolute cross-party agreement about the need to reform cash retentions in the construction industry. I am very open about it: I think they are outdated and I do not think they are fair. They are particularly unfair to small businesses."

When I challenged the Minister about timescales, she told me:

"the hon. Gentleman can be assured that this Minister gives absolutely her word that this matter is not going to be kicked into any long grass. In fact it is very short grass, which has only just grown, because the review will be completed by March and then recommendations will go out to public consultation. If legislation is required as a result of that consultation, I will be happy to be the Minister to take that through."—[*Official Report, Enterprise Public Bill Committee*, 9 February 2016; c. 47-48.]

Here we are in April 2017, the process has been kicked back all this year and now we have a general election, which will cause further delay. We are not just in long grass, but in long grass growing out of a sea of mud. Worse still, it is rumoured that the consultation which has been completed will be consulted on again, so we can now assume that any new Government will not move on this until after the summer recess. I plead for consideration of suitable secondary legislation to be enacted early in the new Session, whoever the new Government may be.

I have been contacted by companies in my constituency affected by the late release or non-release of retentions. One company, which wished to remain anonymous, would not name the company it had been having difficulty with, because it still has to tender for more work from the company withholding the money and so does not want to upset it. That is how that market share operates. I pay tribute to the Specialist Engineering Contractors Group, SNIPEF—the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers Federation—the National Federation of Roofing Contractors and the Builders Merchants Federation, which have been proactive in raising these matters with me. Simply put, however, these organisations and companies are fed up with the blockages from the Government.

The Scottish Government have been operating a "Project Bank Accounts" system to ensure subcontractors get paid on time when the Government pay the main contractor. Such a system could be adapted to include retentions. As I mentioned, the tenancy deposit scheme is the model that should be adopted for retentions. This scheme could already have been in place had the UK Government accepted the proposed amendment to the Enterprise Bill. Instead, this year alone, we have seen examples of £720,000-worth of retentions lost when TAL Ltd in Northern Ireland went into liquidation in January this year. In an article in *The Times* in February, a Welsh bricklayer director was lamenting that

"main Contractors treat retentions as their own money"

and that it can take five years to get bills settled.

Retention moneys are ring-fenced in separate accounts, in compliance with legislation, in countries such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand and certain EU member states. As I have outlined, we know what the problem is—it has existed for well over 50 years—we know that there is a solution that works, as it does in other countries, and the Government have acknowledged cross-party support for ending cash retentions. I have outlined today that this is a UK-wide issue that requires UK Government action, so I urge them to support the Bill. If I am lucky enough to be re-elected, I will continue to pursue this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered

That Alan Brown, Hannah Bardell, Callum McCaig, Gavin Newlands, Stuart Blair Donaldson, Bill Esterson, Alison Thewliss, Patricia Gibson, Corri Wilson, Dr Philippa Whitford, Mark Durkan and David Simpson present the Bill.

Alan Brown accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 May, and to be printed (Bill 174).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the Order of 24 April 2017 (Business of the House (24, 25, 26 and 27 April)) be varied as follows:

In paragraph (17)–

(a) after sub-paragraph (c) insert–

“(ca) proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill shall be brought to a conclusion (unless already concluded) two hours after their commencement;

(cb) the Lords Amendments to the Higher Education and Research Bill shall be considered in the following order: Nos. 1 to 12, 209, 210, 13 to 78, 106, 79 to 105, 107 to 208, 211 to 244;”, and

(b) in sub-paragraph (d), for “and (c)” substitute “to (ca)”.—(*Heather Wheeler.*)

DIGITAL ECONOMY BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Digital Economy Bill, it is expedient to authorise the imposition of charges which are payable to the Information Commissioner.—(*Matt Hancock.*)

Digital Economy Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Mr Speaker: I must draw the House’s attention to the fact that financial privilege is engaged by Lords amendments 248 to 254. If the House agrees to any of them, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the *Journal*.

Clause 1

UNIVERSAL SERVICE BROADBAND OBLIGATIONS

1.21 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 1.

Lords amendment 2, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendments 3 to 39.

Lords amendment 40, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.

Lords amendments 41 to 236.

Lords amendment 237, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 238, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 239, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 240 and 241.

Lords amendment 242, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendments 243 to 245.

Lords amendment 246, and Government amendment (a) thereto.

Lords amendments 247 to 289.

Matt Hancock: I am delighted that today we have a final opportunity to scrutinise the Digital Economy Bill and, I hope, get it on to the statute book before the Dissolution of Parliament. The Bill has been widely supported during its passage and tackles head-on some serious issues that many in this House feel strongly about. It will help us to extend digital connectivity, protect children from online pornography and better deliver Government services. The other House has made some amendments to the Bill, so I shall go through them in turn.

Lords amendment 1 challenges the Government to be more ambitious on universal digital connectivity. The universal service obligation forms part of our plan to deliver better connectivity, helping to ensure that everyone gets decent broadband and no one is left behind. However, we have serious concerns about whether the amendment is deliverable. As drafted, it is counterproductive to the implementation of a USO, because of the risk of legal challenge and the delay that that would cause. We are legislating for the USO under

[*Matt Hancock*]

the EU telecoms legislative framework, under which a USO is intended to ensure a baseline of services where a substantial majority has taken up the service but the market has not delivered, and where users are at risk of social exclusion.

According to Ofcom's latest data, in 2016, take-up of ultrafast broadband with a download speed of 300 megabits per second and higher was less than 0.1%, so we are nowhere near being able to demonstrate that the majority of the population have access to full fibre with a download speed of 2 gigabits per second. We therefore cannot accept Lords amendment 1, and we are not in a position of a substantial majority having taken up superfast broadband. I do, however, support the ambition of better, faster, more reliable broadband, so the Government propose an amendment in lieu that requires any broadband USO to set a download speed of at least 10 megabits per second, and requires the Government to direct Ofcom to review the minimum download speed in the broadband USO once superfast take-up is 75%. That gives the assurance that any USO speed will be reconsidered once a substantial majority of subscribers are on superfast.

Lords amendment 2 seeks to tackle a number of issues relating to mobile phones and frustrations about the service we receive. I understand those frustrations—I represent a rural constituency, so am often subject to them—and the Bill is designed to address them through the new electronic communications code, new switching and information powers, the enabling of automatic compensation, and the strengthening of Ofcom's hand in the interests of consumers. Lords amendment 2 is an understandable reaction to the faults in the market, but it is not the answer, for the following reasons.

First, the requirement to allow customers to roam is unclear, and there are doubts about whether it would work legally, as acknowledged by the Opposition Front-Bench team in the other place. Although superficially attractive, roaming is the wrong solution. It would stymie investment by operators—why would they improve their coverage when a competitor could reap the rewards as their customers roamed on to their network? By contrast, taking roaming off the table in 2014 locked in £5 billion of investment to improve the UK's mobile infrastructure, and 4G coverage from all operators has grown from 29% to 72% in the past year.

Secondly, the Bill already has greater provision on switching than the Lords amendment would require. That provision concerns operators of all telecom services—including fixed line, broadband and pay TV—not just mobile phones. Ofcom is better placed to ensure that operators adhere to procedures that enable easy and quick switching, thereby compelling operators to improve the level of their service.

Thirdly, the Government intended to look into bill capping in the consumer rights Green Paper, and it is already offered by some providers. Although we cannot accept Lords amendment 2, we can see the benefits for consumers of being offered the choice to limit their bills and avoid bill shock. We have therefore put forward an amendment in lieu that requires providers to make sure that as well as new customers, those with existing contracts have the opportunity to place a limit on their bill. This will not affect any obligations regarding contacting the emergency services, be that by voice call or text message.

We agree with the spirit of Lords amendment 40 and the proposed code of practice for social media platform providers on online abuse. We take the harm caused by online abuse and bullying very seriously. We offer an alternative provision that we think will achieve the intended outcome and which will form part of our work in the next Parliament to tackle serious harms and online threats and improve internet safety. Our amendment in lieu will provide a code of practice that will help to protect the users of online services and set out the behaviour expected of social media companies. The code is intended to give guidance for how social media providers should respond to harmful behaviour such as bullying. Good work is being done by some companies to prevent the use of platforms for illegal purposes and, when it is reported to the police, potential criminal conduct will continue to be liable to investigation, as with any other offence. We already expect social media providers to work closely with law enforcement in relation to potential unlawful activity taking place on their sites.

Other uses of social media might be cruel, upsetting, or insulting, but nevertheless legal. More can be done to tackle online abuse, such as bullying, and the other serious issues that face our children and young people. The code will set out guidance about what social media providers should do in relation to conduct that is lawful but that is nonetheless distressing or upsetting. Our intention is that the guidance will address companies proportionately. The biggest social media companies have recently put in place some improvements to make their platforms safer, but we all agree that they still have some way to go, and the amendment in lieu will help to achieve that.

Lords amendments 237 to 239 would establish a BBC licence fee commission to make a recommendation on the level of the licence fee required to fund the BBC, for a full public consultation on the appropriate level of BBC funding. However, we do not believe it is right for an unelected body effectively to set tax rates. It is a long-established principle that the Government do not consult on the level of taxation, so the amendments are not only impractical but unnecessary.

Lords amendment 242 would extend the public service broadcasting prominence regime for TV to on-demand menus and platforms, and I know it is a favourite of the Opposition Front-Bench team. We recently consulted on this idea and concluded that we could see no compelling evidence to change the regime, but I understand the impulse behind the amendment—to ensure that PSB channels are readily available as technology changes. However, the technologies of broadcasting and internet-based on-demand viewing are completely different, and amendment 242 goes far beyond the current prominence regime because it would extend the regime to content originating from the non-PSB portfolio channels of the commercial PSBs. It also seeks to give absolute prominence to PSB content by removing Ofcom's discretion in applying prominence rules, and to extend the current definition of an electronic programme guide to include smart TV interfaces, which manufacturers tell us would create the need for bespoke products for the UK market, putting up the cost of a television. Therefore, we cannot accept the amendment, but we do understand the strength of feeling in both Houses on this issue so we have tabled an amendment in lieu of Lords amendment 242 to place a new requirement on Ofcom to report on the ease

of finding and accessing PSB content across all television platforms. If Ofcom's report makes it clear that there is a problem in this area, and one that can be fixed only by legislation, then, assuming that this Government are returned in June, I can commit to bring forward that legislation as soon as possible.

1.30 pm

Another area that has raised serious concern is secondary ticketing. I pay tribute to colleagues across this House for their work on this, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who is in his place in a bright blue suit. Since this issue was last debated in the House, we have published our response to the Waterson review, accepting the recommendations in full; introduced Lords amendment 247 to provide the power for Government to introduce a criminal offence to stop the use of bots to purchase tickets in excess of the maximum specified; provided funding to the National Trading Standards for enforcement action; and facilitated the sector's participation in cyber-security networks. The Competition and Markets Authority has launched an enforcement investigation into suspected breaches of consumer protection law in the online secondary ticketing market.

However, that was not enough. The noble Lords have also added Lords amendment 246 to the Bill, requiring ticket resellers to provide buyers with the ticket reference or booking number and any specific condition attached to the resale of the ticket. We agree in principle with the amendment. We do, however, have concerns over its practicality, and the provision relating to the restrictions on tickets duplicates existing provisions in the Consumer Rights Act 2015. Therefore, we have tabled our amendment to Lords amendment 246, requiring that any unique ticket number must be identified, which we intend to have the same effect. We will also continue to work with industry to reduce the risk of fraud or unwarranted cancellation of tickets. I hope that that satisfies my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty.

I also wish to say a few words about some of the amendments that we are proposing to accept on age verification for people accessing online pornography in part 3 of the Bill. This is a hugely important part of the Bill and has been welcomed across the House. Although the intention is to protect children, the scope of material for adults that the regulator can act against has prompted much debate. In the other place, we heard concerns that the current "prohibited material" definition may be going too far in the type of material that the regulator is able to block above and beyond the age verification requirements, and that would give the regulator extended powers of censorship beyond that originally envisaged in the Bill.

Our goal here is to ensure that children are prevented from accessing online pornography. Our amendment therefore redefines the scope of the material, taking an approach based on the definition of an "extreme pornographic image" in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008. I can confirm that this does not change the definition of what is, and what is not, lawful for adults to view. In Lords amendment 45, we have made it absolutely clear that content behind age-verification controls can still be subject to criminal sanctions provided by existing legislation.

What is illegal offline is illegal online. Where material is criminal in nature and not hosted in the UK, the National Crime Agency's Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre works with international partners through Interpol to address this material in that jurisdiction. As those who are interested in consuming this material are likely to be of interest to law enforcement, CEOP considers all aspects of illegal images of children as it is the appropriate body to tackle this issue. I recognise that, for many, the Digital Economy Bill represents unfinished business in reforming the law in this area. Our internet safety strategy, which is already under way, will look into the question of safety on the internet. We agree with Lords amendment 41, which requires the Secretary of State to produce a report on the impact and effectiveness of the new regulatory framework for online pornography. The amendment includes a requirement that the Secretary of State consults on the definitions used in the Bill.

The power for the regulator to direct internet service providers to block non-compliant sites is a significant step. The ISPs should take reasonable steps to block non-compliant sites when directed by the regulator to do so, but we should recognise that no solution is 100% effective.

I am delighted that we have been able to make this much progress in this Bill to protect children from harmful content online. I pay tribute to the work of many Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Devizes (Claire Perry) and for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), the former Secretary of State, the Select Committee and others. I look forward to putting this Bill into action.

Let me turn now to the other amendments proposed by the other place. Lords amendment 46 fulfils our manifesto commitment, just in time, to enhance the public lending right by extending it so that authors of e-books and audio books have the right to receive payment from a Government fund for the remote lending of these books from public libraries across the UK.

Lords amendment 240 concerns children's TV programming. We support children's TV and have extended the tax relief for animation and high-end programmes to children's TV. This amendment, which was proposed, and strongly supported, by Baroness Benjamin in the other place, empowers Ofcom to support children's TV further if necessary.

Lords amendment 241 concerns the accessibility of on-demand programmes. We debated that on Report in this House last November. I pay tribute to Action on Hearing Loss as well as to the many hon. Members who have pressed this matter. Ofcom will now have the power to ensure that subtitles or other appropriate provision is put in place.

Lords amendment 243 concerns listed events. In the UK, the listed events regime operates to protect free-to-view access to the coverage of sports events with a national significance. This amendment will ensure that the regime is future-proofed as the way people watch TV changes with new technologies.

Lords amendment 244 creates a new power for the Secretary of State to set a strategy and policy statement relating to telecommunications, the management of radio spectrum and postal services, which Ofcom, as the regulator, will have regard to when carrying out its

statutory duties. During the passage of this Bill, there has been debate on the state of the UK's fibre networks, the ability to switch communication provider, the quality of business connectivity and other matters such as the universal service obligation, which are all vital to our future economy. This new measure will allow the Government to establish a clear policy direction on all these matters to ensure greater coherence in an increasingly complex and interlinked environment. I pay tribute to, and thank, Ofcom for the work that it has done supporting the passage of this Bill. It is an excellent regulator.

On Report in this House, we agreed that the parental control filters on internet connections are a very important tool in protecting children from harmful material online. I agreed to ensure that the Bill was amended in the Lords to tackle concerns that the EU net neutrality regulation would render these controls, which have worked well, illegal. Lords amendment 245 delivers on that promise.

Lords amendment 249 responds to an operational requirement of the police who need support in tackling gangs, particularly those in large urban areas, who supply drugs, especially class A drugs, to suburban areas, and market and coastal towns. To support their market expansion, gangs recruit, exploit and use children and vulnerable adults to carry drugs and money through deception, intimidation, violence, debt bondage and grooming. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire for his long campaign on this and to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton). With this amendment the police will be able to disrupt the mobile phones on which the drug gangs rely.

Lords amendments 249 to 252 are the start of our reform of the Data Protection Act. The new legal framework will come into force in May 2018, and these amendments pave the way by ensuring that the future funding mechanism can be put in place on time and provide certainty to data controllers.

Lords amendments 253 to 255 concern the Crown guarantee for BT pensions. These amendments are necessary following the announcement on 10 March of a deal between BT and Ofcom that will legally separate BT and Openreach. We welcome that split, and these amendments ensure that the split does not affect people's pensions.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Just briefly on that particular point, we do not have BT Openreach in Northern Ireland to roll out the broadband; that is carried out by BT itself. Is there any provision for BT in Northern Ireland?

Matt Hancock: The provision in the Bill is to ensure that those whose pensions are protected under the Crown guarantee, which was provided at the privatisation of BT, will be able to retain that protection when they transfer to the separate organisation, Openreach. For those who are not leaving BT Group, there will be no change to their pension arrangements, so they are not negatively affected. Therefore, the provision is not necessary. It is necessary to allow this split to take place without detriment, and without added benefit, to any current BT employee, so that the Crown guarantee continues to operate essentially as it does today.

Further technical amendments have been tabled, including to safeguard journalists from data protection laws when whistleblowing—this was brought to my attention by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)—and to refine the electronic communications code. That is one of the core measures of the Bill which, for all its technicality, will be a crucial enabler of better connectivity and a driver of the digital economy.

Just before I conclude, let me say that improvements have been made to the Bill thanks to the work of many people on both sides of the House, but—

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister spoke about missed opportunities. Does he recognise that he leaves this Parliament with data sharing and the rights of citizens over their own data in exactly the same state—if not worse—of chaos and total mess across Departments that was the case when he took up his role, I think just over a year ago?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is usually reasonable and constructive, so a sense of electioneering must have got into her. I am afraid that I do not recognise that description. We have made considerable progress in the Bill on data sharing, but of course the rules around data will have to evolve, not least because European rules will come into force before we leave the EU. Yes, there is more work to do, but I think that she must have had the rosette on a little bit too often recently, given that she is so churlish about the progress in the Bill.

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister answer the question? Do citizens own and control their own data—yes or no?

Matt Hancock: Well, of course citizens elect the Government, and in many cases the Government are responsible for data. Having democratic legitimacy behind the control of data is critical to a functioning democracy. No doubt we can return to this issue in the future. There are no Lords amendments on that subject, and I consider that the Bill represents significant progress.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). She has worked hard on the Bill and made a number of suggestions that we have taken on board. She has been a pleasure to negotiate with and very effective. When I am complimentary about her, she always tells me that I am damaging her career no end, so I hope that she will take my compliments in the spirit in which they are intended.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Minister knows that it makes me deeply uncomfortable when we agree on anything, and that also applies to compliments paid from the Dispatch Box, but it is a great privilege to speak for the Opposition today during the closing stages of this Bill. Thanks to the deliberations of hon. Members on both sides of the House, including the Minister, and what I would describe as exemplary cross-party working, the Bill is in considerably better shape than when it was introduced last year.

The Bill still does not go far enough in a number of crucial areas. It represents a missed opportunity to update our infrastructure, skills strategy, finance, the responsibilities of the behemoths of the digital age, and

the rights that individuals should have in this era when data is increasingly the currency that matters above all. Nevertheless, there have been some useful changes, and I am grateful to the Minister for his considered exposition of the Government's position, especially regarding the amendments, with which we are not in dispute.

I will deal briefly with each of the Lords amendments in turn. Lords amendment 1 will increase the USO to superfast levels to ensure that every household and business in the country can benefit from speeds of at least 30 megabits per second. The benefits of that do not need repeating, as we have considered them at length during many debates in the short time that I have served as shadow Digital Minister, and the House is united on the need for much improved broadband speed and reliability across the country. Indeed, I note that the Minister's constituency has fallen down the rankings for superfast availability during his tenure in his post, so he will be particularly keen to tackle this issue.

1.45 pm

Just 59% of rural Britain has access to superfast speeds, while an utterly shocking 40% of people in rural hamlets do not have access to even basic broadband. In my city of Sheffield, superfast access is by no means universal. In fact, we have the poorest availability of any major city in the UK. I appreciate the Government's argument about the universal service directive, although it is disappointing that more of an effort was not made at an earlier stage of the Bill's passage to test that argument, given that Ofcom has clearly made the case that it is better value for money for the taxpayer to intervene in the market now and futureproof it for a speed of 30 megabits per second.

The European Commission provided only non-binding guidance in its latest review of universal service in 2011, so it is not entirely clear that a superfast designation is beyond the scope of its directive. Of course, the legal mechanism of a USO is only one of the tools that the Government have at their disposal to deliver decent broadband to all, including more highly specified services.

Nevertheless, Government amendment (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 1 directs Ofcom to continuously review broadband take-up across the UK and to review the USO accordingly, effectively tying the USO to the rest of the market and ensuring that the last 10%, 5% or 1% do not fall too far behind the rest of the UK. Of course, we would have liked the Government to back 30 megabits per second for all, and I do not accept that millions of consumers and businesses should simply be left behind. This was an opportunity to prepare the UK for the ubiquitous future demanded by the digital revolution, and although the Government's amendment is a first step, it is a baby step and nothing more.

On Lords amendment 2, it is fantastic that the Government have now accepted the case that we put forward on mobile bill capping. Government amendment (a) in lieu of the Lords amendment will allow consumers to set a financial cap on their monthly bill when they enter a contract with their telecoms provider. Some mobile providers are offering bill caps already. Tesco Mobile and Three are leading the way, and BT Mobile has a cap of £5. In addition, some smaller companies have bill caps—Plusnet has a smart cap automatically set at £10, and iD Mobile has a £5 cap on its Shockproof tariffs. That proves that it is both possible and commercially

viable for all companies to introduce such a measure. However, there is not currently the sector-wide standard that we would like. Amendment (a) will secure the same basic protections across the whole sector for all consumers, and we are delighted that the Government, who opposed such a measure earlier in the Bill's passage, have seen sense and been persuaded by the sheer strength of our arguments

On pornography and age verification, under part 3 of the Bill, Members from all parties in the House have worked together in partnership, and very often in unison. The original intention of protecting children from the harmful effects of pornography remains. I am delighted that the House has worked together to ensure that we will have one of the most effective regimes in the world for protecting children from pornography.

The digital age brings with it responsibilities, and part 3 of the Bill is a recognition of that fact. However, its provisions have grown beyond the narrow bounds of age verification during the Bill's passage. The blocking measures relating to age verification, which we supported, have also brought us into the contentious areas of what is categorised as extreme pornography or prohibited material. Our consideration of the Bill could have been a welcome opportunity to debate fully what should and should not be accessible on the internet, but due to the late tabling of Government amendments on Report in the Commons, debate was curtailed. It is vital that these issues are properly debated because we are treading a very thin line between protection and censorship. We are pleased that the Government have chosen to accept our reasonable amendment that will require the Secretary of State to produce a report on the impact and effectiveness of this regulatory framework. Crucially, the Government will also be required to consult on the definition of extreme pornography in the Bill.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree, however, that in setting out these definitions on a spectrum ranging from prohibited material to extreme pornography—I will speak to this later—we have left ourselves in something of a quandary, as material that she and I would probably agree is completely unacceptable can in theory be viewed behind age filters? I heard that the Minister was prepared to consider this unfinished business. Will the hon. Lady, on behalf of her party, commit to trying to work out these definitions in the next Parliament to ensure that we arrive at a better place?

Louise Haigh: That was exactly why we pushed for an amendment in the Lords and it is why we are so pleased that the Government have accepted it. We need consultation, as well as a clear definition of extreme pornography and prohibited material. My understanding of the legislation is that nothing extreme, prohibited or otherwise will be able to be viewed behind age verification filters. If something is deemed to be pornography and analysed as such by the British Board of Film Classification, it will be required to be behind such filters.

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is right, but she will know that the original definition referred to five statutes. We now have a definition that is much tighter, specifically because items that were included under the broader definition are now deemed not to be obscene—I agree

[*Claire Perry*]

with that. The problem is that there is material that, according to 85% of people who have viewed it, should not be accessible on the internet for any age group. Such material could be accessible behind those filters for anyone to see. That is the problem that we need collectively to solve.

Louise Haigh: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is true that such material is currently available without any AV filters, so we have made substantial and welcome progress in this area, but the consultation in the next Parliament will be crucial. We look forward to participating in that debate and ensuring that we get the best possible regime for online pornography.

Several Government amendments on age verification were tabled in the Lords. We understand why technology cannot be dictated in legislation or even guidance, but the effectiveness of AV measures will obviously be determined by the technology that is used. If we are not careful, we could end up with age verification that is so light-touch as to be too easily bypassed by increasingly tech-savvy under-18s, or that is far too complicated and intrusive. That could push viewers on to sites that do not use age verification but still offer legitimate content, or completely illegal sites that stray into much more damaging realms. Equally, we must ensure that privacy and proportionality are at the heart of the proposals, so I push the Minister to say more about that.

The BBFC has intimated that its likely preference is age-verified mobile telephony, but there are significant privacy issues with that approach. We should proceed with extreme caution before creating any process that would result in the storing of data that could be leaked, hacked or commercialised when that would otherwise be completely private and legitimate. Concerns have been raised about whether the BBFC is appropriate to be the AV regulator, not least in relation to its conduct in lobbying Members of this House and the other. I am grateful that the Minister has listened to those concerns and that guidance will now be produced by the Secretary of State, meaning that there is proper accountability, and then issued to the regulator. I want to ensure that the report that the Secretary of State produces on the effectiveness of the regulation covers the regulator itself, so I would be grateful for clarification about that from the Minister.

On the social media code of conduct, we are delighted that the Government have taken a decisive step in the right direction. Amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 40 requires the Secretary of State to issue a code of practice for online social media platforms in relation to bullying, directing insults, or other behaviour likely to intimidate or humiliate. It is difficult to understate the importance of tackling bullying and offensive behaviour online. Although social media has brought about transformative and significant changes for the good, it has also facilitated an exponential increase in bullying. It is estimated that seven in 10 young people have experienced cyber-bullying, with 37% of those people experiencing it frequently. Cyber-bullying can lead to anxiety, depression and even suicide.

This is the first time that social media providers will be subject to legislation on this issue. They will be required to have processes in place for reporting and

responding to complaints about bullying. As the Minister said, some providers have taken steps to address these issues, but the pace of change has to keep up with the scale of the problem. It is absolutely right that the Government have taken decisive legislative action to make the internet a safer place for its users. I would be grateful if the Minister would confirm that there will be full public consultation when drafting the code of conduct.

On public service broadcasting prominence, we are happy to support Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 242, which requires Ofcom regularly to review electronic programming guides in relation to public service broadcasting and the implications of changing technology for public service broadcasting. We are pleased that the Minister has confirmed that any necessary powers will be transferred to Ofcom, should it be required to intervene.

We are delighted that, after many years of campaigning, not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), significant progress has been made on efforts to tackle abuses in the secondary ticket market. Fans across the country will be thanking her, the Minister and all those involved in the campaign, but we recognise there is still more to do and that the Waterson review must be implemented in full in the next Parliament. We are pleased that the Minister has again seen sense by accepting Lords amendments on e-lending and on-demand accessibility.

The Bill has been improved significantly and it has been a privilege to enter negotiations with the Government. It has also been a privilege to negotiate with the Minister, as he said it had been to negotiate with me. However, I must say that this Bill is not legislation for the digital economy. The tech sector waited eagerly for well over a year for the Government's strategy and vision for this crucial area of our economy. To say that it was disappointed with the lack of ambition and strategic direction in the Bill and the Government's eventual strategy would be a gross understatement. Our burgeoning digital economy is the largest in the world, growing at a rate that we could hardly have expected even a decade ago, but after seven years of a Conservative Government, 12 million people still lack basic digital skills.

Some 3 million homes and businesses do not have access to superfast broadband. Britain does not even feature on the fibre broadband league table, and our 4G mobile coverage lags firmly behind that of our major competitors. Too often, workers find themselves overworked, underpaid and exploited by bosses they never meet who do not even fulfil their basic duties as an employer. People across the country suffer from digital exclusion because our infrastructure is second-rate and our digital skills programme is well behind the times. Now should have been the moment to lay the foundations for not just a world-leading digital sector, but a truly world-leading economy with digital inclusion at its heart. Those foundations must be built on the responsibilities of employers towards the burgeoning workforce, of the digital giants to their users, and of the Government to create the environment in which digital can transform the economy.

Although the Bill undoubtedly brings forward some welcome changes, it has revealed an alarming lack of ambition for the country and a worrying indication of the Government's priorities in relation to tech as we Brexit. I can assure the House that come 9 June, when I

will be preparing to take the Minister's place, it will be the Labour party that will have the ambition and vision on infrastructure, skills and finance, and that will champion this sector, which is essential to the UK's ability to thrive post-Brexit and for us to deliver the high-skilled, well-paid jobs that areas of the country such as mine so desperately cry out for. We welcome the improvements that have been made in the Bill, but I hope that, however the next Parliament looks, our digital economy will be given far greater prominence and priority.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the Bill and the Lords amendments supported by the Government. This debate takes place against the background of the UK's creative economy, which is the leading creative and tech economy in Europe. London is by far and away the leading creative and tech city in Europe and one of the major centres of the world. The creative and digital economy has been a major factor in our growth and is a great success story for this country. The Bill brings in a series of necessary and welcome measures for reform, but builds on a position of considerable strength, where the UK tech and creative economy is the envy of Europe and many others in the world.

I thank the Government for their intervention in online ticketing resales and abuse in the secondary ticketing market. This follows the campaign of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), who have championed the cause. They brought it to the attention of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, and we held our first hearing on the matter in November, just before we debated the Bill on Report in the Commons. With cross-party support, we tabled an amendment seeking legislative reform to combat the use of bots and the failure of people correctly to identify tickets sold on the secondary market. The Minister said that the Government would consider the representations made, including amendments in the Lords. That has taken place. I congratulate him, the Secretary of State and the Department on the interest they have shown in the subject, on the important roundtables they hosted and on the decisive action that was taken, with the support of the Lords, to amend the Bill.

It is important that people who buy tickets online know what they are buying. I welcome the Competition and Markets Authority's decision to open its investigation to ensure that the existing consumer protection legislation is being enforced. I also welcome the Minister saying that a ticket should have a unique reference number that people can see on the ticket when they purchase it. That would make it easier to identify the reseller.

There is also the question—perhaps the CMA could address this in its inquiry—of consumers buying tickets but not being clear about the seat number and row number. A reference number might not tell them where in a theatre the ticket is for. People end up buying, at high and inflated prices, a cheap ticket at the back of the hall that they were not aware they could have bought themselves in the first place. Many of the venues that gave evidence to the Select Committee complained about that, and it should be addressed through the CMA investigation to make sure that existing consumer protection legislation is enforced and that action is

taken against people who breach it. However, the amendment to make sure there is a unique reference number is a welcome addition.

I also welcome the amendment to ban the use of bots to harvest tickets for mass resale. There has been widespread abuse in the market, and I am glad that these reforms will lead to decisive action to combat it.

2 pm

I want briefly to touch on the code of practice for online social media platforms, which was rightly born out of the debate about internet safety and, in particular, cyber-bullying. This will be an interesting issue for the future, because many of the practices of social media companies are giving cause for concern. One of them is linked to the sale of tickets online, particularly where social media platforms promote and support secondary ticket sites, with tickets being fraudulently acquired or fraudulently sold, which should not be the case.

In the context of the debate about social issues such as fake news, it is also important to consider the broader social obligations social media companies and platforms have to protect users from harmful or misleading content, to make sure there is fair redress for those who are its victims and to recognise that companies do have an obligation. When looking at some of these important issues after the election, we might even consider placing in statute a broader obligation on companies that is linked to the failure to act. If someone refers evidence to a company that harmful, misleading or illicit content has been distributed on a site, and the company fails to act, there could be some measure of redress against the company. That would be an important first step in looking at a code of conduct and at the broader social obligations of social media companies, and I would welcome that, too.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): It is only fitting that you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, because this is my last opportunity to speak before we break up, and you were there for my maiden speech. It is lovely to see you there.

I welcome the changes to the Bill. We have worked very well together, as the Minister and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) outlined—at least, he is wearing red socks, so she might have had some influence on him, although she is shaking her head, and I think she is correct. None the less, it is excellent that we have been able to go on a journey with this Bill. A huge amount of work was needed; when we sat in the Bill Committee, there was a lot of concern that the Bill needed significant improvement. Even though we have managed to put a lot more into the Bill—something my colleagues and I have urged all along—there are still some deeply worrying issues, particularly around data sharing, which will need to be revisited.

It will not surprise Members who know me to hear that I would like to focus my comments exclusively on connectivity, especially given that the hon. Lady has covered every other aspect so wonderfully. Connectivity is a fundamental issue in rural communities and the lifeblood of our communities. It is no longer the roads, although people still complain about them, but the superhighways of the internet that people are desperately concerned about.

[*Calum Kerr*]

We therefore welcome the Government's move on the universal service obligation. As we have heard, however, we would have liked to see more ambition, and the 30 megabits option, which was one of those proposed by Ofcom, highlights that that was possible. I do not accept the Government's argument that it was not possible to be more ambitious because of the mechanism itself. If that truly is the case, we are perhaps choosing the wrong mechanism. If we are not choosing the wrong mechanism, we perhaps need to put in place other measures to ensure that rural communities are not left behind.

In areas in my constituency such as Oxnam, Bonchester Bridge and the Ettrick valley, 10 megabits would be a huge step forward, as people there have 5 or 12 kilobits or 1 megabit. Ten megabits would be welcome, but it will be overtaken in Scotland by the Scottish Government's commitment to 30 megabits. The Minister has talked that down and said, "You're not showing more ambition in Scotland. We could go further—things are open." Well, I am afraid that the end product lets us down. In Scotland, the Scottish Government have committed to 30 megabits to 100% of the population over the current Scottish Parliament.

Let us look at what will happen with the Government's offer here and at the trigger mechanism of a 75% subscription rate. In 2016, only 31% of people were getting 30 megabits; in 2015, it was only 27%. How long is a constituent in England, Wales or Northern Ireland going to have to wait before the USO catches up and gets to 75%? The USO could be either a really ambitious measure to close the digital divide or simply a safety net, and it is quite clearly the latter, which is fine—as long as it is clearly articulated as such—because other things can be done.

As the Minister knows, I have been a huge advocate of vouchers. I was disappointed that a voucher alternative was not included specifically in relation to the USO, but I welcomed the Government's move at the end of last year to hold a consultation on vouchers. That consultation is ready to report, but we are going into purdah. On this occasion, I accept that that is a valid excuse for not continuing our discussion for a number of weeks. However, I urge the Government to live up to their ambition.

The Minister says that fibre means fibre and that fibre is the future, and the Chancellor talks about millions of pounds for fibre and 5G, but they need to ensure that that money is universally available, because based on the Government's strategy to date, most of it, if not all of it, will flow to urban areas if there are no specific policies to ensure that it also goes into the rural economy. In their rush to get back up the fibre league tables, the Government will inevitably show the same pragmatism they have shown on superfast. I therefore urge them to use the opportunity of an election to put in their manifesto a commitment to vouchers and to empowering rural areas.

I have set up a Scottish borders digital forum, which brings together all the community councils. We have been looking at solutions and options, and we are considering how we not only catch up but put in place structures that ensure we do not fall behind in future. The USO will not help us do that; it will push fibre slightly further away, and we will see copper and perhaps

some wireless. If we get the right support, communities in my constituency such as Newcastleton or those in the Lammermuirs, which want to do community fibre schemes, could leap ahead, and that is where the voucher schemes could prove so valuable. Perhaps the Minister could confirm, if he is not saving this for some future date, whether vouchers are something that he could support and that fit into the current model. They would allow constituents in the borders to see their speeds leap forward.

If we do not show more ambition, and put more money in, the Government's policy will widen and cement the digital divide. They will be telling constituents in rural areas, "You can only get 10 megabits," while people in the cities are suddenly getting gigabits. I am sure many hon. Members here—not least those in rural constituencies—think that that would be a failure of Government policy. So let us take this opportunity to show ambition and to ensure that we realise the full potential of fibre and connectivity into the future.

I close by again thanking the team here for the way it has worked. I would like to have been consulted a bit more and to have seen a bit more foresight and ambition in the whole scheme, but the Bill does represent progress, even though it is, as was said, a baby step.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for giving me this final opportunity to speak on this Bill. I am particularly pleased given all our hard work and the fact that the Government have made the completion of its passage a priority during this final week.

I will confine my remarks to Lords amendments 246 and 247, which address problems in the secondary ticketing market that I, along with many other music fans, have been personally affected by. We have refined these proposals through various stages of the Bill Committee and discussed them at length in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for helping us to get the time to hear detailed evidence on this very important issue. I also thank all my colleagues on the Committee for their tenacious advocacy for producers and fans of sports, theatre and music, and their constructive work to allow the Committee to make some unanimous recommendations for the Bill Committee.

Damian Collins: I thank my hon. Friend for his words. Does he agree that it was particularly regrettable that Viagogo decided not to appear in front of the Committee when it should have given important evidence to us? Many people will draw their own conclusions as to its reasons for not appearing.

Nigel Adams: I could not agree more. It is despicable that Viagogo has dodged and been slippery around attending the Select Committee. There have been so many victims of Viagogo that it should have taken the opportunity to come and explain how it markets itself and presents its website. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I do not know if you are going to mention Claire Turnham and her campaign at this juncture, and I do not want to steal your thunder if you are, but I just wanted to mention—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): The hon. Gentleman's thunder.

Mrs Hodgson: Correct—his thunder. I wanted to mention that I have had an email from Claire Turnham, as I know you have—[*Interruption.*] He has, I mean. You would think I would have got the hang of this by now, Madam Deputy Speaker—I have been doing it for 12 years. I am obviously demob happy. I do apologise, and I will try to get the protocol right. Claire Turnham has been in touch, and the numbers are shocking—£51,000 has already been refunded to the victims of Viagogo. I was astonished, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman was, that there are still 418 members waiting to join the group.

Nigel Adams: I can assure the hon. Lady that my thunder is still very much intact and has not been stolen. I totally agree. The campaign that Claire Turnham has run has been exemplary, but she should not have had to run it. The customer services team at Viagogo should have dealt with the complaints that were flooding in. We will see, but I suspect that we have not heard the last of Viagogo in this place.

Although we have not been able to conclude the inquiry due to the impending Dissolution, I hope that our successor Committee, however it is comprised, will adopt the evidence that we have already heard and continue this work. I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has campaigned for years to get wider attention for the problems with secondary ticketing. Based on the number of people across the country who have shared their stories of being ripped off or missing out on a favourite show because of the practices of parasitical touts, I imagine that a large number of colleagues across this House have also heard from affected constituents how these practices are poisoning our cultural wells both for fans and creators.

Amendment 247 will prohibit breaches of ticket sales limits, helping to combat touts who use bot software to gobble up tickets before genuine fans can get them. I originally tabled a version of this amendment in Committee, and, thankfully, members of the Select Committee unanimously added their names. I am grateful to Ministers, particularly my right hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and Culture, a huge Paul Simon fan who has had experiences trying to gain Paul Simon tickets; to Members of the other place for their co-operation in fleshing out the legal details for a workable law; and to the Secretary of State for her work in engaging very closely with the industry.

It is particularly important that the amendment provides for an unlimited fine when someone is found guilty of this offence. Fans and ticket agents have been engaged in a technological arms race against increasingly sophisticated touts who can make tens of thousands of pounds of profit in one go from, say, just one pair of Adele tickets. To prevent fans from being fleeced and to protect the rights of artists to decide how they want to sell their tickets, we needed to make touting a genuinely bad proposition for those seeking to make a quick windfall, and a smaller fine could not have done that. I am very pleased that this law has teeth.

2.15 pm

Amendment 246 seeks to augment the Consumer Rights Act 2015 provisions that require transparency

and declaration of certain information to the buyer during any ticket resale. We have heard time and again from fans who have bought tickets from touts only to find that they were misled about the validity of those tickets or where the tickets were located, or even denied entry; and, on the other side, from artists and venues who have anti-touting policies but cannot enforce them because touts and resale websites either flout the Consumer Rights Act or are not required under the Act to declare enough information for them to identify and cancel these tickets.

Some of these stories are heart-breaking. As we have heard, one of the worst offenders has been the company Viagogo, which, in addition to often completely ignoring Consumer Rights Act requirements to declare information such as the face value of the ticket, has often even failed to display to consumers the full price they would be paying for the resold tickets. As a result, fans who thought they would be paying a couple of hundred pounds would end up instead finding that their credit cards had been charged amounts into the thousands. For some, the dire financial straits this put them into has led them to have panic attacks and even to consider suicide. The Victims of Viagogo group organised by Claire Turnham has identified approximately £108,000 of refunds owed, of which less than half has been refunded, and the group has hundreds upon hundreds more ripped-off fans waiting to join. Even when a refund is given, people are still left without tickets for events they were excited about, with disappointed children and a family day out ruined, as was the case for one woman who hoped to surprise her husband with concert tickets when he came home from serving in Afghanistan. As we have heard, our Select Committee invited Viagogo to give evidence and respond to our questions, but it left an empty chair. I hope that our successor Committee does not let this pass.

Lords amendment 246, and the Government amendment to it, is important because adding an unique ticket reference number to any ticket resale will allow consumers to check with a venue, in advance of the purchase, whether that ticket will be valid, and also allow artists and venues to enforce their terms and conditions and to cancel touted tickets. There is no point in making a rule if we cannot enforce it, and it is high time for touts to learn that they cannot simply continue with impunity. I therefore ask that Ministers work with the industry to establish in regulations what constitutes a unique ticket number that will be identifiable to agents and venues. If this happens, it is genuine progress, and I am grateful to the Government for getting behind it. Originally, however, Lords amendment 246 included the addition of a requirement for the CRA to list any terms and conditions associated with resale of a ticket. The Government amendment has deleted that provision, contending that this is already covered under section 90(3)(b). What I have learned seems to indicate to me that the position is significantly less clear. An unequivocal statement from the Minister would therefore be a welcome step, and I would also be grateful if we could look into this further in future.

Going back to the point about a law being only as good as its enforcement, one problem we have is that there have not yet been any prosecutions under the Consumer Rights Act for violations to do with secondary ticketing, and instead the Competition and Markets

Authority is undertaking a review. The review is welcome, and should I be re-elected I will be most interested in its conclusions. There have clearly been myriad violations of the CRA with regard to ticket reselling. Without having been able to test the law's function in court, we do not know whether it is legally effective and fit for purpose, not to mention the fact that the lack of prosecutions means that the law is not serving as the robust protection for consumers that it was intended to be.

For example, Metallica—a group with which I am sure you are familiar, Madam Deputy Speaker—has a very popular UK tour coming up this autumn. There are strict conditions attached to the tickets, including that the lead booker must enter with others in their party, which is limited to a maximum of four. They must also present photo identification matching the name on the purchase. All those conditions have been clearly listed by the primary sellers, namely Ticketmaster and the Ticket Factory. However, the FanFair Alliance, which does great work in this area, has found multiple listings on Ticketmaster's secondary sites, Get Me In and Seatwave, as well as on those of the other two major resellers, StubHub and Viagogo, which do not note those conditions. It is a disaster waiting to happen for fans, if the venues follow through on enforcing those conditions.

Whether the problem is one of enforcement of the CRA or of the CRA being unclear, it certainly needs to be sorted out, because it is obvious that the conditions are not being consistently declared. Personally, I cannot see how it would be harmful to make the Consumer Rights Act absolutely clear on that issue, and I would appreciate clarification from the Minister.

Although we have achieved great progress, problems remain with secondary ticketing and they need to be considered in future. A number of dodgy practices are yet to be investigated. This week I heard from someone who recently resold spare tickets on StubHub. He told me that he had priced the tickets below those offered by other sellers and closer to their face value, but instead of a fan buying them it was StubHub itself that bought the tickets, presumably to resell for an even greater profit.

The potential use of Google AdWords is also an issue. Ticket resellers, including Viagogo, spend top dollar to advertise themselves highly in Google's search results, often masquerading as official ticket resellers when in fact they have not been authorised by the venues or the event organisers and are selling tickets that are invalid if resold. I understand from Google that it wishes to be vigilant of deceptive advertising but that to act on those issues it needs evidence and examples to be reported, either from consumers who have been turned away from events after buying a ticket from a company using a sponsored link on Google, or from the Advertising Standards Authority. Such information has not been forthcoming thus far.

In conclusion—I can see the joy on the Whip's face at those words. [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"] There is more, if Members would like me to continue. *[Interruption.]* I will not quote any of Metallica's lyrics, but only because I do not know them. I thank Ministers, the Secretary of State and colleagues across this House for helping to make some real progress in this Bill and I look forward to seeing its measures enacted.

Mrs Hodgson: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Gentleman, who I have got to know very well in our time campaigning on this issue during this and the last Parliament. It is a real delight that we have reached this stage and I rise to speak in favour of Lords amendments 246 and 247 on the resale of tickets. It is with great delight that I welcome the news that the Government accept those Lords amendments and that they will make it on to the statute book before this Parliament dissolves.

It goes without saying that we would not be in this position without the concerted cross-party campaigning to put fans first in this broken market. None of that would have happened without the campaigning by me and others over the years. The list is very long, so I hope that the House will indulge me. It includes the steadfast support received from my own party's Front Benchers, especially in recent years. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), made an excellent speech today; I sincerely hope that she will be returned so that she can continue in that vein.

Conservative Members have also given support, including, most notably in the last Parliament, Mike Weatherley, the former Member for Hove and Portslade, who I know is a friend of the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams). Mike Weatherley and I founded and co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group on ticket abuse. In recent years, the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and other members of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, including the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—I was going to say the gentleman sitting over there wearing a red tie, but that would have made me sound like David Dimbleby—have worked tirelessly on its investigation into the secondary ticketing market. I sincerely hope that the Committee will pick up on the issue again in the next Parliament, so that all of the inquiry's hard work is not lost. I am sure that that will happen.

I also acknowledge the Minister's customary good humour and willingness to listen, which, along with the work of shadow Front Benchers in the Lords and those who tabled the amendments, has ensured that we have reached a satisfactory conclusion. I also thank the Secretary of State, who I am pleased to see in the Chamber. More than three years ago, when she was a Home Office Minister, she met me and the former Member for Hove and Portslade to discuss the fraud aspect of this issue. That proves that Ministers have long memories, so such meetings are worth it.

Matt Hancock: In response to a point raised by the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), we are clear that section 93 of the Consumer Rights Act requires secondary sellers to provide information on ticket restrictions on resale.

Mrs Hodgson: Excellent. I was going to come on to that issue, following on from the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty. I will have to remember not to press the Minister on it, because he has already addressed it. That is welcome and I am pleased that he has put it on the record.

I also commend the sterling work over many years by colleagues on both sides of the House of Lords. Way back in 1997, the Labour peer Lord Pendry, the then

shadow Sports Minister, was the first to coin the phrase “put fans first”, so I cannot claim credit for that, as I did not invent it. He campaigned on the issue way back then, but sadly for him and, indeed, for us, he was not made a Minister in the Government that followed, so he was not able to ensure that this happened 20 years ago. That shows that this day has been a very long time coming.

More recent contributions have been made by Lord Stevenson and Baroness Hayter from the Labour Front Bench, Lord Clement-Jones of the Liberal Democrats and the amazingly talented late Baroness Heyhoe Flint of the Conservatives, who tabled the first relevant amendments in the Lords and who sadly passed away a few months ago. She was a joy to work with. Without this campaign I would never have had the chance to know her and I wish I could have had that privilege for longer.

I also want to give a special mention to the former Sports Minister and Conservative peer, Lord Moynihan, whose renowned tenacity during debates on the Consumer Rights Act 2015 and the wash-up at the end of the last Parliament ensured that we got certain measures on to the statute book. Without him, we would not have progressed to where we are now, as we would still be at base camp waiting for the weather to shift. He has been the most amazing ally and expert in this crusade, and all fans across the country who are not ripped off in the future should know his name and thank him.

Having finished the thank yous, I turn to the business at hand. Lords amendments 246 and 247 will take us one step closer to ensuring that fans are finally put first in the secondary market, something has been sorely lacking for years. At this point, I was going to press the Minister on the point that he has clarified, so I thank him again for doing so. Accepting the Lords amendments is a fitting way to end this Parliament, and I am confident that any residual issues will be picked up quickly once Parliament returns following the general election.

None of us know or can predict what will happen come polling day, but if the good people of Washington and Sunderland West re-elect me, and if other Members present are re-elected by their constituents, I will definitely get right back to businesses and pick up where we leave off today, because there are plenty more issues to continue to campaign on. We have taken one step closer, granted, but we are still far from our cross-party vision of a fair market that ensures that fans are not ripped off.

We need to consider the enforcement of current legislation, such as that which is being investigated by the Consumer Markets Authority, as the Chair of the Select Committee mentioned. We need to support the victims of Viagogo, who, as the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty mentioned, have been unfairly ripped off by one of the worst players in this market, which, disgracefully, did not attend the Select Committee when called to do so. We should definitely revisit that question to see whether there are ways to force companies that have their head office overseas to come and give evidence in this place. It seems wrong that they can evade that by saying that they are not based in the UK when all their customers are based in the UK. We should also ensure that the Waterson review's recommendations are implemented fully and effectively. The list of things that

we need to put right could go on, but those are just a few of the many issues that must be picked up in the next Parliament.

2.30 pm

Finally, I want to again thank the Minister, the Secretary of State, my Front-Bench colleagues, Members from across the House and our colleagues in the other place for committing so much time to this campaign. For the early part of the past eight years, I felt like a lone warrior, but I have welcomed the momentum and support from Members of both Houses that have built up around the campaign. That momentum cannot slow when the newly elected House returns in June. Fans deserve for us to campaign for them at every opportunity and to put them first. Let us all commit to continue to fight for them until this market is cleaned up; then our work will be done.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak today, because, as in the case of my friend the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—I call him my friend with sincerity—you, Madam Deputy Speaker, were in the Chair when I gave my maiden speech. You will also be in the Chair while I make my final speech of this Parliament.

I support the Bill wholeheartedly as it is consumer-friendly from beginning to end. That will be of extreme benefit to my constituents; it will improve their lives and enable them to grow their businesses and have more fulfilling careers. In particular, I want to highlight the points made about the universal service obligation, switching mobile phones—this has been an ongoing debate for a while and it is good to see resolution on it—and all the initiatives with digital government. I also appreciate the intent of many of the suggested amendments, if not their exact wording, and agree with the Minister that those that have been accepted are there to improve the Bill.

I would also like to echo the comments of many other Members by saying that in the development of the Bill and in Committee—we almost have an alumni network of Committee members in the Chamber today—it has been very nice for me, as a relatively new MP, to see Parliament working at its best, when we work across parties, have meetings and discussions, and disagree respectfully, but come to reasonable conclusions because we have the same intent in mind. We see the theatre of Prime Minister's questions and other events, but Parliament does a lot of work across the parties. I echo the comments in praise of the work done by many colleagues over many years, well before I came to the House of Commons, to make significant progress on a vital Bill.

I respectfully disagree slightly with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). I would not like to run down the UK digital economy. We have the largest digital economy in terms of percentage of GDP in the world and this Bill will enable us to be even more successful. We need to ensure that we have an enabling Bill to continue that success. We should not take our digital leadership for granted, and measures in this Bill will therefore be a huge advantage.

The Minister mentioned further work being required in several other areas. I agree with him, particularly on bill capping and many of the topics to do with the

[Nigel Huddleston]

significant changes required in secondary ticketing. The devil will be in the detail on secondary ticketing. I completely understand the rationale for having a booking number or unique reference number for secondary ticket transactions, but we have to be very careful that that does not have the unintended consequence of opening things up to more fraud. We must be very careful about the details of that element of the Bill.

Finally, I want to comment on the internet and social platforms. I know a fair bit about this because, as many Members know, I worked for Google before I came to Parliament. It is a great company, as are all the major internet players. They do a lot of good, but they also need to take their responsibilities far more seriously than they have of late. I welcome the changes, and significant progress has been made on child exploitation images and age verification. It was alarming for me to learn that 1.4 million people under the age of 18 accessed pornography in the UK just last year.

The scale of inappropriate content online now is huge. YouTube alone has 400 hours of video uploaded every single minute of every single day. A lot of that content is perfectly acceptable—fine, fun, entertaining, newsworthy and so on—but some of it is inappropriate and the scale of the inappropriate material is shocking, and this comes from someone who worked in the sector for a while. Every single day, Google removes 200,000 videos that have been flagged as inappropriate. Last year, Google removed 92 million videos from YouTube for being inappropriate, up from 14 million the year before. Clearly, Google are being active and other social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, are being somewhat active, but we need to send a message loudly and clearly, particularly when we consider the social media code of conduct, that although they are doing something they are not doing enough.

If that means that they have to spend millions, tens of millions or billions working on making sure that we, our children and our families are protected and can operate online in safety, so be it. I would prefer the companies to do this of their own volition and to take appropriate action by investing considerably in technology and human resources—bodies to make judgments and assessments on the appropriateness of content online—but I hope that I can work with colleagues across the parties when we come back to Parliament, as I hope we will, to ensure that if they do not act we will take action for them.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I hate to be someone who repeats things, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I think that you were also in the Chair when I made my maiden speech. I hope that that is not a bad omen.

To get back to the Bill, I am at a slight disadvantage compared with other Members who served on the Committee and have a better insight into the Bill. I want to restrict my speech mainly to Lords amendment 1. I found myself somewhat in agreement with the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr)—we come from rural areas, although his is in Scotland and mine in Northern Ireland, and we find ourselves in fairly similar places on this matter. At one stage, the Minister said that the Bill was unfinished

business and I think that he will find that as time goes forward it will continue to be unfinished business. Technology is moving on so fast that we will see more demands, no matter what area that is in. That is my one concern about the Bill; it might not be future-proof. I accept that there is movement in reducing the proposal from 30 megabits per second down to 10 megabits for broadband.

Matt Hancock: I understand that argument, and one reason we rejected Lords amendment 1 was precisely because it was not future-proofed and contained specific figures. The powers in the Bill require Ofcom to review speeds so that as technology advances so too can the expectations and demands of the universal service obligation.

Tom Elliott: I thank the Minister for that clarification, which is useful for someone such as me, who does not have that specific insight. And hey, if we can get 10 megabits per second to all the householders and businesses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, that is great. It is a huge job of work, as less than 40% of businesses and households in my constituency have access to 10 megabits per second. If we can get to that grade, I say bring it on, and the sooner the better. I want to see businesses flourish. In an area that is very rural, many of the application forms of agriculture now have to be done online. It is a requirement, and we do not have the access to the high-speed broadband needed to do that.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman accept from me that there are rural areas in England, too? Although the Government are to be congratulated on what they are doing, does he agree that we must do more to ensure that geographically isolated areas do not remain digitally isolated?

Tom Elliott: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman—he has my full support in his attempts to resolve that matter.

I will give hon. Members an example. My young son got a new PlayStation 4 for Christmas 16 months ago, and I promised to download him a game for Christmas. I gave him the voucher on Christmas morning in the hope that the game, which was some sort of simulator, would have downloaded by lunchtime, but it had not even downloaded by new year's day—it took 10 days to download. Such things are frustrating for young people. They also have to be able to do their classwork and their student work, so they rely on being online. There is now a great deal of reliance on being online.

I want to put on record my appreciation for the fact that the Government have introduced this important Bill and ensured that it has made progress. I accept the Minister's suggestion that Lords amendment 1 was not future-proofed, but I emphasise that we must continue to look at the matter regularly, because changes will be required.

Claire Perry: I want to make three points, and I will not detain the House for too long. First, I want to set out for the benefit of the Front Benchers the concern that I still feel about some definitional points; secondly, I want to talk about how far we have come; and, thirdly, I want to echo what has been said about how cross-party working can deliver in this place.

Both Ministers have received a letter from me on the part 3 amendments. I understand how we have reached the current position. We expressed concern during various briefings about the fact that definitional questions about the difference between “prohibited” and “extreme” were not thrashed out in Committee. I commend Ministers for the very productive Committee proceedings. Despite what the Opposition Front-Bench team have said, I think that the Bill was greatly improved by the current ministerial team, who showed a real willingness to engage, listen and improve the Bill. I feel strongly that we are in a much better place after Committee than we were when we started.

We have had concerns about the definition of “prohibited material”, which is now a clear, appropriate and workable definition guided by five different statutes, one of which is the Obscene Publications Act 1959. That Act gave rise to the concern about whether certain acts—I will not trouble *Hansard* to check whether certain terms are permissible; I will simply not use them—that were once considered to be illegal are no longer considered to be so, and thus should not be captured by the definition of “prohibited”. I think that the concern over those very specific items led the Government to narrow the focus too much to a definition of extreme pornography. That definition leaves in the middle a lot of material that is not currently captured by statute, but is considered to be anything from life-threatening, at worst, to damaging at best.

By my reading, the definition of extreme pornography makes space for two things: all but the most extreme forms of sexual violence—by that I am referring to choking pornography and multiple sexual acts on one woman or man—and non-photographic child sexual images, including animation. The latter particularly concerns us, because we have all worked hard to ensure that this whole area is outlawed, without any discussion of what is permissible. I think we would all support the complete removal of that whole area from the internet.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): It was a great privilege to work with the hon. Lady on the Committee. Does she share my concern that we do not yet have enough information or clear, research-based evidence about the long-term impact of viewing or appearing in all sorts of different types of pornography?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady has worked assiduously in this area, and I thank her for our many conversations and the improvements that we have made together to the Bill. She is quite right: in some ways we are conducting an experiment with the unknown, in terms of child-rearing and the way in which young people absorb information about the world. It is not for me to stand here and pontificate about what might or might not be harmful, but according to research that Care and others have shared with me, when people are shown images of activities that will now be permitted behind an age verification screen, between 74% and 81% favour preventing any access to them. That is the joint response from men and women, although unsurprisingly women have a stronger sense that such images should not be visible to any age group.

2.45 pm

The Bill will mean that we use the definition of “prohibited material” in the offline world, but the narrower definition of “extreme pornography” in the online world.

When people are asked whether that is sensible, 82% say that the regime should be as tough or tougher for online material, given its ease of access for the generation we are trying to protect.

Matt Hancock: I want to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend, who, like others, has improved the Bill no end through her work. I reiterate that what is illegal offline is illegal online. For online, we have used the Bill to introduce and enforce age verification. Age verification can, of course, take place only online, because it is about stopping people viewing such material online. I therefore think the point that she has just made is taken care of.

As for definitions, we had to use an existing definition but, as I said in my speech, we regard that as unfinished business. We have accepted an amendment that compels the Secretary of State to report, after consultation, between 12 and 18 months after this Bill is enacted. That report will provide the opportunity to take all the research into account and reach a good settlement that has strong support behind it, rather than doing everything in a rush just before the Dissolution of Parliament.

Claire Perry: I appreciate the Minister’s comments, and he neatly anticipates what I was going to say: I have no intention of causing trouble at this stage, because he has assured us from the Dispatch Box and in meetings of his firm commitment to making sure that these definitional questions are resolved in such a way as to enable all parties to support them.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way a second time. I want to put on record a further concern that I raised by tabling a probing amendment in Committee, but that remains unresolved. Regardless of the appearance of the acts, I am concerned about the welfare and safety of people who may have been coerced, forced or violently pushed into appearing in pornography. We may not be able to tell whether that is the case from viewing such material, and I am very concerned about the effect that that can have.

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady raises an important point about such material, which is easily available and, in some cases, marketed for commercial purposes. Many of us believe—evidence is emerging to back this up—that it may be extremely damaging to people who view it, particularly if they are underage, as well as to those who are coerced into performing such acts. I hope that the hon. Lady shares my relief and satisfaction about the fact that Ministers accept that, and that they are prepared to continue to consider the question of who this material is harmful to.

That brings me neatly to my second point, which is to emphasise quite how far we have come. I pay tribute to many colleagues, some of whom are not in the Chamber. Some, like the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), are standing down. With me, she led the cross-party inquiry into the original question about what we should do in this space. In the face of much prevarication and pushback—not from within this place, but primarily from the industry—we managed to deliver a result that was effective and proportionate. I thank all colleagues, including Ministers and shadow Ministers, for continuing to work with such commitment.

[Claire Perry]

I want to refer to the recent conversations that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has had about banning extremist material or making its dissemination more difficult. In this space, none of us is a technological expert—with the exception of my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who can probably claim to be one—but I think that we understand what our constituents want. Whenever we want to change something in this space, we get the response, “Oh, don’t trouble your little heads about the internet,” or, “You innocent people know nothing about this, so how can you possibly stand up and talk about stopping extremist material or preventing children from accessing material online? You do not really understand that the internet is a special place and it should be different.” I have never understood why we should allow the internet to be a special form of content dissemination when we willingly accept self-regulation and Government regulation of other forms of media distribution.

What has been so good about the journey we have been on since 2012 is that we have seen an increase in corporate social responsibility, as my hon. Friend said. We have seen internet service providers—led, I might say, by TalkTalk and Sky, which were then joined rapidly by the others—really going out there to put in place family-friendly filters and to invest in education about online safety. I was delighted to see that the proposed changes for PSHE—personal, social and health and economic education—include conversations about how our young people can be safe digital citizens online.

I want to report back from a visit I recently conducted to the wonderful Internet Watch Foundation in Cambridge. It has benefited substantially from increased funding from the industry as the result of the work that we have all done. That work has enabled it to go into places such as the dark web, where it knows that people are exchanging child abuse imagery, and to block that material and take it down. It is extremely grateful for the work the Government have continued to do and the support it has received from right across the House.

However, I share the concerns raised by my hon. Friend. I still think that companies out there are hiding behind their legal jurisdiction in the United States, and therefore their adherence, as it were, to a very different set of freedom of speech standards. Secondly, they are giving the slightly shoulder-shrugging response, “Well, if you make it illegal, we will comply,” which is not the way to build Government and consumer confidence in their platforms. I am afraid that time is running out for companies such as Facebook to be saying, “We’re really sorry that a video of a man hanging his 18-month-old baby was on the internet.” If the company can be so clever as to make an advert for a specific colour of shoes, which I had browsed once, that will follow me around the internet almost in perpetuity, I think it has the technology—the pictorial and IP addressing technology—to deal with that. It would probably say, “Look, she does not know the right words,” but I am a

politician, not a technologist. I think that the industry is stuffed full of very clever people who could make this change happen if they wanted to, and they should stop looking for individual or collective Governments to force them to do so.

Finally, I want once again to put on record my thanks to all Members who have campaigned with me. Together we have really made a difference. I also thank Ministers, who have really taken this seriously and worked very hard to deliver real progress. Should I be lucky enough to be re-elected in a few weeks’ time, I guess I will be happy to continue this journey, particularly in relation to the definitional clarity that would enhance this space even further.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made in lieu of Lords amendment 1.

Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 2.

Lords amendments 3 to 39 agreed to.

Lords amendment 40 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendment 40.

Lords amendments 41 to 236 agreed to.

Lords amendments 237 to 239 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 240 and 241 agreed to.

Lords amendment 242 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 242.

Lords amendments 243 to 245 agreed to.

Amendment (a) made to Lords amendment 246.

Lords amendment 246, as amended, agreed to.

Lords amendments 247 to 289 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendments 248 to 254.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): We now come to my favourite piece of parliamentary procedure, so in my last session in the Chair, I am delighted to ask the Whip to move the motion for the Reasons Committee.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 237 to 239.

That Mims Davies, Louise Haigh, Matt Hancock, Calum Kerr, Scott Mann, Jeff Smith and Graham Stuart be members of the Committee.

That Matt Hancock be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

Criminal Finances 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 11 and 33. If the House agrees to them, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the *Journal*.

Clause 1

UNEXPLAINED WEALTH ORDERS: ENGLAND AND WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND

2.59 pm

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 147.

Mr Wallace: I just heard what you had to read through, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have 147 amendments, so I hope the Chair has changed by the time we have got through them. However, I do not think we will be taking them individually.

When we sent the Bill to the Lords some months ago, there was considerable cross-party consensus on its aims and measures. After exercising robust scrutiny, we made a number of amendments in this House, including the significant addition of the Magnitsky clause on gross human rights abuses and violations, which I believe significantly improves the legislation. I am pleased to say that the same consensus continued in the House of Lords and that the group before us consists only of Government amendments.

With Prorogation imminent, it is crucial that we get the many valuable powers in the Bill on to the statute book, including unexplained wealth orders, the seizure and forfeiture powers, and the offences of corporate failure to prevent tax evasion. I welcome the support of colleagues across the House to ensure that we can achieve that goal. Although there are 147 amendments in the group, I reassure hon. Members that they are to a great extent minor or technical changes that aim to enhance the operation of the Bill's existing measures. I will briefly highlight some of the most significant measures.

Undoubtedly, the issue that received the most substantial scrutiny in the House of Lords was that of company ownership transparency in the British overseas territories with financial centres and the Crown dependencies. This topic is of great interest to right hon. and hon. Members in this House. As part of our international efforts to increase corporate transparency, the Government continue to work closely with our overseas territories and Crown dependencies to combat corruption and ensure that they implement the commitments they have made on law enforcement access to beneficial ownership data by the deadline of June this year.

I met the Chief Ministers of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man earlier this week to discuss their progress, and pressed again our ambition for transparent registers. Yesterday, I co-chaired a meeting of peers and the London representatives of the overseas territories, so that they could update us on their efforts so far.

Once the commitments have been implemented, they will put the UK and our overseas territories and Crown dependencies well ahead of most jurisdictions in terms of transparency, including many of our G20 partners and other major corporate and financial centres, including some states in the United States. As I have said previously, we should be proud of that fact and of the progress we have made since the anti-corruption summit last year. These arrangements will prevent criminals from hiding behind anonymous shell companies and bring significant benefits in terms of the capacity and information that UK law enforcement authorities will have at their disposal to tackle criminal activity and investigate bribery and corruption, money laundering and tax evasion.

It is right, however, that we review the effectiveness of the implementation to assess whether the arrangements are delivering the outcomes that we and our law enforcement agencies are after. That is why we amended the Bill in the House of Lords to require a statutory review of the progress made by the territories against their existing commitments. That report will be laid in Parliament, so that the House can revisit this issue as appropriate in due course.

Some peers and right hon. and hon. Members would have liked us to go further. However, as I have made clear, we are making considerable progress by working consensually with the territories and respect our constitutional settlements with them. The Government maintain that it would not be appropriate to force legislation on jurisdictions that are, to a great extent, self-governing. With Prorogation growing ever nearer, I welcome the fact that that amendment was strongly supported by peers of all parties. I trust that hon. Members will agree that it is a sensible way forward at this stage.

Turning to the provisions that were already in the Bill, we have made a number of amendments to the proposed operation of unexplained wealth orders. The hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) raised concerns that the £100,000 threshold for the imposition of unexplained wealth orders could disadvantage law enforcement agencies in certain parts of the country, particularly where property values may be lower or the proceeds of crime more evenly shared out. The Northern Ireland Executive raised similar concerns. In the light of that, Lords amendments 2 and 15 will lower the threshold from £100,000 to £50,000, as was requested by the SNP. The threshold remains an important safeguard that will be considered by the court, along with other factors, before unexplained wealth orders can be made.

Following concerns raised in the Lords and by the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) in evidence to the Public Bill Committee, further amendments were made in the Lords to ensure that unexplained wealth orders could be applied in relation to property held in trusts or other complex ownership arrangements, including through a foreign company. Those amendments will help to ensure that the orders have the greatest possible impact once law enforcement agencies can use them.

Lastly in relation to unexplained wealth orders, Lords amendments 11 and 33 provide for a compensation scheme in relation to the interim freezing orders that can accompany an order. Such a freezing order would

[Mr Wallace]

be used to ensure that someone does not scarper while we go to court to put in place an order. We therefore need a compensation scheme, should the court decide an order is not appropriate. That is an important safeguard to circumscribe the use of such powers.

Hon. Members will recall that we extended the seizure and forfeiture powers in chapter 3 of part 1 on Report in the Commons to cover gaming vouchers and casino chips, following another concern raised by Opposition Members. Following a representation from the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, Lords amendments 47 to 49 and 91 to 93 will also allow law enforcement agencies to seize a betting slip where they suspect that the funds used to place the bet are the proceeds of crime. Those provisions will be subject to the same safeguards as those on cash seizure, and we will work with bookmakers and their trade associations to ensure that the measures are used effectively. I trust that hon. Members will welcome that further expansion of the powers.

On a related issue, Lords amendments 69 to 71 will allow for legal expenses to be deducted from any property recovered under the seizure and forfeiture powers, helping to ensure that they function effectively in practice.

Following discussions with banks and other regulated bodies, Lords amendment 36 will extend the period in which companies can share information with each other to tackle money laundering. At present, information sharing can take place for 28 days from the initial notification; we are extending that to 84 days. That takes account of more complex cases where, for example, numerous banks may have relevant information. It is a further sign of this Government's commitment to working in partnership with the private sector to tackle money laundering. It will help to ensure that the information sharing provisions underpin the incredibly important work of the joint money laundering intelligence taskforce.

As I said at the outset, there are a number of other Lords amendments in the group that provide for minor or technical changes to the existing provisions. I do not expect that any of them will provoke significant concern among hon. Members, but I would, as ever, be happy to address specific queries during my closing remarks.

I hope that the House agrees that the amendments that have been made in the Lords improve the Bill, which, as I have said, has been the subject of significant cross-party support throughout its passage. The Bill, as amended, will ensure that law enforcement agencies have the tools they need to tackle money laundering and terrorist financing and to work as effectively as possible with the private sector on those crucial national security priorities.

We must, of course, remember that the Bill is only one element of the Government's wider approach to tackling corruption and other serious and organised crime. I referred in earlier debates to Labour's Bribery Act 2010, which is another plank in the assault on corruption. That goes to the heart of how the Bill is part of a wider package and continual process of tackling corruption.

I was pleased that there was a call for evidence on the review of limited partnerships, which closed on 17 March 2017, as this allowed people to make their concerns

known about the abuse of Scottish limited partnerships that we have all seen and that has been evidenced by *The Herald* newspaper throughout this process. I thank the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, who has been an effective champion on this issue. I hope that, once the review is completed and we see the results, he and I will be in agreement about the next steps. Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy officials are analysing the responses and expect to submit advice on options to Ministers shortly after the election.

The Ministry of Justice has conducted an initial call for evidence to examine the case for changes to the law on corporate criminality liability for wider forms of economic crime. It is considering the responses at present. We are also strengthening the supervisory regimes for the regulated sector, including proposals for a new office of professional body anti-money laundering supervision—OPBAS, I am told it is called—in the Financial Conduct Authority, to help ensure that the non-statutory supervisors comply with their obligations in the money laundering regulations.

The UK's public register of beneficial ownership information—the first of its type in the G20—has been up and running since June 2016. Recently, we published proposals for a further public beneficial ownership register for foreign legal entities to increase the transparency of overseas investment in UK property and central Government procurement contracts. We are continuing to reform the suspicious activity report regime, including through investment in systems and processes to complement the legislative reforms. Following a commitment at last year's anti-corruption summit, we have worked closely with civil society, businesses and practitioners to develop the first UK anti-corruption strategy.

I am pleased that we have reached this stage of the Bill's consideration in such a constructive fashion. I invite the House to agree to the Lords amendments before us, so that this crucial legislation can be enacted without further delay.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I rise to speak on behalf of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition for the final occasion in the current Parliament.

The Minister talked about cross-party co-operation and Labour's Bribery Act 2010, which the Bill builds on, as well as the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. We welcome all the Government's technical amendments, because we want a Bill that works and prevents financial crime.

We all remember the heady days of 2016, when the Bill was first announced. We remember the headlines about the possibility that the assets of human rights abusers who bought London homes would be seized and all the rhetoric about cleaning up dirty money. We welcome the Bill and we are happy to support the amendments, most of which are technical and will ensure that some measures in the Bill will work more effectively. They perform a tidying-up function. We particularly support the measures that are intended to ensure that unexplained wealth orders cannot be circumvented through trusts or other complex financial arrangements, and we welcome the thought that has gone into the specific arrangements for the devolved Governments in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We in

the Labour party hope that the return of an inclusive devolved Government in Northern Ireland will be achieved as soon as possible.

Let me now say something about Lords amendment 34. Throughout the Bill's passage through the House of Commons, we have consistently returned to the elephant in the room: beneficial ownership and transparency in the United Kingdom's overseas territories and Crown dependencies. I do not want to restate all the arguments—there is no time for me to do so, because we all have to go back to our constituencies and prepare for power, do we not?—but I believe that my position, and that of the Labour party, is clear. Labour believes that the Government have a moral duty to ensure that our overseas territories and Crown dependencies adopt publicly accessible registers of beneficial ownership to prevent them from being at the global epicentre of illicit financial practices, which damage developing countries and the world economy. They contribute to geopolitical instability, and they do our reputation harm as well. We have seen headlines that, while not suggesting that dead bodies can be seen piling up on the streets of London, make it clear that malpractices have been taking place.

The argument can run and run, and we can have another day for it, but I take heart from the Government's realisation that a step in the right direction on the long and winding road is ensuring that the new arrangements for information sharing between the relevant territories and the UK's enforcement agencies are subject to an open and transparent review. Territories such as the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands have been astute. They are very clever at using what are essentially tokenistic, box-ticking consultations—*soi-disant*, in inverted commas—to argue that compliance, competitiveness and security concerns hamper their adoption of centralised and closed registers of beneficial ownership. They do that because they know they can get away with it. They know that having a centralised, as opposed to a decentralised, platform brings them one step closer to laying the foundations for a public register in the future. That is the holy grail. That is what is at the end of the rainbow—what we are all looking for.

The Government's concession on the issue is much appreciated, but I believe that the original Labour amendment would have been a far more effective vehicle for assessing the substance of the overseas territories' claims that they are unable to have public registers of beneficial ownership owing to those compliance, security and competitiveness concerns—all the pretexts and excuses that are being wheeled out. We firmly believe that this is a missed opportunity for Britain. The systems of British overseas territories and Crown dependencies allow tax avoidance on what some people describe as an industrial scale. It does go on, and we cannot pretend that it does not. The Government's unwillingness to support our position on registers of beneficial ownership is unforgivable. Sadly, it shows that the Conservative party is not serious enough about money laundering. It could do better. We used to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime—indeed, we still are—but the Conservatives could be tougher on financial crime. They are not as tough as they would have us believe.

3.15 pm

Money laundering and corruption have been identified as high-priority threats in the National Crime Agency's national control strategy. The Minister mentioned last year's summit under David Cameron. How long ago it all seems! Times are changing before our eyes. Those threats have also been identified in the UK's strategic defence and security review, its national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing and its overseas development aid strategy. Incidentally, I welcome the fact that the 0.7% commitment remains in the Conservative manifesto.

We all know that international terror networks require large-scale and continuous funding to conduct their operations. It could not be clearer that a finance sector embroiled in money laundering and tax avoidance is a threat to us all. I grant that the Bill is a step in the right direction, but it is regrettable that it does not contain provision for public registers of beneficial ownership. It is a case of two steps forward, one step back. However, I am not surprised that the Government are unperturbed by having missed this opportunity, given their threat to turn post-Brexit Britain into a low-wage tax haven in which workers' rights will potentially be tossed aside.

We are in a wash-up period, so let us hope that a Bill that was announced with such fanfare is not washed up on a beach of lost dreams. We now find ourselves caught up in a precipitous rush to an election that is taking place with almost indecent haste. Whatever happened to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011? It really is not worth the paper that it is written on. This election is taking place for no other reason than political expediency. I very much hope that on the other side of it we will be in government, but wherever we are, we will be watching what happens next.

If the forthcoming review demonstrates that the decentralised platforms favoured by the overseas territories are impeding the operational efficacy of our enforcement agencies, Labour Members will demand that the Government react immediately to ensure that all platforms are centralised and made public. The review is not the end of the path towards transparency for those territories; it is merely the start. The Labour party will continue to fight to ensure that they eventually embrace full openness and transparency.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Unlike some other Members, Madam Deputy Speaker, I did not make my maiden speech with you in the Chair, but I seem to have made a number of speeches in front of you, although some have been made to an empty Chamber. Perhaps, if we are both lucky enough to be re-elected, we will not be drawing the short straw during the next parliamentary term.

As the Minister said, the Bill's passage has been widely consensual and co-operative. We have managed to work together across all party boundaries in Committee, at various meetings, in discussions with the Minister and during debates on the Floor of the House. We have reached a point at which we think that the Bill is a very decent start towards the longer-term goal of tackling and eradicating financial criminality. I think that everyone agrees with those aims. Of course, we think that the Bill could be improved, and I am sure that the Minister will be minded to agree, in theory, with the principles of the improvements that we envisage. I trust that we will work on that as time goes on.

[Richard Arkless]

Touching now on some of the Lords amendments, I was delighted to hear the Minister say that the threshold for unexplained wealth orders will be reduced from £100,000 to £50,000 pursuant to the submissions we made in the Bill Committee. It was gracious of the Minister to give us that credit at the Dispatch Box, and it is taken graciously. There are very good reasons why the threshold should be £50,000, and the Minister acknowledged them in his speech. The last thing we want is something in the terms and conditions—the facets and facilities—of an UWO that could be used by the criminals to get one step ahead and subvert that process. Bringing the threshold down goes a long way towards closing off the gaps for the criminals; I thank the Minister for that and am glad that this change will be in the Bill in its final form.

The inclusion of betting slips as a form of cash in the Bill is also welcome. That was a Scottish National party election pledge, and we are proud that it has been delivered in the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) has made significant political waves on the issue of Scottish limited partnerships, and special mention must go to the journalists David Leask and Richard Smith from the *Herald*—as acknowledged by the Minister—who have done some great investigative journalism on this subject over the last couple of years.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I had not intended to participate in this debate, but just want to acknowledge the co-operative way in which the Minister has responded.

Richard Arkless: I corroborate that: the Minister has never given any indication at any point in the process that he does not agree with the thrust of what we have been saying. It is heartening to hear that he has corroborated our position in the consultation. My only request to him—and I will take him at face value—is that he and his Department show the same energy in tackling this issue beyond the consultation period, so that we can finally get rid of the scourge of the awful vehicle of the Scottish limited partnership, which brings this place and our economy into disrepute.

The question of compelling jurisdictions to publish registers of beneficial ownership has been a hot topic during the debates on the Bill. I would have preferred a situation where we could justify persuading or compelling overseas territories to publish registers of beneficial ownership, although we in the SNP would, rightly, always stop short of allowing this place to tell another jurisdiction what it can and cannot do; clearly, that is consistent with what we believe on constitutional issues. For that reason alone, I am pleased, although not overwhelmingly so, by the new provisions in the Bill. There is a commitment for discussions and an assessment to take place in relation to the information-sharing between the territories and the UK Government. We have had good and constructive discussions with all the territories and with the Government, and they all assure us that, on a 24-hour turnaround, information can be ascertained to aid the tackling of financial criminality in the UK. That is a good and reassuring assurance, but it must be documented and proved in this House.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) on contributing to putting some real teeth into this Bill. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway agree that the Government's compromise amendment 34 on sharing beneficial ownership information is not really a compromise at all, and instead just a restatement of existing Government policy, with no mention of transparency or of developing countries? Does he also agree that this is a lost opportunity, in light of the Panama papers, to grasp the issue of corruption and work a bit harder to ensure real transparency in the OTs, so that we can stop the sucking away of money from developing countries?

Richard Arkless: I agree with my hon. and learned Friend, but the jurisdictional issue still comes into play. Although of course I agree completely with the thrust of her substantive argument that it would be sensible to compel the OTs to publish these registers, unless I can satisfy myself that this place has locus to do so, I would find it very difficult to support that suggestion. My view is that we will never fully rid the financial sector of financial criminality until we have a uniform publication of registers of beneficial ownership, and we must strive to achieve that.

Despite the cross-party co-operation, I was somewhat perturbed by the Labour Front-Bench Member saying that its position is clear on this matter. I do not agree; it has not been clear. In particular, an amendment was put before the House when the Bill was previously before it that would have compelled the Crown dependencies to publish their registers, but with nothing against the OTs. That should have been the other way around. Therefore, we could not support that amendment, but we would have been willing to support an amendment in relation to the OTs. That might well have been a missed opportunity.

Throughout the passage of this Bill we have sought to co-operate, and, more importantly, we have sought to widen the debate beyond the technicalities and the manifestations of financial criminality contained in the Bill. We think that the banking culture in the UK is a significant facilitator and indeed the root cause of financial criminality, and that we will never have the tools to eradicate it fully until we tackle that root cause. I do not think that that is a particularly controversial point. I can understand why the Minister was keen not to include the provision for a banking culture review in the Bill, although we would have done so, but I urge the Conservative Front-Bench team—or whoever is in government after the next election—to pursue this point. The banking culture that has developed over the last generation is the real facilitator of financial criminality and it must be reviewed and brought to task.

We have sought to widen the debate in relation to whistleblowing. Whistleblowers need genuine, material and proper protection. It is not easy for people working in large financial services organisations who see things to report to their boss that things are not as they ought to be. People who find themselves in that position should have the maximum protection from this place, to feel able to bring that information forward so that the regulators, the Government and all of us can react accordingly. That will be crucial in the future.

Therefore, while we accept and agree with what is in the Bill, I do not want the conversation to stop here. It should continue beyond this Bill, to examining how we can tighten things up further and deal with some of the underlying root causes of financial criminality, not just the manifestations and the vehicles to tackle it.

I conclude by saying that I am delighted that I will be fighting the general election in Dumfries and Galloway for the SNP. We will be giving it everything we have got, and hopefully sending this Prime Minister homewards to think again.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 147 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendments 11 and 33.

Higher Education and Research 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 23, 138 and 139. If agreed by the House, I will cause an appropriate entry to be made in the *Journal*. I also remind the House that certain of the motions relating to the Lords amendments will be certified as relating exclusively to England and Wales, as set out on the selection paper. If the House divides on any certified motion, a double majority will be required for the motion to be passed. I also alert Members to the fact that an additional paper has been published today containing three additional motions to disagree to Lords amendments 183, 184 and 185. I am sure that the Minister will explain this further to the House. The first motion to be taken is to disagree with the Lords in their amendment 1, with which it will be convenient to consider the other motions and amendments as on the selection paper. I call the Minister to move to disagree with Lords amendment 1.

3.29 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

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

Government amendments (a) to (d) in lieu of Lords amendment 1.

Lords amendments 2 to 11.

Lords amendment 12, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 209, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 210, and Government motion to disagree.

Government amendments (a) to (g) in lieu of Lords amendments 12, 209 and 210.

Lords amendments 13 and 14.

Lords amendment 15, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.

Lords amendments 16 to 22.

Lords amendment 23, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu.

Lords amendments 24 to 70.

Lords amendment 71, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu.

Lords amendments 72 to 77.

Lords amendment 78, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 106, and Government motion to disagree.

Government amendments (a) to (h) in lieu of Lords amendments 78 and 106.

Lords amendments 79 to 105.

Lords amendments 107 to 155.

Lords amendment 156, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu.

Lords amendments 157 to 182.

Lords amendment 183, and Government motion to disagree.

[*Madam Deputy Speaker*]

Lords amendment 184, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 185, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 186 to 208.

Lords amendments 211 to 244.

Joseph Johnson: The Higher Education and Research Bill sets out the most significant legislative reforms of the sector for 25 years. The world of higher education has changed fundamentally since the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, leaving a regulatory system that is complex, fragmented and out of date. The sector has consistently called for new legislation to update the regulatory framework and just yesterday the two main sector groups, Universities UK and GuildHE, reiterated their full support for this important legislation.

Given its scale and importance, this Bill has understandably received robust and constructive debate as it has progressed through this House and the other place. I would like to put on record my thanks to all Members and noble Lords who have engaged with it during the process, throughout which we have listened, reflected and responded. This group includes no fewer than 240 amendments agreed in the other place which strengthen and improve the drafting of the Bill. They cover a range of issues including institutional autonomy, the inclusion of collaboration and diversity of provision in the Office for Students' duties, student transfer and accelerated degrees. The other place also agreed amendments to strengthen the research provisions in the Bill, including putting the Haldane principle into legislation for the very first time. Today, I am pleased to show once again that we are willing to engage and respond. I hope that hon. Members will bear with me if I speak at some length: there are many important points that I would like to set out clearly.

Turning first to Lords amendment 1, we listened carefully to the debate in the other place about the role and functions of universities. At its heart was the importance of protecting institutional autonomy, which we fully support. We responded to this with a significant package of amendments designed to provide robust and meaningful protection of institutional autonomy across the whole of the Bill, which I was pleased to see receive support from all parties. On the definition of a university, in a limited sense a university can be described as predominantly a degree-level provider with awarding powers. If we want a broader definition, we can say that a university is also expected to be an institution that brings together a body of scholars to form a cohesive and self-critical academic community to provide excellent learning opportunities for people. We expect teaching at such an institution to be informed by a combination of research, scholarship and professional practice. To distinguish it from what we conventionally understand a school's role to be, we can say that a university is a place where students are developing higher analytical capacities: critical thinking, curiosity about the world and higher levels of abstract capacity in their analysis.

Further, the strength of the university sector is based on its diversity and we should continue to recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach is not in the interests of students or of wider society. In particular, small and

specialist providers that support, for example, the creative arts, theology and agriculture have allowed more students with highly specialised career aims the opportunity to study at a university. Indeed, as we have said in our White Paper and throughout the passage of the Bill, the diversity of the sector and opportunities for students have grown as a result of the important changes introduced by the previous Labour Government in 2004, including the lifting of the requirement for universities to have students in five subject areas and to award research degrees. No one would want, and we would not expect, to go back on the specific changes that the party opposite made.

To protect the use of university title, we have tabled amendments (a) to (d) to Lords amendment 1 to ensure that before allowing the use of that title, the Office for Students must have regard to factors in guidance given by the Secretary of State, and that before giving the guidance, the Secretary of State must consult relevant bodies and persons. This consultation will be full and broad. It will reference processes and practice overseas, for example in Australia, and provide an opportunity to consider a broad range of factors before granting university title. Those factors might include a track record of excellent teaching; sustained scholarship; cohesive academic communities; interdisciplinary approaches; supportive learning infrastructures; the dissemination of knowledge; the public-facing role of universities; academic freedom and freedom of speech; and wider support for students and pastoral care.

In the other place, we tabled an amendment based on a proposal from Baroness Wolf requiring the Office for Students to take expert advice from a relevant body on quality and standards before granting, varying, or revoking degree-awarding powers. I can confirm that the role of the relevant body will be similar to that of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's advisory committee on degree-awarding powers, and the system we are putting in place will build on the QAA's valuable work over the years.

Amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 71 further strengthens that provision. Specifically, the amendment makes it clear that, if there is not a designated quality body to perform the role, the committee that the OFS must establish to perform it must feature a majority of members who are not members of the OFS. Further, in appointing those members, the OFS must consider the requirement that the committee's advice be informed by the interests listed in the proposed new clause, which will ensure that the advice is impartial and informed. The amendment also makes it clear that the advice must include a view on whether the provider under consideration can maintain quality and standards, and it requires the OFS to notify the Secretary of State as soon as possible after it grants degree-awarding powers to a provider that has not previously delivered a degree course under a validation arrangement.

I also confirm that I expect the Secretary of State's guidance to the OFS on DAPs to continue to require that a provider's eligibility be reviewed if there is a change in its circumstances, such as a merger or a change of ownership. The OFS has powers under the Bill to remove DAPs from a provider where there are concerns as to the quality or standards of its higher education provision following such a change. We expect the OFS to seek advice from the relevant body on any such quality concerns before taking the step of revocation.

In the other place we made amendments providing additional safeguards on the revocation of DAPs and university title, recognising that those are last-resort powers. Amendments were also made relating to appeals against such decisions. Amendments (a) to (h) in lieu of Lords amendments 78 and 106 achieve the same aims as the Lords amendments but will align the wording more closely with terminology used elsewhere in legislation. The amendments allow an appeal on unlimited grounds, and permit the First-tier Tribunal to retake any decision of the OFS to revoke DAPs or university title.

Over the course of the Bill's passage we have seen complete consensus in both Houses on the importance of teaching in higher education. We have always been a world leader in our approach to higher education in this country, but we cannot and should not be complacent. The teaching excellence framework offers us the opportunity to safeguard the UK's best teaching and to raise standards across the sector. For the TEF to work properly, however, there must be reputational and financial incentives behind it. We propose to disagree with Lords amendments 12 and 23, which would render the TEF unworkable.

Almost 300 providers took part in the first round of assessments, and we have received vocal support for the TEF from the major sector representatives. The sector has voted with its feet and has demonstrated real confidence in the framework. It would not be appropriate to stop or fundamentally alter the TEF now.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I hear what the Minister is saying about the TEF, but does he accept that, although there might be widespread consent across the sector for a TEF-type exercise, the sector is not happy about the traffic light system and wants to see the review he is establishing?

Joseph Johnson: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point, which enables me to discuss the amendment that the Government have tabled precisely to address those concerns.

I am pleased to present to the House a series of amendments that demonstrate our continued commitment to developing the teaching excellence framework iteratively and carefully. We have consulted widely on the TEF, and we want to continue drawing on the best expertise as we develop this important scheme. That is why I am pleased to have tabled amendment (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 23, as it requires the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the TEF within one year of the TEF clause being commenced. Crucially, the amendment requires the Secretary of State to lay the report before Parliament, ensuring parliamentary accountability for the framework as it moves forward.

The report must cover many aspects that have concerned Members of this House and the other place, including whether the metrics used are fit for use in the TEF; whether the names of the ratings, to which the hon. Lady alluded, are appropriate for use in the TEF; the impact of the TEF on the ability of providers to carry out their research, teaching and other functions; and an assessment of whether the scheme is, all things considered, in the public interest. I am happy to confirm that the Secretary of State will take account of the review and, if he or she considers it appropriate, will provide guidance to the OFS accordingly, including on any changes to the

scheme that the review suggests might be needed, whether in relation to the metrics or any of the other items the review will look at.

We have also heard concerns about the impact of the link between TEF and fees. We recognise the important role of Parliament in setting fee caps. That is why I am also pleased to propose amendments (a) to (g) in lieu of amendments 12, 209 and 210, which amend the parliamentary procedure required to alter fee limit amounts, to ensure that any regulations that would raise fees would be subject, as a minimum, to the affirmative procedure. That provides a greater level of parliamentary oversight on fees than the measures originally put in place under the Labour Government in 2004. I have also today brought forward a further motion to disagree with Lords amendments 183 to 185, which are no longer required as a consequence of these amendments. That is a purely technical change as a result of the wider set of amendments regarding fee amounts.

Furthermore, today's amendments demonstrate our commitment to a considered roll-out of differentiated fees. Amendments in lieu (c) and (d) will delay the link between differentiated TEF ratings and tuition fee caps, so that this will not come in for more than three years, with the first year of differentiated fees as a result of TEF ratings being no earlier than the academic year beginning autumn 2020.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): If I have understood it correctly, the linking of the TEF and the fee level is just being postponed, and these things are not being completely decoupled. I wonder whether the Minister might be able to provide reassurance to the University of West London in my constituency, which has 17,000 students who are worried about this. They like Lords amendment 156, which relates to international students, and fear that they are going to go completely bankrupt if things are not kept as they are in the Lords amendment.

Joseph Johnson: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are committed to ensuring that universities are able to increase their fees in line with inflation, provided they can demonstrate that they are delivering high-quality outcomes through the TEF. We are going to be introducing this scheme gradually and we are not going to be differentiating according to the fee uplift that institutions are able to get before the academic year starting August 2020; until that point there will be no differentiation of fee uplift based on performance in the TEF.

This means that differentiated fees will not be introduced until after the independent review has reported to the Secretary of State and to Parliament. Until that point all English providers participating in the TEF will receive the full inflationary uplift. It will be up to devolved Administrations, as before, to determine whether they are content for their institutions to participate in the TEF and what impact participation may have on their fees. I can confirm today that the ratings awarded under the TEF this year will not be used to determine differentiated fees, unless a provider actively chooses not to re-enter the TEF after the independent review. In practice, this means that this year's ratings will only count towards differentiated fees if, after the review, a provider does not ask for a fresh assessment before their next one is due—that is an opportunity that will be open to all participants.

[Joseph Johnson]

Before moving on to our other amendments, I would like to reiterate our commitment that the TEF will evolve to assess the quality of teaching at subject level, as well as institutional level. We recognise that subject-level assessments are more challenging, which is why I have already announced an extension to the roll-out of subject-level TEF pilots, with an additional year of piloting. This follows the best practice demonstrated in the research excellence framework, and means the first subject-level assessments will not take place until spring 2020.

3.45 pm

In both this House and the other place, we have heard compelling arguments about the importance of student electoral registration. I commend the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for his passionate work on that issue. Having worked closely with my hon. Friend the Minister for the Constitution, I am pleased to propose Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 15. Our amendments will improve the electoral registration of students by permitting the Office for Students to impose a condition of registration on higher education providers that requires their governing bodies to take steps specified by the OFS to facilitate co-operation with electoral registration officers in England. The amendments place that requirement firmly within the new higher education regulatory framework while, equally importantly, maintaining unaltered the statutory roles and responsibilities of EROs for ensuring the accuracy of the electoral register. The provisions will complement EROs' existing powers.

In implementing the condition, the OFS will be obliged to have regard to ministerial guidance issued under the general duties clause, which will lay out what the Government expect in relation to the electoral registration condition, alongside expectations about other functions of the OFS. There are many excellent examples from across the sector of methods of encouraging students to join the electoral register, including the models put in place by the University of Sheffield—in the constituency of the hon. Member for Sheffield Central—that provide an example of good practice.

Through the Government's amendments, the OFS will have a specific power to impose an electoral registration condition to deal with HE providers that are not doing enough to co-operate with electoral administrators. When a condition is imposed, it takes effect as a requirement—it will oblige action to be taken. The clear aim is for the OFS to look across the sector and, when needed, ensure that necessary action is taken. The condition can require particular steps to be taken so that higher education providers work with EROs to facilitate registration. As with any registration condition, non-compliance is enforceable, including through OFS sanctions.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his comments on the work that we have done on this issue. The Cabinet Office has been extremely helpful from the very start in supporting the initiative with the University of Sheffield. Nevertheless, does the Minister recognise that the critical game-changer is the seamless integration of electoral registration and student enrolment? When other universities—not only Sheffield—have taken that up, they have seen levels of registration that the simple promotion of the voter registration

portal, or giving direction towards it, have not succeeded in achieving. In monitoring the effectiveness of the Government's proposals, will the Minister look at effective outputs? If universities' outputs through methods of co-operation with electoral registration officers do not deliver the sort of 70% mark that integrated systems have delivered, will he expect them to be pushed in that direction by the Office for Students?

Joseph Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued and thoughtful engagement with this issue. We look forward to continuing to work with him as we develop the guidance that will be given to the OFS. As we have said previously, we do not expect that there will be a one-size-fits-all approach. We need an approach that recognises the particular circumstances at different institutions. We look forward to continuing to engage closely with the hon. Gentleman in the coming weeks and months, subject to the results on 8 June.

It is vital for this country that we have a healthy democracy that works for everyone. The Government share the aim of increasing the number of students and young people who are registered to vote. It is vital that the views of students and young people are taken into account in the democratic process, and our amendments will help to deliver that.

Last but by no means least, amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 156 relate to international students. I reiterate that the Government value and welcome international students who come to study in the UK. We recognise that they enhance our educational institutions, both financially and culturally, enrich the experience of domestic students, and become important ambassadors for the UK in later life. It is for those reasons that we have no plan to limit the number of genuine international students who can come to study in the United Kingdom. I need to be very clear that that commitment applies to all institutions. We have no intention of limiting any institution's ability to recruit genuine international students. We have no plans to cap the number of genuine students who can come to the UK to study, or to limit an institution's ability to recruit genuine international students based on its TEF rating or on any other basis.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Can the Minister explain the logic of including in a statistic which the Government wish to limit a statistic that they have no desire to limit?

Joseph Johnson: I can reassure my hon. Friend that this Government welcome international students, who deliver huge value to our institutions, our economy and our learning environment. However, it is also important to recognise that the independent Office for National Statistics classifies students as part of migration. The ONS has an independent status and it applies that definition accordingly. It is appropriate that the matter is treated in the way that it is at present in our immigration system.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I thank the Minister for these amendments, as they reflect very well what the Education Committee said in its recent report on the university sector and implications of leaving the European Union. I, like the Minister, believe that it is important to ensure that our sector—this very important sector—is attractive abroad.

Joseph Johnson: Indeed. No one would disagree with that. It is good news that the UK continues to be a highly attractive place in which international students can come to study. Numbers of international students are running at record highs, and we have more than 170,000 non-EU entrants to UK higher education institutions for the sixth year running. The latest Home Office visa data show that, since 2011, university-sponsored visa applications have risen by around 10%.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Joseph Johnson: I will take one more intervention—*[Interruption.]* I will take two more interventions on this subject.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but he is being rather selective with the statistics, because the UK is losing market share across the world when it comes to international students. In fact, the Higher Education Statistics Agency shows that the UK has seen a reduction of more than 50% in students coming to the UK from India. More than half of international students in the UK say that they do not feel welcome. Does he recognise the scale of that problem?

Joseph Johnson: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman is being selective. I can easily point to the 8% increase in visas from Chinese nationals in 2016. Overall, if we look at the numbers since 2011, visa applications are up by 10%, but let us not get distracted further. I will take a further intervention and then I shall move on.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): My hon. Friend has been a great advocate on this issue for a long time. I personally thank him for delivering these amendments. Given that there will be a new duty on institutions to give out their numbers of international students, what will happen to institutions that, for any reason, do not give that information to HESA under the terms of the enforcement powers?

Joseph Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. We would expect all higher education providers on the OFS register to be compliant with the duties and conditions imposed on them. If they are not, the OFS has a range of regulatory tools at its disposal to deal with such eventualities.

Paul Blomfield: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Joseph Johnson: For the last time.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for giving way. I understand his discomfort on the issue. He talked about numbers, but does he not recognise that in the latest year for which numbers are available—2014-15—new enrolments of international students fell by 3%, so he cannot say that the numbers are going up?

Joseph Johnson: We can certainly say that visa applications have risen by around 10% since 2011, although there might be fluctuations from year to year. That has been the case for many periods in the history of international students coming to study in this country. There has not been a story of continued growth; there have been ups and downs. Since 2010, which is a longer timeframe, we have seen applications up by around 10%.

Lords amendment 156 could do real damage. For example, it would prevent international students being treated as long-term migrants. The internationally recognised definition of a long-term migrant is anyone moving countries for a period of more than a year. If we were not able to apply to international students the key features of our work immigration regime, such as the need to obtain a time-limited visa that specifies the terms on which the migrant can come and a requirement to return home upon expiry of the visa, that could undermine our whole student migration system. I cannot advise the House to agree to that amendment.

Secondly, the Lords amendment would prohibit any change to the future student migration regime that could be interpreted as more restrictive than that in force when the Bill is passed. Any future changes—even minor technical changes—would require fresh primary legislation rather than being made by immigration rules laid before Parliament. I do not believe that that would be sensible or helpful, particularly given how crowded the forthcoming legislative programme is likely to be.

That said, I recognise the strength of feeling on the issue, so I am pleased to ask the House to support amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 156. The Bill already creates for the first time a requirement for information on higher education providers to be published. It also puts in place a statutory duty to consider what would be helpful to students on higher education courses here, prospective students and higher education providers. Our amendments expressly extend that important new duty to cover what information would be useful to current or prospective international students in higher education and to the providers that recruit them or are thinking of doing so. They will also specifically require a consideration of the publication of international student numbers. All this is designed to help to ensure that as much information as possible is available about the UK's offer to international students. We have a good story to tell and the Government are keen to ensure that it is told.

The Bill is long overdue. It will streamline the higher education system's regulatory architecture. It will give students more choice and opportunity. It will strengthen our world-class research and innovation capabilities, and it will enhance the competitiveness and productivity of our economy. I thank all Members for their constructive engagement throughout the Bill's passage.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure and privilege to speak on these amendments this afternoon. I join the Minister in thanking the various teams of drafters and Clerks for all the work they have done. He and I have had some intense discussions in the past three to four days, and they must have put great pressure on the Clerks to produce the substantial amendments that are before us today. I want to give special thanks to the Public Bill Office. Most people who have been in opposition, of whatever party, know that it is very much, in terms of resources, a David and Goliath process and we are enormously grateful for the professional work of the Public Bill Office in assisting us.

I want to place on record, because we are talking about Lords amendments, my gratitude and that of many in the House for the robust exercise by the House of Lords of its historic privilege, which is to revise, to

[Gordon Marsden]

remind and to warn. It has done all three things with this raft of amendments, which, combined with the intense pressure that was applied across the sector by numerous groups, the work that we have put in and the Minister's co-operation in recent days, has brought us to where we are today.

I am sorry that the Minister, in his measured presentation, did not find time to talk about the contribution of the people who work in universities. Their contribution is just as important as that of students and teachers, because without them we would not have universities or other higher education institutions. I place on the record also my thanks to the various sector groups who have assisted us: the National Union of Students, which delivered thoughtful and trenchant critiques that helped us get to where we are today, as did the other unions involved—the University and College Union and Unison—and the Council for British Universities, as well as the whole range of universities, modern and traditional. I must not forget the submissions from the further education sector and the Association of Colleges, because as I frequently remind the Minister, 12% and rising of higher education in this country is provided by further education colleges.

This process has been about the dialogue with university vice-chancellors and junior lecturers. We are in a much better place because of the specialist critique and the Lords amendments that the Minister has accepted on UK Research and Innovation, and on research. As the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) is in the Chamber, I pay tribute to her and her team for the points they made about the importance of the devolved Administrations.

4 pm

Let us turn to the amendments that the Government wish to remove; I was going to say “tamper with”, but that would be churlish. The Government's concession on university title is welcome and necessary, and, my goodness, it has been a long time coming. From the beginning, there have been strong concerns about this across the sector from people who work within it—people concerned about the nature of their employment and about the quality of their teaching—and, as I have said, from the students who increasingly have to pay more and more.

We should not forget that the Bill is being wound up in the context of a world-class university sector that is now facing all the challenges of Brexit that have not been not included in the Bill in any shape or form. We have to protect our world-renowned brand of universities in as many ways as possible, so we are content that the Government have now committed to holding this full and wide-ranging consultation on university title. As the Minister said, once that consultation has finished, as a result of the discussions that we have had with him, the Secretary of State will have to issue guidance to the Office for Students on the criteria to be applied when awarding university title, to which the OFS must have regard.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend is making a strong case. I agree that it is good that the Government have recognised the challenge to university reputation that could come from the extension of university title without safeguards in place. Does he agree that the

Government's proposals are a watering down of Lords amendment 1 and that it will be necessary to look carefully at the guidance in due course to ensure that it adequately protects university title?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend, the esteemed chair of the all-party parliamentary university group, is absolutely right. She makes precisely the same point that so many people want to make to the Government. Edmund Burke famously said that the price of liberty was eternal vigilance. Well, the price of extracting these concessions from the Government today—if, by any chance, they get back into office after 8 June—will be at least very severe, if not eternal, scrutiny. Whatever the situation is, not just in the House but outside it, that scrutiny has to happen.

The agreed process is not a tick-box one, but one where there must be a big conversation. My hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and all sorts of other people have made this point. I pay tribute to Baroness Brown for pursuing the matter. I hope that the penny has finally dropped for the Government. As MillionPlus said,

“strong safeguards need to be put in place to ensure that any body that is awarded degree awarding powers...has met the criteria to do so, and will not put student interest at risk, or potentially damage the hard earned reputation of the entire higher education sector in the UK.”

That is why it is so important that the Government commit to that full and wide-ranging consultation.

I am pleased that the Minister has confirmed, as we discussed, that the consultation will look at international examples, such as Australia, in granting university title. It is crucial that the Government look at the range the Minister talked about: excellent teaching, sustained scholarship, cohesive academic community, learning infrastructure, knowledge exchange and—often forgotten—pastoral care, with universities actually supporting students to learn and not simply be part of some vague online community. As *Research Fortnight* said last year,

“the title of university needs to be seen as a privilege...not an automatic entitlement”.

That is why this consultation and the subsequent guidance are so important, with the market being open to new entrants, and that is why we will continue to press Ministers on this issue.

Let me move on to the granting of degree-awarding powers. As we have said from the beginning of proceedings on the Bill, that is at its heart significantly about trust, or the lack of it, and that was nobly elaborated and strengthened by the amendment tabled in the other place by Baroness Wolf, who is a fantastic advocate for the HE and FE sectors and who knows of what she speaks, which is why the Government have had to move on this issue. We have said right from the beginning that the Government need to make things very clear to allay some of the concerns that we, along with a number of people across the sector and the noble Baroness and others in the other House, have had about the principle of independence. Giving providers the option from day one to build up degree-awarding powers is potentially dangerous, and we are potentially taking a gamble on probationary degrees from probationary providers.

I do not want to reopen the debate we had on this in Committee, and I want to say very strongly that we are not against private providers or new providers as such, but the premise must be to strengthen the public sector and to ensure that new providers can demonstrate that they provide high-quality education—including robust governance that maintains academic quality, protects the student interest and has a demonstrable track record of delivering higher-quality education—before they are granted degree-awarding powers.

We know only too well from the issues that have arisen in the United States with private providers, from the criticisms Baroness Wolf has levelled at a similar process in Australia and from the issues involving BPP and the Apollo group three or four years ago why the safeguards being put into the Bill are entirely necessary. The Council for the Defence of British Universities said exactly that in its submissions.

We are therefore pleased that a significant degree of scrutiny will now be put in place and that, when granting, varying or revoking degree-awarding powers, the OFS must be advised by the independent designated quality body—the Government have conceded that—on a provider's ability to provide and maintain HE provision of an appropriate quality and standard. It is crucial that there is a traffic light, if I can dare to use that expression, saying "Caution" and providing a guarantee of the process. It is important that the OFS is advised in the way I have described; after all, in the first few years of its existence, it will—whether we take the term neutrally or not—be a creature of the Government, but one that is on probation and on trial.

There are known quantities in this process, which is why I was pleased to hear the Minister praise the QAA for what it has done, but, as he said, things change with time. That is why we had to press the Government so hard to come forward with a new mechanism if the QAA were no longer to be the appropriate body. That is reiterated in the concession of an automatic review by the designated quality body if there is a change of ownership or a merger at a university. We know what can happen, just as people in the sector know—the people employed there and the people being taught in inferior conditions because of what has happened in the past. We therefore need these steps, alongside a consultation and guidance on university title, to protect our brand of HE providers.

This is about not just the letter but the spirit of these proposals, and that is reiterated by the automatic review, which will prevent university title and degree-awarding powers being purchased without the protections of quality assurance. We remain concerned that, should no independent designated quality body exist, the OFS must set up an independent specific committee. We were determined to encourage the Government to take that fall-back position. Their concession of an independent specific committee with a majority of members with no previous involvement with the OFS is crucial. It is also crucial that this body remains independent of Government and of the OFS, for the reasons that I have described.

I want to move on to the teaching excellence framework, and Lords amendment 23 and the amendments that the Government have tabled in lieu. The Minister said that the importance of teaching excellence was accepted across the House. Indeed, who would be against teaching excellence? However, the devil is always in the detail.

In this case, the detail is that it took nearly six years to take through the research excellence framework process. We are therefore wise to think and to pause, particularly on the potential to differentiate fee levels at higher education institutions, which has been a major concern for many across the sector. We have expressed serious fears from the start, not least in the context of the ridiculously titled "gold, silver and bronze" scheme, which was no doubt dreamed up in the Minister's office by someone in a post-Olympics euphoria back in the autumn.

People are concerned that any sort of link is bound to affect student decision making adversely, particularly in deterring students from low-income families from applying. Those concerns have been expressed right across the sector, from unions such as the UCU and Unison to a number of other groups. The Minister quotes somewhat selectively on occasion the groups that he wishes to quote, but I can assure him that a number of universities and university groups, including some of our most revered and aged, remain concerned about this. That is why it is crucial that the Government put in place a legislative commitment to a full independent review before the TEF could be used to differentiate fees and why it is right that that has been accepted and aided by the work that the Lords has put in. It gives us a different direction of travel from the rubber-stamping technocracy the Government previously had in mind for us.

The Government's agenda on higher education has consistently hit students hard, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. As we have always said, we will do everything in our power to resist the TEF being used as a Trojan horse for the escalation of fees. We know from the Sutton Trust and from the various surveys about the daunting mountain of debt that is being imposed on students as a result of how this Government and their predecessor have gone forward on this: what an impediment to their hopes and dreams. Now that inflation is leaping, post-Brexit, to the sorts of levels that will bring in increases in future, we are right to be concerned that there should be a proper process in how we take this forward.

Along with the unions involved and many others in the sector, we feel very strongly about any sort of link that affects student decision making adversely—particularly, as I say, with regard to low-income families. The NUS and the UCU have strong concerns that the TEF would create a high-stakes, multi-tiered system and increase pressures on teachers, as well as incentivising universities to cut teaching in subjects that score less well. Sally Hunt, the general secretary of UCU, said last December:

"If the Government really wants to improve teaching quality, it"

also

"needs to think...about whether staff are supported"

enough

"to deliver their best teaching."

It is therefore vital that the Government have now finally, on the back of the strength of the concerns of our colleagues and the people who really know what is going on in the sector, found the courage to put in place a legislative commitment to a full independent review before the TEF could be used for differentiating fees.

I was grateful to the Minister for spelling out so clearly the chronology of that process, because it is not

[Gordon Marsden]

simply about the extra year, but about the process itself. We would have preferred—and we will still campaign for—the link between the TEF and the fees to be removed altogether, but we know that we have entered a process where we have to do the best we can with this Bill.

4.15 pm

A full independent review would give us much more capacity to challenge any issues. It is clear that the review would cover specific areas, including whether the process by which ratings are determined is appropriate for use by the scheme; the names, which the Minister has referred to; the scheme's impact on the ability of providers; and an assessment of whether it is in the public interest. A good, strong independent reviewer would dig those things out, and then the Government, whoever they are, will be held to account.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Does my hon. Friend agree that the review is welcome but that it would have been really good to hear the Minister say this afternoon that he would definitely want to act on its outcome, not simply ignore it, which could happen in the future?

Gordon Marsden: My hon. Friend knows that I cannot be responsible for the Minister's mood music. I can only respond to what he has committed to do in the Bill, and its commitment to an independent review is very important. A whole raft of people, not just the Lords, are concerned. The combined efforts of an outside challenge, the wisdom of the Lords, who constrained the Minister by inserting the original amendment, and our determination have resulted in welcome concessions.

Joseph Johnson: To reiterate what I said in my speech, I am happy to confirm that the Secretary of State will take account of the review and, if he or she considers it appropriate, will provide guidance to the OFS accordingly, including on any changes to the scheme that the review suggests are needed, whether they be in relation to the metrics or any of the other items that the review will look at.

Gordon Marsden: I am grateful to the Minister for that important clarification. It is also important that all fee regulations under the Bill that were previously subject to negative procedure will now be subject to affirmative procedure. That puts daylight on issues related to rocketing fees, and I believe that it will be entirely possible that the Secretary of State, whoever it will be, will have to listen to a dogged independent statutory review that says, "This ain't working. Either it won't ever work, or it certainly won't work for the time being." It is in all of our interests to make sure that that statutory review is as potent as we wish it to be.

I welcome the Government's electoral registration amendment, which strengthens the current position to some extent. We would have preferred a full commitment to ensuring block registration, but nevertheless we wholeheartedly welcome anything that will facilitate greater student interest in and awareness of political affairs. I pay tribute to the fantastic work of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central and to the pilot work undertaken at the University of Sheffield and the University of Bath. I also praise my fellow member of the Bill Committee, my hon. Friend the

Member for Ilford North, and my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) and for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), all of whom have concerns about students and feel very strongly about the matter. It is important to note that we are not just relying on nudges. The Minister was kind enough to refer to the involvement of the Cabinet Office in this regard, and there will be specific powers to impose an electoral registration commitment to deal with HE providers not doing enough.

Finally, let me turn to the amendments on international students. I praise and welcome the doggedness with which Lord Hannay pursued this matter with the coalition that worked across Parliament to insert the original amendment. I hoped and thought that the strength of that coalition might have moved the Government, but unfortunately it is not a question of the warm words, values and welcomes which the Minister talked about and to which, I am sure, he signs up—he was a dedicated remainer before the election. Unfortunately, he has a Prime Minister who has been at best curmudgeonly and at worst obstructive on this issue. The sharp questions from the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and the contribution of the Chair of the Select Committee on Education, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), show where we are on this matter.

At a time when Brexit is throwing up fresh problems for the higher education sector, the Government's stance is threatening both the sector and our reputation worldwide. Those new issues are about whether we will be able to stay in Erasmus or get funding for beyond Horizon 2020, and about European structural funding, but the university and HE sector has enough to contend with without having a Prime Minister who appears to wrinkle her nose and, sometimes, attach manacles to her colleagues in Cabinet every time they suggest a different path.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): My hon. Friend is making compelling points. In Northern Ireland there are two universities, Queen's University, Belfast and the Ulster University. They both rely on Erasmus and European social funds to develop cross-border educational research programmes with higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland. The impact of Brexit in the context of this debate is therefore particularly important to us; does he agree with me on that?

Gordon Marsden: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend makes a further point about the Government's still having a long way to go in understanding and realising what that international sector is all about. That is why it is so disappointing that the Minister will not go further—in fact, the truth is that he cannot go further. He and his colleagues have been sat on from a great height by No. 10 and by the Home Office. That is the reality. The Tory party and its members are split down the middle on this issue. It is an unedifying shambles that the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), who is retiring, presciently commented on in *The Times* today. It is a shambles that Labour, in government, would have no part in.

During this election campaign, we will continue to press for the removal of students from net migration statistics for public policy purposes, and although I genuinely welcome the new designated body that the Minister has talked about, the truth is exactly as the

hon. Member for Bedford said: it leaves the Minister without a visible means of support in delivering the objective that he will no doubt fervently wish could be delivered under that process.

The problems and weaknesses of the Bill have been substantial, not least as regards the wilful obtuseness of the Government to do anything to make a pre-Brexit Bill—conceived when the Minister and the Government at the time assumed that Brexit would fall—fit for a post-Brexit world. They could have put it out to pre-legislative scrutiny, but they did not. They could have paused it. That was quite rightly argued for by the University and College Union, the Council for the Defence of British Universities and others, including distinguished figures across the sector and in this House, not least the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright)—but they did not.

It has been left to us—by us, I mean not just the Labour party, but the other opposition parties in this House and in the House of Lords—to make the arguments in this place. A concerted effort has been made by cross-Benchers, Lib Dem peers, the noble Lord Hannay and the small but important group of Conservative peers, including Lord Patten, who have wrinkled their noses at, and fought ferociously against, the technocratic complexities and central dictation in the Bill. Those things risk blunting the creativity and dynamism of our HE sector, whether delivered at an old university such as Oxford or Cambridge, at the many dynamic new universities which MillionPlus celebrated at its 25th anniversary last night, or in the further education sector. I pay tribute to the Government for extending HE awarding powers to the FE sector, not least because my college, Blackpool Fylde College, will be one of the first to benefit.

The Americans have a saying that goes something like, “When you get lemons, you have to try to make lemonade,” and that is what we have all tried to do. We have tried to make a flawed Bill better fit for purpose, and to help, not hinder, the dynamism that I have talked about. We have had a decent thrash at it; without that decent thrash and the work of the House of Lords, I think it would have been a very poor Bill indeed.

Ben Howlett: You will be pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my remarks in this debate will be short. I think all hon. Members have something else to do right now.

I have championed universities for the last six years, and I have debated with many different Members from across the House. In the last two years, it has been a great privilege to be vice-chair of the all-party group on students, together with my friend the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). I wish him every success, and I hope to be able to join him in continuing to represent students in Parliament after 8 June. I have 23,000 students in my constituency, spread across two universities: Bath Spa University and the University of Bath. Both universities have a large complement of international students, who are absolutely vital. We have had debates in this place for years about how much they contribute to our local and national economies.

I am pleased that the Bill has been introduced. The student community and the higher education sector as a

whole have called for such legislation since 2011, when Lord Willetts introduced new law in this area, and I hope that this Bill will receive Royal Assent later today. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister for all his work on the Bill. He has been a great champion of the higher education sector and international students, and the Bill is testament to all his work.

I turn quickly to Lords amendment 156 and Government amendments (a), (b) and (c) in lieu. As has been said, it is incredibly welcome that the Minister and the Department for Education have listened to a campaign group of MPs and placed on the Higher Education Statistics Agency, or the designated body, a duty to report on the number of international students. That makes a massive difference, and it represents a significant change in the Government's tone. I thank the Minister for listening to us and delivering that amendment.

I want to give a bit of a shout-out to Members who have made a big contribution to the campaign, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), for Eastbourne (Caroline Ansell), for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) and for Bedford (Richard Fuller), and my right hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). They are great champions for their student communities and for international students. I pay tribute to Opposition colleagues who have also championed that case.

I am delighted that the Department for Education has produced the amendment. If the outcome of the election on 8 June is favourable, I guarantee not only to the Government but to my constituents that I will continue—in collaboration with Universities UK, the Russell Group and MillionPlus—to make the case for taking international students out of the overall immigration figures. It is very peculiar that they are still included. If I am around after 8 June, as I hope to be, I will make such representations along with colleagues. I hope that they will all be re-elected, too, so that we can make this final carve-out in the interests of my constituents, students, international students and the UK's reputation overseas. I wish everybody a huge amount of luck in the forthcoming general election.

4.30 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Last July, when the Bill was first brought to the House, I spoke about the issue of pushing ahead with it following the Brexit vote and questioned whether the time was right for this particular Bill. There are still some issues, including those raised by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), with regard to Brexit, and I will come on to them in a little while. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his tenacity, and for collaborating with those from across the House on all aspects of the Bill. I also pay tribute to the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation for the huge amount of work that he has done on the Bill.

We welcome Government assurances that the decision about whether Scottish higher education participates in the TEF will remain in the hands of the Scottish Government. That was one of our key asks, and it is very important to us. There should not be any system that is detrimental to Scotland's world-renowned higher education sector, which is currently worth over £6 billion annually to our economy.

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Lady will be well aware that Northern Ireland, where both education and higher education are devolved, does not have any political authority at the moment due to the lack of political institutions being up and running. That is particularly damaging for us, with Brexit looming, because our universities rely on EU migrants both for their teaching and student populations. Does she agree that the resolution of both issues is needed to ensure that further and higher education continue to be the pumps that fuel the local economy?

Carol Monaghan: SNP Members have of course been consistent in our calls for EU workers and EU students, both in universities and in our local communities, to be given the assurances they need. This is not about them getting assurances that they are allowed to stay; it is about them getting assurances that they are welcome to stay and that we appreciate the contribution they make.

We agree with subsection (4) in Lords amendment 23 that any assessment system should not be used to create a single composite ranking of higher education providers, which would skew prospective students' opinions about whether to attend a particular institution. Scottish higher education already has its own quality assessment process, which includes inputs not just from students, but from teaching professionals across the sector. The enhancement-led institutional review is highly regarded, and we would not want a UK-wide system to replace or threaten Scotland's current system. The UK Government do not have any jurisdiction over the Scottish HE sector, and therefore the Secretary of State alone should not be creating an assessment system for Scottish education. We are looking for assurances that the Scottish Government will be allowed to play a full part in the development of any system that could be made to apply, without full consultation, to higher education in Scotland.

On Lords amendment 156, it is positive to hear the Government reiterating their commitment that there are no limits on international student numbers. However, the Government's amendments in lieu, which place a duty on higher education institutions to publish information relating to international students, do not go far enough to allow this sector to thrive. Current immigration policy poses a significant risk to Scottish universities, and we are losing out to key competitors in attracting international students.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her hard work on the Bill. Picking up on what she said about Scottish universities, Heriot-Watt University in my constituency, which has an outstanding international reputation, particularly in the fields of science and technology, recently announced cuts and redundancies. It specifically cited the Brexit effect, the Government's immigration policies and the Government's messaging on immigration. Does she agree that without Lords amendment 156, UK universities will continue to suffer adverse effects as a result of Brexit, the Government's immigration policy, the ridiculous inclusion of international students in the net migration figures and the lack of protection for university staff from the strict immigration controls?

Carol Monaghan: My hon. and learned Friend speaks passionately about her constituency and Heriot-Watt University, but the picture she has painted of Heriot-Watt

could be applied to any of our universities. They are all feeling those effects very strongly at the moment. This is not so much the case with established professors, but students and early career researchers are extremely mobile. When they move, we could potentially lose our position in the university world rankings.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that Scotland saw a 2% increase in non-EU international entrants in the academic year 2014-15, compared with 2013-14. There was an increase in the number of entrants from some countries, including India, Pakistan and Nigeria. Although we welcome those slight increases, there remains a significant fall in the number of entrants from those countries since the academic year 2010-11. The number of Indian students has fallen by 59% since 2011, which is causing devastation across the sector. By comparison, between 2012-13 and 2013-14, the number of international students in higher education in Canada increased by 11%. It is able to capitalise on this market, which we are failing to do.

Joanna Cherry: I visited Canada recently with a parliamentary delegation from the Scottish National party. Does my hon. Friend agree that Canada's immigration policies, which encourage people to come to Canada and stay to contribute to the Canadian economy, could be a great model for the UK, rather than the very narrow path that the Government are intent on going down?

Carol Monaghan: Absolutely. The UK is becoming an increasingly hostile environment for international students and they are being enticed to competitor countries with the promise of a more attractive route to post-study work options.

In Scotland, international students make an important contribution to the economy. The UK Government have focused their migration policy on control, rather than having effective policies that allow for flexibility and support in the area of migration. The loss of the post-study work visa is a blow to many students, but also to our local economy, which is missing out on those skilled people.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and apologise for coming in during her speech. International students are worth something like £7 billion to the economy. We have two very successful universities in Coventry and Warwick.

Carol Monaghan: In Scotland, the value is estimated to be £1 billion annually, so it is very significant. That is something we need to consider. There are not only benefits to our economy, but benefits to our community, such as the diversity that international students bring.

We call on the UK Government to take international students out of the net migration target. We look forward to seeing that in the next Queen's speech. As the UK leaves the EU, I assume that EU students will be classified as international students. The effects of Brexit on Scotland's world-class universities and research institutes cannot be ignored. If we do not get the immigration policy right, long-term damage will be done to our vital HE sector and the wider economy. As was pointed out earlier by my friend the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), we need guarantees for EU nationals, both those working in higher education and prospective students at our universities.

Our problem in Scotland has always been emigration, not immigration. It is time for the Government to face the facts and take international students out of the net migration target. We need skilled people, and I hope very much that the Government will take a serious look at Scotland's needs when considering future immigration policies. It is great to see that the Minister for Immigration is present; I hope that he has listened to some of the points that have been made today by Members on both sides of the House.

I understand that Lords amendments 229 to 240, which relate to schedule 9, have not been selected for debate, but I hope that the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, if he is re-elected—or, indeed, the Department for Education—will clarify the role of UK Research and Innovation's executive committee and its impact on research priorities. We will seek assurances that the committee will not prove detrimental to Scottish institutions by removing funding streams or allowing a large number of research priorities—and, therefore, funding—to stay in England.

SNP Members tabled a number of amendments in Committee and on Report. In particular, we wanted the devolved nations to be represented on the board of the UKRI to ensure that consideration would be given to research priorities throughout the United Kingdom. When we return, we will seek clarification on the composition of the board and assurances about the impartiality of board members.

Higher education is at a crossroads, and the United Kingdom is at a crossroads. I hope the path that we choose to take, both today and in the weeks, months and years to come, will protect this vital sector of the Scottish and the UK economies. It is important to all our futures that we get it right.

Richard Fuller: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). She made a number of points of principle with which I have a great deal of sympathy, especially about the long-term indications for our getting immigration policy right for our institutes of higher education.

Let me take this opportunity to praise my hon. Friend the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation. In the best of circumstances, this Bill would have required deft handling, compassion, understanding and compromise to resolve the issues in not just this House but the other place. Moreover, given the truncated procedure that has become necessary, the fact that we have reached this point is, I think, due to my hon. Friend's significant abilities and dexterity in the management of different interests.

It is also a great pleasure to see that my hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration is in the Chamber—I can be nicer to him today. I will say of him that he is a true man of Yorkshire. I know that the principles of securing our borders and ensuring that the systems work effectively is at the core of everything that he has done as Immigration Minister, and those two great points of view have come together in amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 156.

I support the Government amendments, because although I personally believe, like the hon. Member for Glasgow North West, that the long-term goal should be to exclude student numbers from the immigration statistics,

I also think that we need precision first. The truth is that many of our immigration statistics are represented on sample sets. Information about immigration may be available to the Home Office in very specific circumstances, but out there in the great blue yonder—trust me, it is a great blue yonder—there will be a lot of misunderstanding about what immigration really is.

People have a very sensitive understanding of different types of immigration. We should not treat immigration as a single clump, because that is not how the population think of it. People understand that it can be good for the country, particularly when it comes to the transfer of skills and the transfer of people who will contribute in the long term to the economic vitality of our country. In that context, I think that the Government's proposal is worthy of support, because it will establish a structure within which we can secure precision and that will be understood not only by the Government, but by the institutes of higher education. I think that that would provide a firmer basis for the future direction of the control of student immigration numbers that we seek.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I agree with most of what the hon. Gentleman has said, but including student numbers in the statistics totally distorts the true immigration figures. People therefore get the wrong impression about immigration, and that causes confusion.

4.45 pm

Richard Fuller: The hon. Gentleman is both right and wrong. It is a bit of a stretch to say that the student numbers distort the overall immigration numbers, because the net implication of student migration is quite small, but his comment about the signal that this sends takes us to the point. As I said in an intervention on the Minister, there is a conundrum—an illogical position—when we include within a number that we wish to control a number that we do not wish to control. That epitomises the tension that exists as we wrestle with the way in which we communicate our message about immigration. What the British public want, of course, is a Government who are prepared and able to control migration in total, as this Government are, but I would hope that the Government also want to send a signal to the rest of the world that we are open for people to come here and study hard at our universities. While student numbers are included in the immigration statistics, the problem for our institutions of higher learning is that instead of having a green light, they have, at best, an amber light. They are always going to be looking over their shoulder and trying to work out if they are pushing things too far or have really kept themselves within the goal of the Government. At some point—practically speaking in the next Parliament, when the institution frameworks that the Government are putting in place have had time to bed in—we should look again at taking out the student numbers, because ultimately they should not be in the immigration figures. However, this proposal is a good way of getting precision for now.

The second reason why this compromise is important is perhaps more of a point of philosophy about the Conservative party. The party is at its best when it looks towards the light. In politics there are things that inspire us and move us forward, and there are things that make us fearful and cautious. That light can be on issues of trade and enterprise, of acceptance of culture and diversity, or of research and learning.

[Richard Fuller]

The Conservative party must ensure that it will be pointing towards the light in the next few years. By the very nature of the name of our party—Conservative—we do not always get there first, but it is surely to the benefit of our country as a whole that we always have a positive view about what our country represents. We are a beacon for many around the world who are finding that their freedoms—perhaps their social freedoms or their freedom of expression—are restricted, so there is a responsibility on our party to look at the issue, particularly in relation to our world-class universities, and to say that the next Conservative Administration will be looking towards the light and making ourselves an open and international country, because that is where the best interests of our country lie.

Wes Streeting: I am delighted to be in the Chamber for the conclusion of proceedings on the Higher Education and Research Bill, having been involved in the Public Bill Committee. We might not be entirely confident about the contents of the Bill, but we can say with absolute confidence that it is in a better shape than it would have been were it not for that Committee and the Bill's consideration in the other place.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Shakira Martin on her election as president of the National Union of Students. The NUS and students unions can be proud of their contribution to the debate about the Bill, and the Bill is better for it.

In considering the Bill, I have taken a particular interest in the question of student voice and student representation. That issue is close to my heart, and it is particularly important in the light of where higher education finds itself today. We have not addressed in this debate the fact that UK universities are now the most expensive in the world. Students at UK universities are graduating with higher levels of debt than those anywhere else in the world. It is a disgrace that in the past two years we have seen maintenance grants for the poorest students abolished and the scrapping of the NHS bursary to support student nurses, midwives and allied health professionals. We have also seen a nosedive in the number of students applying to study nursing. Thanks to the decisions taken by this Government, many people who are working in our national health service—and in other areas, including our universities—are wondering whether the UK is really the place for them to work, even though they make an extraordinary contribution to our civic, economic, social and political life.

As we enter the election process, I hope that we will bear in mind the proposals made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). It is a constant source of frustration to me that although young people often have more at stake in an election or referendum than anyone else, because they are the people who are stuck with the consequences for the longest period of time, they are the least likely to turn out and vote. My message to them, as they look at what Conservative-led Governments have done over the past seven years, is that their future is on the ballot paper. We have seen a trebling of university tuition fees, and the abolition of grants for the poorest students and of the education maintenance allowance, which supported the poorest students through sixth form and college.

Those are not policies that champion the ambitions and aspirations of young people in this country, but policies that seek to cap those aspirations.

International students make an enormous social and academic contribution to our universities, as well as an enormous economic contribution, generating some £26 billion for our economy. They also provide long-term soft power benefits to the UK. It is unfair to criticise the Minister in this regard, but it is a constant source of astonishment to me that, despite all that, we have a Prime Minister who is so short-sighted and narrow-minded in her world view that she cannot see either the short-term or long-term benefits of welcoming people from across the world to work and study in our universities. If she had understood that, she would have not only followed the advice of Ministers around her Cabinet table and Opposition MPs, but listened to public opinion, because the majority of members of the public understand the contribution that international students and staff make to our universities. I do not know why the Prime Minister does not understand it.

I very much look forward to debating such issues over the next six weeks. I hope that every young person in this country, whoever they choose to cast their vote for, will recognise that when young people do not turn out to vote and make their voice heard, other people will make decisions for them, and those decisions are often not in their interests. Every young voter in this country should bear that in mind on 8 June.

Paul Blomfield: It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, although I regret the fact that this Bill has been caught in the wash-up, because we would have had a better and more structured opportunity to discuss these Lords amendments if we had had more time. I pay tribute to the many Members of the other place who have contributed so much during their consideration of the Bill.

I welcome a number of the concessions that the Government have made, especially by accepting an independent review of the teaching excellence framework, although big questions remain about the metrics and the process involved. In previous debates, people have often cited the research excellence framework as a model for the TEF, saying that if that model worked for research, there was no reason why it should not work for teaching. That principle is right, but it took many years to develop the REF into its current form. A real fear was expressed in Committee, as well as in the Chamber, that we were rushing into a TEF in a way that could create unintended consequences. The idea of an independent review and the way in which that has been framed are welcome.

I am grateful for the concessions that were made in the Lords on strengthening the role of the Director of Fair Access, which I talked about in Committee. I am also grateful to the Home Secretary for responding to points that we discussed in Committee about extending to refugees who had been granted humanitarian protection the opportunity to access higher education as though they had been granted refugee status. I recognise that that the group does not capture everyone, but it was a significant move by the Home Secretary.

On voter registration, in which I have become boringly engaged over many years—

Richard Fuller: No.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Gentleman for disagreeing with me. This measure is a step in the right direction, but we will find that it will not go far enough unless we embed electoral registration seamlessly within university enrolment procedures. For many reasons, I hope we can continue to work on that together in the next Parliament.

I welcome the strengthening of provisions on degree-awarding powers, but I retain one concern—the Minister might wish to cover this either in an intervention or in his concluding remarks—about the transfer of ownership. I heard his comment that the Office for Students will be expected to review degree-awarding powers when there is a transfer of ownership, but I am concerned about the nature of that review if ownership is transferred to an organisation that has no track record as a provider. In those circumstances, will we effectively press the reset button and have a comprehensive review as if we were talking about a new provider? I would be grateful if the Minister responded to that point.

Having said all that, I am bitterly disappointed that there has been insufficient movement on the issue of international students, and I say that as co-chair of the all-party group on international students—I share that job with Lord Bilimoria. My disappointment is evidently shared by Conservative Members. In his typically incisive way, the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), who was a great colleague on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, put his finger on the contradiction in the Government's current position very effectively. I was pleased to hear his subsequent contribution on the issue.

The hon. Member for Bath (Ben Howlett) has been a great colleague during his short time in Parliament so far, and I have been delighted to work with him on the all-party group. He has been a great advocate for higher education and students, and he has done sterling work on championing the cause of international students.

My concern and disappointment cross the House, and I know that the Minister will share my disappointment—he is not alone. From what we hear, the majority of the Cabinet share my disappointment. It is No. 10 that is saying no. Frankly, this is madness. The Government are shooting themselves in the foot. Just when we need to be building on our country's success, the Government are torpedoing it.

Lords amendment 156 was thoughtfully drafted by Lord Hannay, who made it clear that it would take international students out of consideration as long-term migrants for public policy purposes. The Minister said that we have to count international students. The Government often cite the United States, where the Census Bureau counts international students, but the Department of Homeland Security, which is responsible for public policy on migration, does not treat them as migrants. That is the model we are looking for, and it is the model embedded in Lords amendment 156. If the amendment were agreed to, it would enable growth, generate earnings and create jobs in towns and cities across the country. The regional dimension is important, because the distribution of our universities across the regions and nations of the United Kingdom means that when universities succeed, that success is shared, quite uniquely, across the country.

We do not want to reduce the debate about international students to simple economics. International students enrich the learning environment of our campuses.

Ms Ritchie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that these international students add to the scholarly, research and investigative processes undertaken by universities in terms of academic freedom and the richness of our society?

5 pm

Paul Blomfield: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She pre-empted me perfectly, because that was the point I was coming to. We are talking not simply about an extraordinary opportunity in an ever-smaller world for UK students to learn and study alongside those from many other countries, but about the contribution to research. I see that not only from our universities, but from my local businesses that benefit in Sheffield, and it is of huge importance.

To that list we should add the enormous benefits of the lasting relationships we build with those who study in this country. Last year I was talking to the high commissioner of a country that is one of our major trading partners and an important ally. He said to me, "Do you realise that more than half our Cabinet were educated at UK universities?" According to the Higher Education Policy Institute, 55 world leaders from 51 countries studied here. That is the sort of soft power that other countries would die for—political influence and commercial contracts based on the affection that people feel around the world because of their experience of studying in the UK.

All those things are in addition to economic benefits—almost £11 billion of export earnings. One would imagine that the Government would be celebrating that great British success and trying to make it stronger, but that is not the case. Throughout the last Parliament, to growing concern, the Government undermined our ability to keep up on international student recruitment. The Minister contests that claim and says that the numbers have stayed broadly level. I agree that largely they did—they dip off, and I will return to that point—but staying level in a growing market represents a failure. Holding level is not good enough when it means that we are reducing our market share, to the benefit of our competitors. As I said earlier, in 2014-15, the latest year for which numbers are available, new international student enrolments fell by 3%. He says that these things go up and down, but we can contrast that figure with the position in the United States, which has the biggest share of international students and where enrolments increased by 7%. The situation also contrasts with what is happening in Australia, where enrolments increased by 35%. Seeing our weakness, it put in place a strategy that was deliberately designed to take students from the UK. Canada is also planning to double its numbers, all at our expense.

Throughout the last Parliament, new measures introduced by the Government made the UK a less attractive destination. Those measures were put in place to help the Government to hit their net migration targets, and this is why the point made by the hon. Member for Bedford is so relevant. The problem is that the Government view international students as part of the migration debate, but that is not how the public see them. As he said, polls show that 75% of the public want international student numbers to stay the same or

[Paul Blomfield]

go up. It is also not the way this place sees them, because in the last Parliament an unprecedented five Select Committees of the House of Commons and the House of Lords called for change and for taking international students out of the net migration targets. These are challenging times for our country as we chart our course in the post-Brexit world. We need to win friends, not alienate them. As the Prime Minister's trade mission to India last year demonstrated, many of those friends will put access to our universities at the heart of their discussion about our future trading relationships. We need to build on our successful sectors.

In terms of export earnings, universities are a huge success, but that is put at risk by Brexit. This is about not just the 125,000 EU students who are here, but the 30% of non-EU students who said that the UK would be a less attractive destination if we left the EU. We face losing up to half our international students if we do not get this right, and that will have an impact on the economy of every town and city across the country that has a university. As the Minister knows, it puts at risk critical courses, particularly in STEM subjects at a postgraduate taught level, which depend on numbers of international students.

A sensible Government and Prime Minister would look at those facts and say, "How can we strengthen our appeal to international students?" While our competitors are doing just that by developing recruitment strategies to win more students, the Prime Minister is saying no. There is no other sector in our economy that the Government would treat this way. The die is cast for this Bill but, as the hon. Member for Bath said, Members on both sides of the House will ensure that this issue will return in the next Parliament. Ultimately, common sense will prevail.

Joseph Johnson: With the leave of the House, I wish to say a few words of thanks to Members and others for their contribution to the development of the Bill and, most pertinently for this afternoon's purposes, for the insightful points made during this debate. We have heard agreement that the Bill is an important one that has been carefully developed through dialogue on the Floor of the House, in Committee and in the other place, as well as through the extensive consultations dating back to the initial Green Paper in November 2015. It has benefited tremendously from thoughtful input from experts, reviews and independent reports. It was introduced right at the beginning of this parliamentary Session—perhaps even on its very first day—and it will still be going strong on its last day, so it is fair to say that no opportunity to scrutinise it has been missed. I am pleased that both sides of the House recognise that today's amendments will strengthen the legislation still further.

I shall address briefly some of the questions asked during the debate. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) asked about the role of the independent review with respect to the TEF. The independent reviewer will consider the devolved Administration providers as part of the review. The Bill will allow the devolved Administrations to continue to decide whether they wish to allow their providers to participate. She also asked about UKRI's executive committee. As UKRI is established, we will work closely

with the devolved Administrations to ensure that the UK's research and innovation base remains one of the most productive in the world. I can confirm that we amended the Bill on Report to require the Secretary of State to have regard to experience of working in the devolved Administrations when appointing the UKRI board. The executive committee is, though, an internal management committee for UKRI.

The hon. Lady also asked about post-study work for international students, a subject on which many Members focused. I reiterate that there is no limit to the number of international students graduating from UK universities who can move into skilled jobs in the UK. They do not count against the tier-2 limit and, actually, numbers have been rising year on year for the past three years.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) asked about the transfer of ownership of degree-awarding powers. The answer is that, yes, should a provider with no track record buy a provider with degree-awarding powers, a full review of the provider's continuing eligibility for degree-awarding powers would be undertaken.

I thank the Members who have given such time and so much energy during the many hours of debate we have had. I particularly thank the members of the public Bill Committee, which sat in the autumn, and pay tribute to the Opposition Members involved, especially the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden).

Gordon Marsden: The Minister will recognise that on such occasions certain things have to be said, and said forcefully, but I put on record how courteous he has been to me and the rest of our team.

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful for that. It has been a pleasure to work with the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues, including the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). I also pay tribute to the devolved Administrations who have played a full part in the scrutiny of this Bill, especially the members of the Scottish National party, including the hon. Member for Glasgow North West who has been tireless in her scrutiny of the measures.

The other place has excelled itself, with extensive and very thoughtful debate on this legislation. I thank all those who have given their time and energy to this Bill, including the very large number of highly distinguished academics, former Ministers and those who have extensive experience of the university and research sectors in the other place. Their passion for the sector has been clear to all those who have followed these proceedings.

I also add my thanks to those more widely in the sector, including the two main representative bodies, Universities UK and GuildHE, which have given their time in abundance to ensure that the sector's views have been fully heard and understood and reflected in this legislation. That explains why they have repeatedly expressed their support for passing this Bill into legislation.

There is absolute agreement on the importance of our world class HE sector and our globally leading research. I am pleased that we in this House have agreed a Bill that finally fits this important sector for the 21st century, putting students, choice, value for money and global competitiveness centre stage.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (d) made in lieu of Lords amendment 1.

Lords amendments 2 to 11 agreed to.

Lords amendments 12, 209 and 210 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (g) made in lieu of Lords amendments 12, 209 and 210.

Lords amendments 13 and 14 agreed to.

Lords amendment 15 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendment 15.

Lords amendments 16 to 22 agreed to.

Lords amendment 23 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made in lieu of Lords amendment 23.

Lords amendments 24 to 70 agreed to.

Lords amendment 71 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 71.

Lords amendments 72 to 77 agreed to.

Lords amendments 78 and 106 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (h) made in lieu of Lords amendments 78 and 106.

Lords amendments 79 to 105 and 107 to 155 agreed to, with Commons financial privilege waived in respect of Lords amendments 138 and 139.

Lords amendment 156 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made in lieu of Lords amendment 156.

Lords amendments 157 to 182 agreed to.

Lords amendments 183 to 185 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 186 to 208 and 211 to 244 agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 183 to 185.

That Jo Churchill, Chris Heaton-Harris, Joseph Johnson, Gordon Marsden, Carol Monaghan, Wendy Morton and Karl Turner be members of the Committee.

That Joseph Johnson be the Chair of the Committee.

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(*Andrew Griffiths.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PETITIONS

Closure of King George Hospital Accident and Emergency Department

5.21 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I rise to present a petition against the closure of King George hospital accident and emergency department, signed by well over 10,000 of my constituents in Ilford North, as well as many constituents in Ilford South and other neighbouring constituencies. Were my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) not attending the NATO Parliamentary Assembly today, he would be by my side. This issue is of central importance to the people I was sent here to represent. For that reason, it was the very first issue that I raised upon election to this House.

The Conservatives promised that they would keep the maternity and accident and emergency departments at King George hospital. Maternity has gone, and the closure decision for A&E has been taken.

The petitioners therefore request:

that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a review of the original decision to close King George Hospital A&E and in particular the criteria used which the petitioners believe are now out of date.

I look forward to continuing to champion this cause for many years to come.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the petitioners are against the closure of the A&E department at King George Hospital in Ilford.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a review of the original decision to close King George Hospital A&E and in particular the criteria used which the petitioners believe are now out of date.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002041]

Ulverston Post Office

5.23 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It is with considerable pride that my last act in this Parliament before prorogation is to present a petition of 7,846 residents of Barrow and Furness—of course, overwhelmingly in the town of Ulverston—to save Ulverston post office.

Ulverston post office has been an essential part of community life in its building in County Square for more than 100 years, so we were devastated to find that it had been placed under threat of closure by the Government's latest reforms. There has been an extraordinary response from the town. Well over half of all the residents have already signed the petition. My particular thanks go to Mr Malcolm Tyson, who has probably gathered more than half these signatures on his own. He tells me he has walked more than 500 miles to save Ulverston post office, and I hazard that he would probably walk 500 more to be the one who did save it. This issue is critical.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to make provisions to ensure that the Post Office remains open and available for use by the community.

As long as I remain the strong, independent Labour voice for Barrow and Furness, I will back them to the hilt.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of constituents of Barrow and Furness,

Declares that Ulverston Post Office has been a central part of the community for over 100 years and serves as a lifeline for many residents; further that the petitioners believe it should remain in County Square with no loss of services to users and no reduction in jobs for its local employees.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to make provisions to ensure that the Post Office remains open and available for use by the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002042]

Transitional state pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s

5.25 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents for transitional state pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s. Every constituency in this land will have thousands of women who have been affected by the changes to state pension provisions.

On Friday, in Porth in my constituency, I heard from one woman who had no idea she was going to be affected by these changes until I wrote her a letter about them. I think that the Government should have been notifying these women. I heard from another woman, who has worked for 43 years already in very strenuous, arduous jobs, and who has now had to take up three tough additional jobs at the age of 61 just to keep the wolf from the door, when the food bank in the Rhondda, which is based in Tylorstown, has had a dramatic increase in the number of elderly people, and particularly women, who are using it. It is perhaps an irony that the food bank is based in what used to be the Conservative club.

The injustice here is absolutely obvious. It is one thing to tell somebody at the age of 20 that they are going to have to work till 66, 67 or 68, but it is quite another to start telling people that when they are coming up to those years already, particularly in constituencies such as mine, where many of these women will be solely reliant on the state pension to make ends meet.

No woman was properly warned about this. The changes happened far too swiftly. Only 280 constituents have signed the petition, but I can assure the Government that if we had had a little longer in this Parliament, thousands would have signed up in the Rhondda. I just say to any Government that want to mess with the women of the Rhondda: they will see you off. I hope that presenting this petition will be the last thing I do in this Parliament, but I also hope that this issue will be the first I deal with in the next.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born on or after 6th April 1951 who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the Rhondda,

Declares that the 1995 Pensions Act has been implemented unfairly; further that Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI), agree with equalisation, but don't agree with the unfair way the changes were implemented — with little/no personal notice (1995/2011 Pension Acts), faster than promised (2011 Pension Act), and no time to make alternative plans; further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences; and further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with a lack of appropriate notification.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born on or after 6th April 1951 who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age (SPA).

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002043]

Diesel Fumes: Islwyn

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

5.28 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this opportunity to discuss the urgent issue of the effect of diesel fumes in Islwyn. Last month, I questioned the Prime Minister about her plans to incentivise the use of less harmful alternatives to diesel. I welcomed her comments that the Government were preparing an air quality plan to tackle pollution across the UK. However, with the upcoming general election and the Dissolution of Parliament, the Secretary of State announced on Monday that the proposals are being put on further hold. I am afraid my constituents cannot wait that long.

The Royal College of Physicians estimates that pollution by diesel engines contributes to 40,000 premature deaths each year. Further, Public Health Wales has stated that air pollution causes 2,000 deaths per year in Wales. That is 6% of Wales's annual deaths, and an average of five deaths per day. Nowhere in Wales is worse affected than my constituency.

The European Union dictates that hourly levels of toxic nitrogen dioxide must not exceed 200 micrograms per cubic metre of air, and it cannot exceed these levels more than 18 times a year. Hafodyrynys Road in my constituency alone had already surpassed this limit 60 times by the third month of this year—March. This gives Hafodyrynys Road the dubious honour of being the most polluted road in the UK outside of London. Over the next couple of weeks, many of us will be lauding our constituencies, but I am sure that that is a title that no one would wish to compete for. It is concerning that even with pressing evidence that the pollution situation in the UK is spiralling out of control, the Government do not recognise this situation for the public health emergency that it is.

Hafodyrynys Road is a key cross-valley route between Pontypool in the west and Caerphilly in the east. Every day the road is heavily congested with traffic, with diesel-reliant heavy goods vehicles frequently passing through. Diesel engines are no doubt very popular. When arguing for higher taxes on diesel cars, we have to be concerned that this may hit hard-working families who simply cannot afford to change their car. The Government's diesel scrappage scheme may be popular, but it could be difficult and costly to set up, and it needs political will. This means that there needs to be further study of these ideas. It is therefore deeply disappointing that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has now lodged an application at the High Court to postpone the publication of its plans.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am well aware of the excellent work that my hon. Friend has been doing on this issue. Residents in my part of Caerphilly borough are also concerned about the issue of which he speaks. Does he agree that a great deal of work has been done on the scrappage scheme by Fair Fuel UK, which shares his concern about the impact that the toxin tax can have on hard-pressed drivers?

Chris Evans: I totally agree. My hon. Friend, representing as he does the next-door constituency to me, will know of the effect that diesel fumes have on valleys roads, in

particular. Like me, he regularly knocks on doors. If I speak to someone on one of these roads, the No. 1 issue is the diesel fumes coming from it and the effect that is having on their children. There needs to be real political will and a sense of urgency from the Government about this. It is no good using delaying tactics—this is happening now. It is a disgrace and a scandal now.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that companies such as Volkswagen seem to be getting off scot free with their diesel emissions scandal? Does he further agree that all our constituents need is a Government who hold companies such as Volkswagen to account for their very bad behaviour?

Chris Evans: I absolutely agree with my other parliamentary neighbour in the north when he says that Volkswagen seems to have got away with the diesel emissions scandal in terms of lowering the emissions from its engines. It is not just the residents who are affected—consumers who bought those engines were ripped off because they thought they were more fuel-efficient. Again, the Government are not taking on the people in society who are doing the wrong things. It sometimes seems that the Government will go after the small guy—the easy target—but when it comes to tackling the people who are causing problems for our health and hitting our pockets, they are found wanting.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I am sure that this has got a lot to do with Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman has referred to old cars that have a bit of age on them, but some of the stats that come out refer to new cars, which are also failing to filter out polluted air. It is said that some 10 million toxic particles are taken in with each breath by a person in a new car. If that is the case and it is down to poor ventilation, does he agree that this Government need to address not only the diesel scrappage scheme but new vehicles that are failing to meet standards?

Chris Evans: Of all the Members I have served with during my seven years in this House, the hon. Gentleman is the only one who could shoehorn an intervention about Northern Ireland into a debate about Islwyn. I welcome that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I just say that I do not think he did? I was just showing leniency from the Chair.

Chris Evans: I was trying to be kind and charitable to the hon. Gentleman, as he has always been to me. He raises a pertinent point. The Government need to show political will, but the motor industry, including HGV and freight, also needs to make an effort.

As I have said, there is an average of five deaths a day in Wales due to air pollution. That means that between now and the general election on 8 June, 215 people in Wales will lose their lives due to this Government's inaction. Those most at risk of contracting lung diseases from exposure to air pollution are the two most vulnerable groups in society: young children and the elderly.

On the Hafodyrny Road in my constituency, one of the residents—a pensioner—suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. He says that the fumes on the road make it even harder for him to breathe. Another resident, who moved to the road in 2014, has visited the hospital four times since moving there and has been diagnosed with a leaky heart valve. That is further aggravated by the exposure to nitrogen dioxide. Furthermore, a mother of two young children says that the fumes affect her son so badly that he has been prescribed an inhaler to help him breathe. That is just not right. People should be able to leave their homes without having to worry about their health, and to enjoy the outdoors. Instead, my constituents on that road are being made to feel like prisoners in their own homes.

The situation has become so desperate for my constituents on Hafodyrny Road that half of the residents have called on the local council to purchase compulsorily and demolish their homes so that they can relocate. How can it be acceptable that people have got to the point that they feel that they have no other option than to see their homes demolished? Residents cannot afford to live elsewhere, as they know that their current properties will not sell due to the adverse publicity about pollution in the area.

This is a public health crisis and the Government are choosing to ignore it. In Wales, pollution is the second biggest killer after smoking. When it comes to breathing in toxic diesel fumes, many people do not have a choice. DEFRA has had plenty of chances to tackle the issue, but it has chosen to let my constituents down every time. Illegal levels of air pollution have become the norm in Britain, and residents in areas such as Hafodyrny are helpless to do anything about it. It further worries me that there is a primary school just a mile from the road, putting young children at risk of the health complications caused by exposure to nitrogen dioxide.

I am not the only one incensed by the issue of air pollution. I pay tribute to local councillor Andrew Lewis, who has been at the forefront of the campaign for better air quality in Hafodyrny. The Mayor of London and public health bodies have all called on the Government to do more. Just this week, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) asked the Environment Secretary an urgent question. The Secretary of State said that her Government are committed to leaving the environment in a better state than they found it. Those are empty words, because at every opportunity they have been given to take action they have proposed inadequate plans. The Government have had long enough. It is clear where their priorities lie and, based on the evidence, it is not with the environment or the health of the British public.

My constituents want illegal and toxic pollution levels to be vanquished, as I am sure do the other 40 million people living in areas of the UK with illegal levels of air pollution. That is entirely achievable, if the Government show political will.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Labour didn't manage it.

Chris Evans: That is just typical. I am talking about public health and the Minister is more interested in scoring political points.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let us see if we can help. We are nearly at the end. What we do not want is sideshow arguments. Please continue and I am sure that interventions will be possible when the Minister sums up the debate.

Chris Evans: I have to say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that the Conservative Government have been in power for seven years. Their default position is to blame Labour for everything and that just will not wash. They have had seven years.

Although encouraging people to walk or use public transport and increasing taxes on diesel-fuelled vehicles are necessary measures, they are not enough to reduce the fumes. The Government need to commit to making clean energy alternatives more accessible to the public, particularly for those using HGVs. An increase in clean air zones in cities across the country with illegal levels of air pollution is also necessary to protect the health of our citizens.

It is not just the public's health that is at stake. Illegal levels of air pollution drive down house prices and can also lead to businesses deciding not to invest in the area. What is more, nitrogen dioxide has detrimental effects on the surrounding wildlife. My constituency has a booming agricultural industry, with farms and woodland such as those on Cwmcarn Forest Drive, located very close to the Hafodyrynys Road in Islwyn. It is not fair that the environment and these businesses should have to suffer due to the Department's inaction.

It is not just Hafodyrynys Road that is at risk. As my hon. Friends the Members for Caerphilly (Wayne David) and for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) have mentioned, they have the same problems in their valley constituencies. Last year, Hazrem Environmental applied for planning permission for a waste transfer plant in Cwmfelinfach in my constituency. It is just a few miles down the road from Hafodyrynys. It was down to the campaigning of the Lower Sirhowy Valley residents' group, led by Alan Sharpe, Councillor Philippa Marsden and Councillor Jan Jones, that that did not go ahead. I mention that because it was discovered that the valleys have a microclimate. Basically, the fumes reach up into the air and are trapped between the hills. These are not safe places for diesel fumes to escape or for waste transfer plants. I say to any company that wants to put a waste transfer plant in any valley constituency—whether mine or those of my hon. Friends—that these are not places that lend themselves to such planning applications, and they have to stop right now.

I urge the Government to see the air pollution situation not just in Islwyn but the entire country for the public health emergency that it is. People are dying prematurely at an alarming rate. The greatest tragedy is that it could easily be prevented, but the Government chose not to stick to their original timetable to deliver a competent and much needed air quality strategy. As one of the wealthiest countries in the world and at the forefront of tackling global environmental issues, we have the resources to put into place an effective and successful air quality plan. I urge the Minister and the Department to delay these plans no longer, and to end the suffering of so many people in my constituency and other affected areas in the UK.

If I may seek your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, this will probably be the last time I speak in this Parliament, so I pay tribute to Mr Speaker and to you

and the other Deputy Speakers for the way in which you have chaired Parliament over the past two years and for the years before that. I thank all the members of staff who look after us, especially the security staff, and the Doorkeepers, for all they do to keep this place ticking over. I also pay tribute to Members on both sides of the House. We often attack each other and score political points, but there is deep warmth, friendship and affection among us, as we saw a couple of weeks ago. I thank everybody and pay tribute to them for the experiences I have had in my seven years in this place. I hope that I will be back in June.

5.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Let me begin by explaining that I have not taken on additional responsibilities in DEFRA. As hon. Members know, the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), leads on these issues, but she has had a particularly busy day today including a debate in Westminster Hall on water catchments so was unable to be here for the beginning of this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) on securing the debate. I think it is the last end-of-day Adjournment debate that we will have in this Parliament. I associate myself with the comments the hon. Gentleman made in praise of you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and your great chairmanship in these debates.

The hon. Gentleman has described some of the problems that his constituents face and I welcome the chance to respond on those points. He is of course aware that this is a devolved matter and many of the issues and challenges that he raises are matters for the Welsh Assembly or the relevant local authorities, but since he has raised a number of UK-wide issues and commented on the UK Government's position, I want initially to set this in the wider UK context. I reassure the hon. Gentleman and all Members that improving air quality is a priority for this Government and we are determined to cut emissions to improve the health of the people we all represent and to protect the environment.

We have already achieved significant improvements in air quality across a range of pollutants, and the UK meets the legal limits for almost all pollutants, but faces significant challenges in achieving limits on nitrogen dioxide. We are not alone; 16 other EU countries face similar challenges.

The pollutants generated by diesel fumes, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned, are particulate matter and nitrogen oxides. Long-term exposure, over several years, to elevated concentrations of particulate matter at levels typically experienced in urban areas can reduce life expectancy by between several months and a few years. Air pollution is a contributory factor, along with many others, in mortality. It has a major effect on deaths from cardiovascular disease and a lesser effect on deaths from lung cancer and other respiratory diseases. Nitrogen oxide emissions are considered to exacerbate pre-existing health conditions, as well as affecting more vulnerable groups. However, particulate matter, which consists of very small particles of soot and dust, can affect all of us. That is why we are focused on this pollutant, and that is why it is a key indicator for Public Health England outcomes.

As our recently published toolkit for public health directors points out, care is needed around how information is communicated. Air pollution has many of the characteristics that make a threat to health more worrying—so-called fright factors—and that creates a real risk of counterproductive reactions if communication is poorly handled. It is important that local communities have access to balanced and accurate information about the sources and consequences of air pollution in their local areas. Our assessment is that the main source of PM emissions is domestic wood burning, and we are working on plans to help households to reduce their exposure to it.

Diesel is often used in non-mobile machinery—equipment such as cranes, generators and chainsaws—but I recognise that the problem that the hon. Gentleman has described relates predominantly to vehicles. Transport is responsible for a substantial proportion of air pollution; specifically, it is responsible for 80% of nitrogen oxide emission at the roadside in areas where we need to take action to reduce levels. That is why transport has been the principal focus of our action on air quality, and it is why we have committed more than £2 billion to green transport initiatives. The autumn statement provided a further £290 million to support greener transport, including by supporting the early market for ultra low emission vehicles between 2015 and 2020. The Department for Transport is working actively with the freight and haulage industry to reduce vehicle emissions from light and heavy goods vehicles. That may directly help the problem with lorries along the A472 as companies replace their fleets.

The House will be aware that the reason for the difficulty in meeting our nitrogen dioxide limit values is the failure of Euro standards for diesel vehicles to deliver the expected reductions in nitrogen oxide emissions. The Euro standards should have resulted in major reductions in nitrogen oxide emissions. That has not been the case, particularly in real-world emissions for diesel vehicles, which have proven to be many times higher than those in lab tests. Previous commitments, to which former Governments signed up, were made in good faith and in the expectation that technological improvements would help us to achieve the Euro standards. However, it is clear that the standards have failed. That is why, since 2011, we have been at the forefront of action in the EU to secure more accurate real-world emissions testing for diesel cars.

The national air quality plan for nitrogen dioxide, which was published in December 2015, set out an approach designed to improve air quality and achieve compliance. The five cities identified in the plan are working to implement clean air zones, with Government support, to target the oldest and most polluting vehicles. That is on top of the action taken in London by the former Conservative Mayor and the current Mayor. The consultation on the clean air zone framework was launched in October 2016 to ensure that a consistent approach was taken, and we expect to publish the summary of responses and our finalised framework shortly. Our plan was based on the best evidence available at the time. We have been pressing for updates to COPERT emission factors, and we got those updates in September last year. We said that when we got the new factors, we would update our modelling, and that is

exactly what we have been doing. We have been updating our plan with new modelling based on the updated COPERT factors.

The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the new plan will be published with the Welsh Government and other devolved Administrations because, as he knows, improving air quality is a devolved matter. As such, the issues in Islwyn—particularly on the A472 at Hafodyrnyys, which he mentioned—are a matter for Caerphilly County Borough Council and the Welsh Government. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern where people's homes face straight on to a strategic road used by a number of heavy goods vehicles. He has described the experiences of his constituents, and I hope that joint action can be taken by Caerphilly council and the Welsh Government to improve the situation.

I understand that Caerphilly council is producing an air quality action plan for submission to the Welsh Government, and has established an air quality steering group to produce the action plan. The steering group comprises local residents, ward members, Public Health Wales, and officers from the council and the neighbouring councils of Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen. I also understand that the Welsh Government have very recently received a draft action plan from Caerphilly council, but given the upcoming elections, it is right and proper that the incoming Administration take ownership of the plan, finalise it and take forward its implementation.

The Welsh Government undertook a public consultation on local air quality and noise management in Wales, which closed on 6 December. The Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs in the Welsh Government issued a written statement on 30 March, explaining how the local air quality and noise management system in Wales will change in light of the responses received. Through our discussions with the Welsh Government, I know that they are firmly committed to improving air quality across Wales. Legislative frameworks are in place to limit the levels of air pollution. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of such EU directives and domestic legislation, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, which they hope will reduce or remove barriers to effective action on local air quality. There is a role for national measures to improve air quality, which we are undertaking, but local actions—with targeted, bespoke interventions—can make substantial changes, including measures to improve traffic flow, planning and deterrents for idling traffic.

I want to talk briefly about the situation in England. English local authorities have powers, under the Road Traffic (Vehicle Emissions) (Fixed Penalty) (England) Regulations 2002, to issue fixed penalty notices of £20 to drivers who allow their vehicle engines to run unnecessarily while the vehicle is stationary. In November, my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary wrote to 230 local authorities across England that have longstanding air quality challenges to highlight the need for further action and to understand better the issues they are facing. Responses from the local authorities show that many are working in partnership with other local authorities and regional air quality groups, as well as at county level. Many are taking forward measures in air quality action plans, traffic management initiatives and improved air quality-focused planning guidance for new developments.

[George Eustice]

Local authorities of course need support. This is why DEFRA provides statutory policy and technical guidance for local authorities in England to enable them to fulfil their air quality management duties. I am aware that the Welsh Government provide similar technical guidance to local authorities in Wales. The successful applicants to our clean air grant fund were announced in February. Nearly £3.7 million was awarded to local authorities to deliver projects such as clean air zone feasibility studies in Bristol and the retrofitting of Derby City Council's HGV fleet with emissions-reduction technology.

The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs also wrote to public health directors, together with the public health Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), to encourage them to engage with their

local councils on actions that can reduce air pollution. On 1 March, DEFRA, in partnership with Public Health England, released an updated air quality toolkit for directors of public health. The toolkit is a suite of information, guidance and communication tools, designed to make it easier for local authorities to be as effective as possible in improving local air quality.

In conclusion, I assure all hon. Members that air quality is a top priority for DEFRA, my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who leads on the issue, the Secretary of State and the whole Government. As the Prime Minister said recently:

"We have taken action, but there is more to do and we will do it."—[*Official Report*, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 887.]

Question put and agreed to.

5.55 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 26 April 2017

[MR CLIVE BETTS *in the Chair*]

School Funding: North-east of England

9.30 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered school funding in the north-east of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Betts. I am very pleased to have secured this important debate, albeit on the second last day that Parliament is sitting in this Session. I know the subject of the debate has made many of my constituents very concerned, as well as those of my fellow MPs from across the north-east who, I am pleased to say, are in attendance today in some numbers and those who unfortunately could not be here. They include my fellow Sunderland MPs, my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson). My right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), who has raised concerns with the Minister following a meeting he had with headteachers in his area, is also concerned about the effect on his constituency. He asked me to convey his apologies, as he really wanted to be here but had to be elsewhere.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), who has done a lot of work over recent months to raise awareness of our collective concerns about the Government's negligent approach to schools in our region. I have to add, Mr Betts, that he will be sorely missed when he steps down from this place next week, both by us, his regional colleagues, and, I know, his constituents. I am thrilled to see him in his place today.

Labour Members are passionate advocates for the education of children and young people. It is safe to say that "Education, education, education" is a mantra that we still believe in, yet sadly we have seen this Government ride roughshod over our education system and our local schools, by putting them in an unprecedented position. The Government have not only failed to support our schools; they have made cuts that are fundamentally detrimental to the very viability of some schools.

In my contribution this morning, I will set out why that approach to education is so damaging and why there must be an urgent rethink by Ministers. To do this, I will look at three areas: the national situation; how it is affecting schools in my constituency and the north-east; and, finally, how that approach to our education system is affecting the very nature of our schools, whose purpose is to educate our children and address societal issues, such as child poverty and social mobility.

Before I even get to the crux of why I called this debate, perhaps I can already predict what the Minister will say in response. He will probably say, as the Prime Minister said just a few weeks ago, that this Government

have protected the schools budget. However, he knows as well as I do that that is not actually the case, because the real issue is the failure to recognise that our schools are facing real-terms cuts, not cash cuts. It is deeply disingenuous of the Government to say that they have protected school budgets. I suppose it is like the Government paying public sector workers the same as they paid them seven years ago and then saying that they have protected their salaries. Oh, hang on a minute—they have done that as well.

These real-terms cuts are mainly down to inflation, but also four other things: the increases in the cost of employers' contribution to national insurance and pensions; the abolition of the education services grant to local authorities and academies, which has reduced funding by £600 million; the cost of annual pay awards to teachers, which is set to increase by 4.4% by 2020; and, finally, the impact that the apprenticeship levy will have on maintained schools that take on apprentices. Much of this would not be a problem if the Government were not overseeing static funding for our schools, whereby these real-terms cuts now range from between 6.5% and 8%.

On top of all this, there are growing concerns about what the new schools funding formula will do to schools' budgets and to staff retention and the schools estate, which is in dire need of an uplift. We might easily come to the conclusion that what we are seeing is the complete mismanagement and neglect of our education system—a perfect storm, if you like.

Instead of coming to terms with those issues, we have seen this Government shove their heads in the sand and carry on regardless, ignoring what many in society—from MPs across the House to teachers and parents themselves—are calling for, which is support for our education system to ensure that our children succeed in life. As the Public Accounts Committee recently stated in its report on school cuts,

"the Government does not seem to understand the pressures that schools are already under."

I completely agree with that, and I feel frustrated that Ministers are continually ignoring the concerns of a wide cross-section of society on this matter.

School leaders, who know their budgets the most, were surveyed by the National Association of Head Teachers, with 72% saying that their budgets will be untenable by 2019-20. That is not surprising when the National Audit Office has set out that the Department for Education expects schools to make £3 billion of savings a year by 2019-20. It is safe to say that this £3 billion cut—which is what it is, rather than a saving—as well as the funding pressures that schools face and the lack of action to support them through all these difficulties, is leading to headteachers having to make impossible decisions, some of which will ultimately impact negatively on pupils and their education, and all because of what the Minister is doing, or not doing, as the case may be.

This sorry state of affairs that our schools find themselves in is nothing to do with efficiencies; it is all about impoverishing our schools. Shamefully, this approach will hit children living in the poorest areas the most, such as in parts of my constituency and those of my fellow north-east MPs from across the House. We all have deprived communities in our constituencies. That means that more and more children will be held back in life, when we should be supporting them to achieve social mobility and to achieve their full potential.

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

As I stated at the beginning of my contribution, I know that this is an issue that many of my constituents and teachers in my constituency are concerned about. That is not surprising, when the total budget cuts by 2019 across the city of Sunderland are expected to be over £16 million, which means an average cut of £470 in per-pupil spend and a loss of 439 teachers across the borough of Sunderland.

In my constituency, the worst hit school is Rickleton Primary School, which will see a budget cut of nearly £150,000. That is well above the average cut for primary schools nationally, which is estimated at around £103,000, which is still a huge cut. The headteacher of Rickleton Primary School, Mr Lofthouse, set out clearly in an email to me, which I have sent on to the Secretary of State for Education, what those funding pressures will mean for his school, from potential staff redundancies to the impact on his pupils' education, and it is not only Mr Lofthouse. Many other headteachers across Sunderland have expressed similarly grave concerns. Those concerns were reflected in a meeting I held in Sunderland recently with around 30 headteachers and school governors, who all agreed that our schools were at a crisis point. That led me to securing this debate today.

The worries of those headteachers and school governors are genuine and showed just how concerned they were for the education of the next generation. In all my 12 years as an MP, I have never been in such a meeting, with headteachers expressing concerns of such gravity. If the Minister had been at that meeting, he would have had his eyes truly opened to the extent of his actions and the gravity of the situation. One headteacher from Sunderland said that if they did not see any support from the Government for their school, it would mean losing five teachers, which would not be legal under the 30:1 pupil-to-teacher ratio. The true scale of this issue was described extremely well by another headteacher at the meeting, who said that balancing their budget had always been hard under successive Governments—they had always had to deal with cuts—but that these cuts will be impossible to achieve. She ended by saying:

"This can't be done—no joke, not kidding or exaggerating".

Following that meeting, a joint letter from headteachers in different parts of our region, some of which are represented by MPs who are here today, appealed to parents to make their voices heard by the Government regarding these plans. I for one am proud to stand with my local headteachers, school governors and parents who are deeply concerned about this issue and urge the Minister to rethink his disastrous plans, which will negatively affect the lives of children and young people not only in my constituency, but across the north-east and in other parts of England.

To help the Minister along, I will read an extract from that letter to parents. It will help him understand what is happening on the ground and the plight facing our schools right now. It is unprecedented for teachers from three boroughs to get together and write to parents in this way. The letter states:

"School leaders in our region have endeavoured to make every conceivable cut to our spending, but are now faced with reducing basic services still further, all to the disadvantage of your child."

Teachers do not go into this profession to make life harder for children and to make cuts. They do it because they want to help transform the lives of all children,

especially those who need extra support the most. What we are currently seeing is the exact opposite, and it is all due to this Government's shocking failures. As someone who has campaigned during my 12 years as a Member of Parliament to improve the lives of children and young people, especially those living in poverty, I fail to see how the Government's current actions with our education system will help to alleviate any issues of child poverty and disadvantage in our society.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for calling this debate and the critical point she is making about education in deprived communities and social mobility. The school I went to, Kenton Comprehensive School, has announced that it will cut 24 staff posts, including three teacher posts. The head says that she is making every effort to ensure that that does not impact on the learning experience, but does my hon. Friend agree that at a time when we need to enhance our skills, when the future of every child depends on the education they receive, and when social mobility and social equality are such an issue, it cannot be acceptable to cut education and staff in this way?

Mrs Hodgson: I totally agree. As my hon. Friend knows, education is a critical way of reducing poverty in society, as it equips children and young people with the knowledge and tools to get on in life, but the best schools also inspire them to go on and achieve their dreams. That is crucial in the north-east, where an estimated 132,000 children are living in entrenched generational poverty. That is why the cuts are deeply worrying to those of us representing seats in the north-east. The children we represent do not deserve that.

It is a well known fact that poverty impacts on the attainment of children in our society. That was clearly documented in 2015, when GCSE results were analysed. It showed that 36.7% of disadvantaged pupils received five A* to C grades, compared with 64.7% of all pupils. In this country, there is a strong correlation between parental social background and children's test scores, particularly when compared with other developed countries, where it is less so. This is compounded by the fact that children in some of England's most disadvantaged areas are 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than children living in the least deprived areas. That is why it is important that schools are used as a conduit to alleviate some of the issues that children in poverty face and to ensure that they get the best possible start in life.

Poverty is not inevitable. We do not need to see poverty in our society. What poverty tells us is that, due to a lack of political will, innovative thinking and a drive to act, we have failed as a society to address the social and economic issues that cause poverty. We have seen none of those things when it comes to school budget cuts. Instead we are seeing further social separation and division. That is seen quite plainly in the Government's pet project, where they plan to pump millions of pounds of taxpayers' money into grammar schools and the rolling out of more free schools and academies, instead of supporting what parents and teachers are calling for, which is for their child's current school to be funded properly. That was brought to light just today with the publication this morning of the Public Account Committee report. It called the Government's free school policy "incoherent" and wasteful, with the Department for

Education spending over the odds for schools and new free school places in areas where they were not needed, because there was not demand. Why can we not take some of this wasteful spending—the Public Accounts Committee is cross-party and it knows what it is talking about—and use it to mitigate the terrible funding cuts that our schools are facing?

In conclusion, for the sake of the children who live in my constituency, but also those of other MPs across the north-east, the Minister must rethink his and his Department's approach to education without delay. Our education system should be funded fully and fairly, so that it can not only educate our children, but use its power to help improve our society. I hope the Minister will truly listen to this debate and take all our concerns into consideration, especially those of teachers and parents. Investing in education is investing in our children's and Britain's future. Those children in the classroom today are our future workforce. They will take our country on to greater things if we only give them the chance. Failing to support them now will be disastrous for our nation's future and will only store up problems in later years for society as a whole. I hope the Minister understands the scale of what this all means and will go back to his officials following this debate and seriously reconsider his approach to funding our schools. Our children deserve no less.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. We have got about 50 minutes before I need to start calling the Front Benchers. We have got six Members wishing to speak in the debate, so I think you can work it out for yourselves. It is about eight minutes each. If Members can keep to that without a formal time limit, that would be helpful.

9.46 am

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an honour to speak on the last day of Westminster Hall in this Parliament. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate. She was talking about the challenges of school funding, but it was disappointing not to hear about some of the impressive improvements in educational outputs across the north-east over the past few years. Children are getting the benefit of the improvements, which have come through the education framework and through Ofsted's encouragement for schools to hone in on what is important in ensuring that children get the very best possible education from those early years and all the way through.

Speaking as the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, which is right up in the northern reaches of our region, we have a different set of challenges to many colleagues here today. I have very many small schools, where the challenges relate not to pressure on places, but to transport and the ability to sustain a school that, by definition, will have small and erratic numbers of children. The arrival of Ofsted can be good in one year and not so good in another, because cohorts vary so dramatically from year to year.

Some years ago, the Minister visited a high school at the very top of the constituency, in Berwick itself. We were pleased to welcome him there. The challenge is that the school, like every senior school, has a fixed cost

with a small sixth form. There is no other school to go to—the next high school is 30 miles away. If a young person is choosing college rather than sixth form, the next provider is 60 or 70 miles away in my Labour colleagues' constituencies. That is a very long way from Berwick. The challenge is to ensure that we can maintain the full provision of education in that far-flung school right up on the Scottish border.

What I would pitch to the Minister on this last day before we head into the election madness is that, in considering how to use continuing education more effectively, the Department needs to think more fully about how we encourage schools to use modern online learning tools. It would probably need capital investment, but it would help children in schools where the challenge is not so much, "Can we find a place?" but, "How can children access the high-tech learning skills they need to work in the industries that the north-east is growing, which will become, and are in some cases already, world-leading?"

I challenge the Minister to think about how we change the nature of the education that we give our children. The pupil-to-teacher ratio is important in younger years, but as children go up the school age groups, there is an opportunity to draw in excellent education from around the world. My son has recently been teaching himself how to write computer code—I cannot remember which one—because, apparently, that was of interest to him. He used a free Stanford University online tool. All he needed was a computer and decent broadband to sit in his room and learn it. He can now speak in a very strange language, none of which makes any sense to me, but he is now able to do stuff at school. The course was not available to him at school, so he did it off his own bat. Access to those tools are not expensive. They require technical investment, and for schools to think more broadly about how they use the funding that the Government provide to give children a chance to jump to another level in their educational attainment. The schools can be world-leading.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and applaud her recognition of the importance of online learning and the transformative impact of digital technology. Does she therefore agree that the Government's plans for the universal service obligation for broadband of 10 megabits by 2020 are far too little far too late?

Mrs Trevelyan: As the hon. Lady knows, I support the USO and campaigned very hard to ensure that we got it into the Digital Economy Bill. I speak as someone for whom 1 megabit is still a very good day in my house. It is still a challenge for many of my constituents whose children need to do their homework online, but we are getting there. We have kicked the system into a more proactive premise, but I agree that getting access across the board is vital. It will be no good for my constituents to see Newcastle with superfast broadband at 100 megabit or 1 gigabit, because we still cannot download a basic file to do homework. We need to ensure that the universal service obligation spreads across the nation to every home.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West raised the issue of the apprenticeship levy, which for small schools in Northumberland is proving to be problematic because councils have been given the freedom

[Mrs Trevelyan]

to pass the levy fee on. It is an issue for a small school that suddenly got a bill for £10,000 a few weeks ago and will not take up the opportunity of an apprenticeship, and I very much hope the Minister looks at it in more detail.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Schools in my area have contacted me about the apprenticeship levy. The hon. Lady says that the local authorities have the ability to pass the levy fee on to schools. Local authorities in my area have suffered tens of millions of pounds-worth of cuts. Does she expect them to pick up the bill or does she think the Government should offer a concession or do away with it for schools?

Mrs Trevelyan: The question is how the levy is used. For some of my larger schools the apprenticeship levy is a reasonable fee to pay because they will have the opportunity to benefit from apprentices and will increase their cohort of staff. We need to be a little more flexible and encourage councils to think more constructively in how they deal with the levy.

Mrs Hodgson: I know the hon. Lady's constituency and she speaks well for the schools that will be affected. On the apprenticeship levy, I mentioned Rickleton Primary School and the letter that Mr Lofthouse wrote to me and the Minister about the cuts he will have to make. He has been in touch with my office this morning to say that it has already started. Today he has had to tell Liam, his apprentice, that he will have to let him go because of the apprenticeship levy. That is exactly the point we are making. It is ludicrous that, because he now has to pay however many thousands of pounds in the apprenticeship levy, he cannot keep the apprentice whom he said was excelling in his apprenticeship. Does the hon. Lady agree that that really needs to be looked at?

Mrs Trevelyan: One challenge that I found as a new MP is that, even if a policy is a good one, getting the delivery right on the ground is another thing. A simple phrasing of words need not negate the opportunity to apply what I would call common-sense thinking. If a school is happy to pay into the levy pot but happens to have an apprentice, it does not mean it should be excluded from the programme. I hope that will be resolved at a local level rather than be considered an impossible, insoluble problem, because that would never have been the intention of the policy.

Speaking as a member of the Public Accounts Committee—the report we published yesterday highlights some of the challenges of how money for free schools is being spent—there is an enormous amount of good work going on. In Berwick-upon-Tweed, we are looking to apply for a free school to create an autism school, because there is an enormous gap across the north-east, particularly in rural areas, in provision for our autistic children. I will revert to mentioning my computer-geek son again, who has Asperger's and gets mentioned more often than he likes in *Hansard*. We have been fortunate enough to get by in mainstream schools with the extraordinary support of individual teachers, but the reality is that far too many families across the north-east need access to the different levels of teaching that

autistic children across the spectrum require. We hope to be able to create a free school through the free school network. The scheme will allow us to do that. It gives flexibility, freedom and support for parents and teachers who understand special needs provision. We hope to reach out across the region to support families whose children have enormous potential, particularly in the IT and engineering spheres, which are and have always been key skill sets of north-east businesses—they continue to grow. We need to ensure we harness all those talents, including those of a growing number of autistic children.

There is a fascinating statistic. The science is as yet not entirely defined, but the more engineers you put together, the more autistic children you have. There is a spectrum and we create more of these young people—they are mostly young men but there are some young women—for whom a different learning pattern is required. If we get that right, we get extraordinary individuals whose great skills we can use for our economy. I therefore encourage the Minister to continue with the free schools system.

9.56 am

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) who secured this important debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), who will be leaving our ranks. I am sad to see them go. They are both friends of mine and I know they have been excellent representatives for their constituencies over the years.

"Education, education, education" was the mantra of the previous Labour Government, but we do not hear that now. That mantra is finished and no longer there under the current Government. On funding for schools, we need only look at what Durham County Council said about the effect the cuts will have on schools in the county: the funding formula is likely to lead to redundancies with small schools becoming financially unviable; 50% of primary schools will see cuts and 68% of secondary schools will also lose funding; 111 primary schools will see a reduction in funding of about £10,000 on average; and 21 of 31 secondary schools will see a loss of funding of about £48,000 to £50,000.

The National Union of Teachers and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers have surveyed schools about the funding required from parents, who are being asked to pay for school plays and sports events, and to help fill the funding gaps. One in six parents are being asked to fund their children's schools; 76% of schools said their funding has been cut; and 93% of schools have said they are pessimistic about future funding. Some parents are paying on average £20 a week to their local school to keep it going.

Parents are being asked to fund sports events, school concerts, arts and design materials, text books, library books, IT and sports equipment. Some 44% of schools are renting out buildings and some are renting out their car parks. That reflects something that happened before. I remember the 1990s when my children were at school under a previous Tory Government, when the schools

used to ask for help with funding for text books, pens, pencils and equipment. We have come full circle, but this time it is even worse.

Sedgefield Comprehensive School, which I attended quite a while ago, has been rebuilt under Building Schools for the Future. It is a fantastic facility, with fantastic teaching staff and fantastic children who want to learn and get on, and who aspire to do the best they can in their lives. It was recently named one of the top 50 state schools in the country by *The Sunday Times*. That is fantastic news. That was established through what the previous Labour Government did. When I compare the school today with what it was like all those years ago, I would say that it has been transformed. The previous Labour Government helped to achieve that. I am proud of our record and of what we have done for that school.

The headteacher, David Davies, has said that “schools face the prospect of being unable to heat classrooms” and of being unable to ensure that all the subjects that need to be available can be available. He is the head of one of the top state schools in the country. He has said that it is a “complete and utter myth” that the Government are protecting school budgets:

“In recent years, we have seen pension contributions included as well as moderate pay rises and there has been no increase in the budget”.

Schools NorthEast says that schools in the region would have £42 million to spend on education if they were funded at the national average, and more than £320 million if funded at the London rate. The National Audit Office has said that the cuts will be the equivalent of £3 billion by 2020—£119 million in cuts in real terms for the north-east, which is equivalent to 3,200 teachers. It says that the north-east faces an 8% real-terms reduction in its education funding. Sedgefield comprehensive's headteacher, Mr Davies, has said:

“This will mean schools having to reduce...services, which could include only heating classrooms for part of the day, reduced investment in school buildings, IT facilities being stretched beyond their usable life and expensive subjects being cut such as music and design technology. It is our responsibility to provide the best possible education, but ultimately parents need to be aware that the future of their son or daughter is at risk with these cuts.”

I am a great believer in aspiration, but it is not achieved with the kind of cuts faced not just in Sedgefield, but around the north-east. When headteachers such as David Davies are coming out and passing those remarks to the local newspaper, we know we have a problem that the Government need to address.

The data for the comprehensives and secondary schools in my constituency show that Ferryhill Business and Enterprise College will have a £253,000 cut through a change in the budget by 2019, which is equivalent to six teachers. Greenfield Community College will have a reduction of more than half a million pounds, which is equivalent to 14 teachers.

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): Can I just clarify whether the hon. Gentleman is talking about funding to the school, or whether the figures he is citing are the cost pressures facing the school, which is different from the income?

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is semantics.

Mr Gibb: It is not semantics. Actual income to schools in Sedgefield goes up under the national funding formula by £300,000, which is a 0.7% rise in income. So that we can have a transparent, honest debate about school funding, is the hon. Gentleman talking about the cost pressures?

Phil Wilson: The figures have been quoted by headteachers. They know what the budget pressures are and they say that the budgets are being cut. They say that they are under pressure and are losing funds to the equivalent of the number of teachers I mentioned.

Woodham Academy will lose the equivalent of five teachers. Hurworth School, another excellent school in my constituency, will lose the equivalent of nine teachers; Sedgefield comprehensive will lose 11 teachers; and Wellfield Community School will lose nine teachers. The cut in the budget and the pressures that they have to face is equivalent to £2.2 million.

Part of my constituency takes in the rural aspects of Darlington. Every headteacher from primary and secondary schools in the Darlington borough—39 of them—has written to all parents to point out the dangers to the education of their children because of the changes to formulae and the cuts and pressures on budgets between now and 2020.

Mr Gibb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Phil Wilson: I will not. The Minister will have plenty of time to make his comments at the end. I want to get through my speech as other people want to make their comments.

There are also cost pressures and budget changes for the primary schools. For Heighington School in Darlington, which is in my patch, that is £125,000. The primary schools in Sedgefield—Sedgefield Primary School and Sedgefield Hardwick Primary School—will see £120,000-odd changes in their budgets. The Minister can shape it any way he wants, but this is affecting schools, teachers and pupils. Headteachers are coming out and saying that, so there is obviously a problem. We can trade figures left, right and centre, but the headteachers are those who know what is happening on the ground.

I want to raise another issue, which is not related to funding but is important to me. It is so important to pupils Christina Davies, Aidan Wong and Melissa Foster from Greenfield School that they came to see me recently. They are concerned about the new GCSEs, where they are treated differently to those in public schools. Only 7% of pupils are in public education—93% are in state schools.

Chi Onwurah: Does my hon. Friend agree that the over-representation of privately and public-school educated people in positions of power on the Government Benches, together with this Government's obsession with free schools and grammar schools, mean that it is impossible for them to understand the budgeting and funding pressures and what they mean for the experience of our young people?

Phil Wilson: There is an element of truth in that, and it comes down to the core of my next point, on which I would love to hear the Minister's comments. In state schools, 40% of coursework used to go towards a final GCSE mark, and there was a chance to sit it in January

[Phil Wilson]

or June. That cannot be done now. If someone does an IGCSE in a public school, they have the chance to do that, and the result is still recognised by employers.

The pupils from Greenfield school who came to see me are asking why they cannot have a level playing field. If they cannot have 40% of their coursework counted towards the GCSE, why is it not the same in public schools or vice versa? They just want a level playing field and for everybody to be treated the same. Why is it that, just because someone can afford to pay for their child's education, they have a better chance in life than those children of the 93% of parents who do not have the chance and opportunity to send their children to public school? I am not saying do it one way or the other, but let us have a level playing field. It affects the aspirations and social mobility of our children and is fundamentally unfair.

Mr Gibb indicated dissent.

Phil Wilson: The Minister can shake his head, but I have pupils and headteachers coming to see me about this. It is fundamentally unfair when people in public schools have a better chance in life than those children who are sent to state schools.

Mr Gibb: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Phil Wilson: I am going to wind up. The Minister can answer all the points as he wants and I am sure he will. We have a fundamentally unfair system and it needs to be addressed. I am sure my hon. Friends can see that Government Members are shaking their heads. Am I surprised? No, I am not, because they do not believe it is unfair.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Speeches are overrunning. If we continue to overrun, that will cut the time down for other colleagues, so we will now have a seven-minute guideline time, please. I call Roberta Blackman-Woods.

10.9 am

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this really important debate. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), who will be very much missed by their colleagues.

As has often been said, the proposed fair funding formula is neither fair, and nor will it properly fund schools. As other Members pointed out, the proposed freeze on per-pupil funding is a cut in real terms. The National Audit Office estimates that inflation and cost increases will lead to a £3 billion funding gap due to reductions in real-terms spending. It is estimated that 99% of schools across the country will have a per-pupil funding cut, and schools in the north-east will be particularly badly hit.

I was appalled to note that the income per pupil of some schools in my constituency is projected to decrease by almost a quarter between the 2013-14 academic year and 2019-20. On average, that equates to a £305 cut per pupil and an average cut of 7% for each school in my constituency. The figures for individual schools paint a much bleaker picture. I was particularly concerned that the School Cuts campaign, backed by the National Union of Teachers, estimated that Durham Johnston Comprehensive School—rated one of the best-performing schools in the country—is set to lose £613 per pupil, equivalent to the loss of 19 teachers, which will have a huge impact on the school. Framwellgate School in the north of my constituency is set to lose £437 per pupil. Belmont Community School will lose £461 and St Leonard's will lose £300 per pupil. Durham Community Business College, which serves a really disadvantaged community, will face a massive cut of £961 per pupil. That is simply devastating for the school.

Primary schools are affected too. St Oswald's Church of England Primary School will lose £609 per pupil, and Bearpark School, which is also in a very disadvantaged community, will lose the most—£924 per pupil. That is absolutely outrageous. What can the Minister possibly say to justify such cuts?

That all equates to the potential loss of 670 teachers within the local authority of Durham and a budget deficit of more than £24 million by 2019. The situation is terrible and needs to be addressed by adjusting the funding formula and putting more money into education. Overall, the north-east is estimated to lose £119 million in schools funding in real terms by 2020—equivalent to the loss of more than 3,200 teachers. Parents and teachers across Durham have been in touch with me because they are really concerned about the situation.

In 2015, the Conservatives ran on a manifesto pledge to protect education funding, and they promised a real-terms increase in the schools budget in this Parliament. Not only have they failed to keep that promise, but, as we have said many times, they are bringing about a cut in real terms. The effects are damaging: class sizes have increased severely, subjects have been dropped from the curriculum, pupils with special educational needs have lost support, and teacher and school staff vacancies have been left unfilled. Without additional money, the already severe crisis in schools will get worse, threatening standards in education and, perhaps most critically of all, the life chances of pupils across my constituency, the north-east and the country as a whole.

In March, I met the National Association of Head Teachers in Parliament, which is unanimously deeply concerned about the cuts to school budgets. Some 72% of school leaders say their budgets will be unsustainable by 2019. At a recent meeting, headteachers in my constituency said exactly the same thing: they are having to make impossible decisions. What a difference that is compared with a decade ago. Under the Labour Government, I met headteachers regularly to discuss where the investment we were putting into schools was going to go, what new schools we would have, what new technology we would use and what new skills development we would invest in. Not only are the Government not funding our schools properly; they are wasting money on a free school that failed in my constituency, and there is now a proposal for another one. It is a total and utter waste of money.

Since my schools were chucked off the list of the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove)—we all remember that—they were due to get money under Building Schools for the Future because they desperately need capital investment. That money has not been forthcoming under the coalition Government or this Government, and the schools in question cannot even get a meeting with the Minister to discuss how to replace buildings that are no longer fit for purpose. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what he and his Treasury colleagues are going to do to put more money into schools and what he is going to do about capital funding.

10.15 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate. I share her sentiments about my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop).

I, too, am immensely proud of the progress made in our schools during the last Labour Government. The money ploughed into nurseries and primary schools in particular reaped benefits. I remember one secondary headteacher telling me that more and more children were arriving at his school better equipped, with higher levels of numeracy and literacy than ever, ready for the secondary school curriculum. As the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) said, some of that improvement has been sustained, but that is because of the tremendous base that the Labour Government created in schools during their time in office. Funding has not been at the levels needed in recent times, and even parents are worried. The gains made over a generation are in jeopardy.

Ann Harland from Billingham wrote to me about her worries that her child's school, Prior's Mill Church of England Controlled Primary School in Billingham, faces an effective budget cut of £86,576 over the next four years. That is the equivalent of a couple of teachers or perhaps a few classroom assistants. That picture is repeated across the Stockton borough.

In 2015-16, the block allocation per pupil for Stockton-on-Tees schools was £4,487, compared with £4,612 nationally. That figure has stayed the same in Stockton since 2010, while nationally it has increased. During a schools funding debate in January, the Schools Minister admitted that schools are facing cost pressures, but stated that funding reforms are not about the overall level of school funding or cost pressures, but about ending the postcode lottery and making funding fairer. I agree that funding should be made fairer, but other factors need to be taken into consideration when considering reform. If the new formula is fairer, why do Stockton children get less than the average?

Of the 13 secondary schools in the borough, six face a cash cut of up to 2.9%, while the others, with one exception, expect an increase of less than 1%—Northfield and Our Lady and St Bede get a whopping 0.1% and 0.2% respectively—but that is not the whole picture. As was said, the proposed national funding formula does not take into account other elements, such as inflation, staff salary increases and the increased cost of other resources that the school may need.

Taking all the pressures into account, the vast majority of schools in England are likely to see real cuts to funding per pupil over the next three years. What will happen? Teachers will get sacked, assistants will suffer likewise, the already increasing class sizes will get even bigger and schools' ability to deliver a wide and diverse curriculum will be compromised. I expect we will see more of what is happening already, which others have already referred to. There will be increased demands on parents to fund everything from classroom essentials to the extracurricular activities, which until recent years schools have been able to provide.

What is going to happen to schools such as Thornaby in the Stockton South constituency, which borders mine, or the North Shore Academy in my constituency? They serve some of the neediest communities in the country, and they face budget cuts of 2.9% and 2.3% respectively. What are parents of children in those schools going to do when they are asked for cash to help their school get through? They do not have the money.

I am worried about the kids at the bottom of the pile. Allocating funding through this formula will increase the attainment gap, and students from deprived backgrounds may not have the same level of support at home as those from an affluent background. Hon. Members know full well that the Government's formula is far from fair. It is based only on current pupil numbers and does not take into account increases in those numbers.

The Minister may say that, under the consultation proposals, Stockton will receive an overall funding increase of 0.7%, but that will not even help to maintain staffing, teaching and learning at current levels. The Minister questioned whether we were talking about cuts or cost pressures. It makes no blooming odds whether something is a cut or a cost pressure—it means cuts to teachers, teaching assistants and other services.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies recently reported that schools spending is projected to fall by 6.5% in real terms between 2015-16 and 2019-20. That means that even the schools that benefit from the new formula will have their gains completely wiped out by other funding pressures. That will undermine the quality of education in classrooms, putting children's academic progress at risk.

Even Tory colleagues know that their Government are letting our schools down. Doubtless Ministers are working on special arrangements for particular areas—we have seen that already in social care—but if they really want to be fair on funding, to address the attainment gap and to see every child realise their potential, they need to take action now to ensure that no school and, more importantly, no child loses out.

10.21 am

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this debate, which has given rise to many impassioned and honest speeches. I also wish my hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) all the very best for the future.

[Mary Glindon]

Last month, I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), who sends his apologies for being unable to be here today, attended an NAHT meeting of headteachers from across North Tyneside about the effects of Government budget cuts on schools. Both he and I vowed that we would do all we could to support our heads in their campaign to get the Government, if possible, to reverse those severe cuts, which, as they stand, will not only affect our children's education but cost us important skilled teaching jobs.

I would like to press the Minister on the apprenticeship levy, which is of particular concern to community primary schools in North Tyneside. We heard about the ludicrous situation of a school in Washington and Sunderland West. That case shows that the levy places an unjust burden on all the schools it affects, which mainly have very small budgets. North Tyneside Council, which has had to impose a levy, is really concerned. It has raised its concerns with the Government, but in the face of its budget situation, all it can do is sympathise with those schools.

Headteachers of community primary schools have contacted me to point out the unfairness of the levy. North Tyneside Learning Trust schools and academies are exempt from the levy, which eats up 0.5% of the budgets of schools that are affected by it. I must make it clear that schools are not opposed to the idea of extending the apprenticeship scheme, but they feel strongly that the levy was never intended to impact relatively small employers so heavily.

For example, Holystone Primary School has a wage bill of only £1.3 million per annum. Schools in the North Tyneside Learning Trust, Church schools and smaller academies in North Tyneside are excluded from the levy because, under education and employment law, they are deemed employers in their own right. There appears to be a loophole in the levy's application. As community school support staff are North Tyneside Council employees, those schools' wages fall within the local authority's overall wage bill, which is clearly more than £3 million. For Holystone, the levy amounts to £6,500 per annum. Although that school has managed to make some savings—sadly, by reducing staff hours—it is still sailing close to the wind in balancing its budget.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and she has expounded upon it to make her case really well. Does she agree that the Minister could announce today that he will look at this issue and do something about it?

Mary Glindon: My hon. Friend anticipates what I want to say in my closing remarks. I ask the Minister to look at the application of the levy, which is clearly unfair and adds to the burden on our community primary schools, which are already stressed and are trying hard to provide our children with the best education possible in the face of unfair cuts. I also ask him to heed the pleas of everyone here and realise how unfair the Government's cuts are for all our schools and the future of our region.

10.25 am

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West

(Mrs Hodgson), who is an excellent MP, for securing this important debate to highlight the complex issues facing education funding in the north-east. As a parent of three young children, a member of the Education Committee and a local MP who cares very much about the schools in my area, one of the best things about being an MP is getting to visit local schools. I am always blown away by the enthusiasm and ingenuity of the children I talk to and by the hard work and dedication of the education professionals I meet. However, it has become increasingly clear of late from the number of distressing stories I have heard that headteachers are deeply concerned about the real-terms cuts to their school budgets.

I recently visited a primary school in a deprived part of my constituency where the headteacher, who was clearly struggling to hold back tears, told me that budget pressures had forced her to cut the school's family support counsellor and consider cancelling long-standing extracurricular activities for the children. It is clear that for a primary school that needs to provide all-round support for its children to lose such a counsellor through lack of resource not only has an impact on the school's academic outcomes but makes it unable to help children and families who may face chaotic home lives or experiences that could lead to mental health issues, meaning that those issues will not be picked up in childhood and may escalate throughout adolescence and into adulthood. That is clearly a false economy, both in educational terms and more broadly. When children are suffering, they are not able to learn, which leads to lower educational attainment and compounds the social mobility challenge.

I have also spoken to headteachers who decided to take early retirement to reduce budget pressures, knowing that the school would save some money if it got in a younger headteacher on a lower wage. It is baffling that the Government are creating a situation where talented, valuable headteachers see no option but to retire for the sake of their schools' budgets.

Although the Government repeatedly inform us that they are protecting schools funding—the Minister has already attempted to do that today—they know fine well that they are failing to give a full account of real-terms cuts. The introduction of the living wage and rising inflation, which, according to the Government's own measure, is currently at 2.3%—its highest for more than three years—mean that schools have to make their money go significantly further. The National Audit Office has said that, as a direct result, schools will need to find an extra £3 billion by 2020, which equates to an 8% real-terms cut in funding. For one secondary school in my constituency, that amounts to a reduction of £761 per pupil by 2019 and, worryingly, the potential loss of 30 teaching jobs.

The Prime Minister's so-called "great meritocracy" clearly does not extend to the north-east. While the children of the north-east continue to be let down, the current Tory Government unveil plans to expand grammar and free schools at a cost of £320 million. The Public Accounts Committee today denounced the Government's free school programme as

"incoherent and too often poor value for money".

I am also incredibly frustrated and angered that the Government are steamrolling ahead with their divisive grammar schools policy when there is overwhelming

evidence that grammar schools do not increase social mobility. Statistics from the Sutton Trust show that less than 3% of entrants to grammar schools are entitled to free school meals; so the answer, for the Government, is to create more of them, rather than to invest in schools that now serve less well-off children. It defies common sense.

In response to the disappointing announcement of only £260 million of extra funding for existing schools in the north-east, Mike Parker, the director of Schools NorthEast, said:

“The Government has to recognise that if it wants a world class education system it has to fund schools appropriately.”

He also said that the funding settlement

“doesn’t fill the operational blackhole in schools across England.”

The question remains: why fund new grammar schools on an ideological whim when, as my hon. Friends have testified this morning, existing schools across the north-east are in desperate need of increased funding?

Headteachers across the north-east are expected to make exceptionally difficult decisions day to day, because of an inadequately funded system. If the Minister had to balance a school’s books, what would he cut—teachers, subject choices, support services or after-school clubs? Equally, he could increase class sizes; but let us remember that 900 pupils in primary schools in the north-east are already in classes of 40 or more. When the Prime Minister was shadow Education Secretary she railed against large class sizes, but they are increasing on her watch. The answer is clear: the Government should not cut school funding at all. It is often said in the north-east that the Tories cannot be trusted with the NHS. I say they cannot be trusted with the education system either.

10.31 am

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for securing the debate, and all my hon. Friends who have spoken. I want particularly to thank my hon. Friends the Members for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop). I am sincerely sad that we will never hear from them again in this place—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”]—well, for the time being anyway.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): We are not dead yet.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West.

Mrs Hodgson: I made a terrible omission in my opening remarks, when I mentioned my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland and all the work that he has done, but failed to thank my fabulous colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool, for his time here and say how sorely he will be missed. In my excitement at the start of the debate I had not noticed that he was also in his place, and I did not want him to leave thinking I do not love him as much as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which I echo.

Catherine McKinnell: I did not want to take up time in my speech, in case there was not enough time in the debate, but I too want to pay tribute to both my hon. Friends. I am sorry they are leaving but very much hope to hear from them again.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: As with my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West, it was in my excitement at the start of my speech that I said we might never hear from my hon. Friends again; I did not mean that, obviously.

The desperate state of schools in the north-east is clear from the speeches that my hon. Friends have made, but I am afraid schools throughout the country are in similar circumstances. The crisis in schools is a national failure, perpetrated by the Conservative Government, and made worse by news today of the failed free schools policy and by the decision made by the Prime Minister in her short time in office to divert school funding to grammar schools. That is despite all the teaching bodies, the unions and thousands of teachers talking about the crisis in schools. The Government’s response is to deny that the problem exists, trot out the mendacious response that funding in schools has never been higher, and try to introduce an inequitable new funding formula that has been universally condemned and under which every school in England is likely to face funding cuts in the next three years.

I hope that today the Minister will at least accept that there is a crisis in schools, and take the opportunity to explain why the Government are not responding to the consultation on the new funding formula this side of the general election. Surely the public deserve, at the very least, a summary of responses to the consultation, so that they can make a fully informed decision before they go into the polling booth.

Alan Hardie, the principal of the excellent Whitburn Church of England Academy in my constituency was recently forced, as many others have been, to do the Government’s dirty work; he had to send a begging letter to parents, asking for donations of £10 a month to cover basic resources. Alan said:

“We hear the same phrase repeated time and time again by the Department for Education that school funding has never been higher. What they neglect to mention is more and more of this funding returns directly back to central government through the very significant increases in employer’s National Insurance and pension contributions. This is a stealth tax that means that schools have less and less to spend on the pupils in their care”.

The truth is that schools in England are facing their first real-terms funding cuts in 20 years, and must find about £3 billion-worth of savings—on average about 7% of their overall budget; that the secondary schools that will experience the largest cuts will, in real terms, lose an average of £291,000; and that funding to the most deprived secondary schools, where more than 30% of children receive free school meals, will fall, while the highest relative gains will go to pupils in the least deprived areas. It is an all-too-familiar approach from the Government, who, time and again, make those who can least afford it pay for their mistakes.

Since 2010 the Conservatives have offered much in the way of rhetoric on education, but have consistently failed to make that a reality. Instead, they have left in their wake a litany of broken promises. They promised us they would recruit and keep the best teachers. Yet

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

schools face a crisis of both recruitment and retention. Teachers are leaving the profession in record numbers, and many more are set to follow. The Conservatives promised they would create small schools with smaller class sizes, but the opposite is true. Even analysis by the Department for Education has revealed that more than 500,000 primary school children are now in super-sized classes of more than 30. In secondary schools more than 300,000 pupils are taught in classes of more than 30. The Government promised in their manifesto that money following children into schools would be protected and that funding would rise in line with pupil numbers. Yet the National Audit Office has confirmed that schools are required to make £3 billion of efficiency savings.

Worse still, the Department for Education does not have a clue where it expects schools to make those savings. Perhaps the Minister can use the debate as an opportunity to let us, and schools, know how the savings can be made; or will he confirm what we all know—that the only way to make the savings is by schools continuing to increase pupil-to-teacher ratios, reduce basic services such as cleaning and site and premises work, stop investment in books and IT equipment, cease providing apprenticeships to people such as Liam, who was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West, design curriculum offers that fulfil only basic requirements, not replace staff who leave, outsource support services, and lose more support staff, teaching assistants, lunchtime supervisors, caretakers and—the death knell—teachers?

The National Union of Teachers general secretary, Kevin Courtenay, said that headteachers are cutting back on all spending areas to try to keep teachers in front of classes. That is where the Government have taken us; it is the depth of the crisis in schools. Schools are struggling just to put teachers in classrooms. He has said that the fears about schools operating on a four-day week are real. Four-day weeks—that is the future of children's education under another Tory Government.

Children with special educational needs and disabilities are another group that the Government promised to prioritise, but it is the hardest hit, as specialist support is no longer available.

The pupil premium, which was designed to help children from poorer backgrounds, is being used by almost a third of schools to cover their budget shortages, with schools with the highest numbers of disadvantaged pupils more likely to report cuts to staff as a result of those shortages. Is it not true that the Government's priorities do not lie with disadvantaged children or children with special educational needs?

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that a lot of these cuts have come from fiscal pressures? If the Government really were a defender of state education, they would review those fiscal pressures and the needs of state education above those of private education. At the moment, private schools, due to their charity trustee status, are exempt from taxation, to the detriment of state schools, which now have to pay higher national insurance levels and the apprenticeship levy. Private sector education seems to have special dispensation,

unlike its state counterparts. Does she agree that the Minister should look at that fiscal arrangement first before making further cuts to state education?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend that I completely agree with him. This is about priorities, and the Government's are completely wrong. Some £320 million has been promised for 70,000 new places at grammar schools, while other schools, such as those my hon. Friends have referred to, are having to send out begging letters and get rid of staff.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does she agree that the most pernicious aspect of the Government's education policies is that schools in the most disadvantaged areas face the biggest cuts, yet the Government waste money on grammar schools for the few and not the many?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The Government's priority is an obsession with the educational policy of the 1950s and bringing back grammar schools. All of the evidence shows that those schools favour the wealthy. A child from a private prep school is 10 times as likely to get into a grammar school as a child on free school meals.

It is becoming crystal clear that the Government are not interested in the views of the profession, but I wonder whether they are interested in the views of children and parents. After all, it is their lives, hopes and dreams that the Government are playing with. Nathaniel Smithies is a year 9 pupil at Whitburn Academy in my constituency. He wanted me to say to the Minister:

"I feel worried when a school like mine with an Ofsted Outstanding is so worried that it has so little money in the coffers that it has to ask our parents to pay to try and give us the level of education I know my teachers want to give us. I've noticed extracurricular and enrichment activities are diminishing, and we have to pay for little extras for art or for materials like Corriflute or balsa wood for graphics lessons or modelling. And we have a set limit on printing—like if you need to print your homework out at school. I didn't have to do this when I was in year 7."

Nathaniel's mam, Lisa, added:

"When I was asked to help fund my child's education by contributing £10 per month I felt myself torn. As a mother who wants to provide my child with the best chances possible to fully realise his wonderful, as yet unrestricted potential, I will do whatever I can afford to make this happen... But by contributing to my school do I help create a two-tier education, whereby children whose parents can afford to contribute get a better education than those children whose parents are not able to contribute? Does it mean that later on I will be told by the Government that school budgets are adequate because I have helped bridge the funding gap and will now have to continue to do so to maintain the status quo?"

She went on to say:

"I often hear politicians say we need to invest in the future. Surely there is no sounder investment in the future than for a Government to invest in educating children and providing all children the opportunity to be the best they can be, so that all our futures are the best they can be. Somewhere out there among today's schoolchildren there are future Prime Ministers and the next generation of innovators, artists, writers, athletes, engineers, soldiers, scientists, leaders, doctors, nurses and educators. A good education for all leads to a more tolerant, fairer and integrated society. We should be saying what more is needed—not how little can we spend on our schools before we break them!"

The coming election is a real chance for parents to make a choice for the future of our education system. I know what Labour's response is to Lisa's questions. We

want an education system that works for all of our children, not just the lucky few, and we will invest to ensure the highest standards in schools, where every single child is cherished and supported. Will the Minister answer Lisa's questions? I am sure that parents up and down the country want, and are fully entitled to, all of the answers.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I will leave two minutes at the end for the mover of the debate to respond. I call the Minister.

10.45 am

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate. I, too, will be sorry to lose the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright). I have enjoyed debating and sparring with the hon. Member for Hartlepool over many years, both in his role as a Minister for Education and in his more welcome role as a shadow Minister for Education. He carried out both roles with intelligence, humour and application, and I know that I shall miss those debates in the years ahead.

I trust that the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West agrees that we share the ambition to see a country that works for everyone and where all children have access to an excellent education that unlocks talent and creates opportunity, regardless of where they live, their background, ability or need. We are introducing the national funding formula in order to tackle the unfairness in the current funding system, using up-to-date data rather than 10-year-old data. That is why, contrary to what has been said today, under the national funding formula hon. Members will see increases in their funding.

I accept that schools face cost pressures, and I will come to those issues in a moment, but let us get the facts clear. Schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) will see a £1.6 million increase in funding overall as a direct consequence of the national funding formula. That is a 3.6% increase—85% of schools in her constituency will see an increase in funding. Funding to schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) will increase by £0.8 million, which is a 1.4% increase in spending. She mentioned Holystone Primary School. That school's funding will rise from £1.43 million in 2016-17 to £1.47 million, on the basis of the new national funding formula—a 2.7% rise. That is a direct consequence of the national funding formula.

As a direct consequence of the new national funding formula, funding to schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) will rise by £0.6 million—a 1.3% increase—and schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) will see an increase in funding of £0.3 million, which is a 0.7% rise. He mentioned Sedgefield Community College, where he went to school. That school's income will rise from £5.332 million to £5.384 million—a rise of 1%—as a direct consequence of the national funding formula. It is important to distinguish the national

funding formula from other cost pressures affecting schools, which I will come to in a moment. Those cost pressures are being absorbed across the public sector.

Mr Iain Wright: I am thankful for, and moved by, the Minister's tributes to me, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and other colleagues. He talked about funding increases in general terms, which is true, but we are also seeing record pupil numbers. Will he pledge that, as part of the national funding formula, we will see a rise in funding per pupil in the next Parliament? Just to clarify, I am not dead—at least, not yet.

Mr Gibb: The hon. Gentleman looks very healthy to me. May I just say that the figures I have cited are for 2016-17 and are based on actual pupil numbers in 2016-17. They do not take into account the extra funds that will come forth as pupil numbers rise.

Phil Wilson: The Minister is talking as if there is not a problem. If everything in the garden is so rosy, why is the headteacher of Sedgefield Community College saying that the Government protecting the budget is an utter myth?

Mr Gibb: I did not say that there are no issues. I said that there are cost pressures facing schools, but I want to get the factual basis of the issues on the record, so that we know what we are debating. It appears to me that hon. Members in this debate are opposing the national funding formula. The national funding formula is designed to address inequities in the system and will do so. As a consequence, schools that have been historically underfunded on the basis of their intakes will no longer be so, if and when we implement the national funding formula.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I will, and then I will make some progress.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I disagree with the Minister; I do not think we can separate the existing funding pressures from the national funding formula. If he is so confident in the Government's new national funding formula, why will his Department not publish its response to the consultation before the general election?

Mr Gibb: Well, we are now in purdah and therefore it is not permitted for us to make announcements of that magnitude during the election period.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: How convenient.

Mr Gibb: It is not convenient, actually.

School funding in the constituency of the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) will rise by £0.4 million—a 0.9% increase—as a direct consequence, again, of introducing the national funding formula. School funding is at its highest level on record, at almost £41 billion this year, and it is set to rise to £42 billion by 2019-20 as pupil numbers rise.

However, the current funding system is preventing us from getting that record sum of money to where it is needed most. Underfunded schools do not have access

[Mr Gibb]

to the same opportunities to do the best for their children, and it is harder for them to attract the best teachers and afford the right support. That is why we are reforming the funding system by introducing a national funding formula for both mainstream schools and the high-needs support provided for children with special educational needs. It will be the biggest change to school and high-needs funding for well over a decade.

Such change is never easy, but it will mean that, for the first time, we have a clear, simple and transparent system that matches funding to children's needs and the school they attend. In the current system, similar schools and local areas receive very different levels of funding with little or no justification. Those anomalies will be ended once we have a national funding formula in place, and that is why we are committed to introducing fair funding. Fair funding will mean that the same child with the same needs will attract the same funding regardless of where they happen to live.

We launched the first stage of our consultation on reform in March last year. We set out the principles for reform and proposals for the overall design of the system, and more than 6,000 people responded, with wide support for those principles. Last month we concluded the 14-week second stage consultation, covering the detailed proposals for the design of both the schools and high-needs formulae. Our proposals would target money towards those who face the greatest barriers to their education.

In particular, our proposals would boost the support provided for those who are from deprived backgrounds and those who live in areas of deprivation but who are not eligible for free school meals—those ordinary working families who are too often overlooked. We propose to put more money towards supporting those pupils who have fallen behind, in both primary and secondary school, to ensure that they have the support they need.

Alex Cunningham: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I will not give way now, because of lack of time; I apologise.

Overall, 10,700 schools would gain funding under the new national funding formula, and the formula will allow those schools to see gains quickly, with increases of up to 3% in per-pupil funding in 2018-19 and 2.5% in 2019-20. Some 72 local authority areas are proposed to gain more high-needs funding, and they would also do so quickly, with increases of up to 3% in both 2018-19 and 2019-20.

We have listened to those who have highlighted the risks of major budget changes in our first-stage consultation, which is why we have introduced a floor of a 1.5% minimum funding guarantee per year, and no school can lose more than 3% overall per pupil as a consequence of these changes.

Schools in the north-east would, on average, see a 1% increase in funding as a result of our proposals, and 60% of schools in the region would see an increase in funding, compared with 54% nationally. Schools in the north-east are doing well: 68% of pupils in key stage 2 SATS reached the expected standard in reading in 2016, compared with 66% nationally, and 82% of children are passing the phonics test, compared with 81% nationally.

Of course, the picture would not be uniform across the whole of the north-east. I recognise that the proposals would result in budget reductions for schools in the local authority of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West and no real overall change in funding to schools in her constituency. However, I believe that the formula we have proposed strikes the right balance between the various competing considerations for funding, such as the balance between the core funding that every child attracts and the extra funding targeted at each of the additional need factors. We propose to use a broad definition of "disadvantage" to target additional funding at schools most likely to use it, comprising pupil and area-level deprivation data.

I want to turn to the issue of costs. We recognise that schools are facing cost pressures, including salary increases, the introduction of the national living wage, increases to employers' national insurance pension scheme contributions and general inflation. From the start of 2016-17 to the end of 2019-20, we have estimated that those pressures will amount to approximately 8% per pupil, on average. To be clear, that is not an 8% pressure in a single year, nor is it an 8% pressure that is all yet to come. In fact, some of those pressures have already materialised and been absorbed in the past financial year. Over the next three years, per-pupil pressures will, on average, be between 1.5% and 1.6% each year. The current, unfair funding system makes those pressures harder to manage, and introducing a national funding formula will direct funding where it is most needed.

We have published a wide range of tools and support to schools, available in one place on gov.uk. That includes tools to help schools to assess their level of efficiency and to find opportunities for savings; guidance on best practice, including on strategic financial planning and collaborative buying; case studies from schools themselves; and support for schools to acquire greater financial skills. We have launched a school buying strategy to support schools to save more than £1 billion a year by 2019-20 on their non-staff spend. That will help all schools to improve how they buy goods and services.

I am grateful for today's opportunity to debate school funding. A fair national funding formula for schools and high needs underpins our ambition for social mobility and social justice, and it will mean that every pupil is supported to achieve to the best of their potential, wherever they are in the country.

10.57 am

Mrs Hodgson: I am grateful to the Minister for leaving me some time to wind up; not all Ministers do that. This has been an excellent debate. At this late stage, on the penultimate day of this Parliament, it is heartening to see so many colleagues from across the north-east here today. That just goes to show how worried we all are about these funding cuts to our schools. We have all made the case as strongly as possible, as we have all met with our headteachers and are regular attendees at our schools, and we have been told at first hand the consequences of the Government's actions.

I listened to what the Minister had to say. I really was hopeful that he would listen and commit, even at the final stage of this Parliament, to act or at least promise to look at this again in the next Parliament if he is lucky

enough, which I am sure he will be, to be returned at the election and appointed again to his current position in government—if they win.

Alex Cunningham: That will be Emma's job.

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, it might be the job of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). I am sure she will be putting this all right. That will be a great day indeed, and I look forward to it.

Sadly, the Minister did not make any such commitment. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields will, so I look forward to that day. The Minister instead referred to the fairer funding formula, telling hon. Members that we were wrong. He cited a few examples of schools that may be a little bit better off with regard to the funding formula, and he read out a list to try to make that point, but he is missing the bigger point, which is that the national funding formula is being used as a smokescreen. We all agree with fairer funding for schools across the country, but this is being used to hide the real-terms cuts and pay for the other four pressures on school budgets that I highlighted in my speech, such as the pay rise, the national living wage, the apprenticeship levy and trying to fix the schools that are falling to pieces.

I am sorry that we have not made progress on this issue today. I remind the Minister that the electorate is watching; they are watching all of us, and I am confident that they will make their verdict on this at the ballot box on 8 June. Hopefully it will be my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields who can fix this when we come back to this place in June.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered school funding in the north east of England.

Colne to Skipton Railway

11 am

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Colne to Skipton railway.

When I put in for this debate, I did not realise that a general election would be coming up. I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Minister may be unable to make any commitments today, but I know he is a long-standing supporter of reinstating the Colne-Skipton railway line. He reiterated that as recently as the last Transport questions, on 30 March, in reply to my question. However, this debate is timely for a number of other reasons, which I hope to set out in my speech, and the case for reinstating the Colne-Skipton line will continue to be made, regardless of what happens on 8 June. I hope the debate will help to shape the Government's transport policy over the next five years, not just the next 43 days.

Let me give some background. The rail line between Skipton and Colne—the town in my constituency where I live—was opened in 1848. This 11.5-mile stretch of track formed part of a line that went all the way from Leeds to Liverpool. It survived the Beeching report only to be closed in February 1970. Thankfully, we have moved on from the 1970s and now have a Conservative Government who are investing in our rail infrastructure. An example is the millions of pounds spent in the last Parliament on reopening the Todmorden curve and providing a direct rail link between Burnley and Manchester.

Closing the line obviously affected the area between Colne and Skipton the most, as it took away its rail link entirely. However, it has also had a much wider impact, because a trans-Pennine route was lost. Reinstating the line would be great news for Pendle, but would also boost the entire northern economy, improving connections from Preston through to Leeds and everywhere in between, and to the Settle-Carlisle line, and restoring a missing link between Liverpool in the west and Hull in the east.

The campaign to reinstate the line has never gone away, but it has also never been stronger. I pay tribute to the Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership, a campaign group that has constantly made the case for reinstating the line since 2001. I am a patron of the group and meet with it regularly. Without SELRAP, today's debate would simply not be possible.

My predecessor, Gordon Prentice, who served as Member of Parliament for Pendle for 18 years, led a debate on the subject back in 2005. Many of the points he made in support of the line apply today. His debate was called on the back of a 2003 report commissioned by the North Yorkshire and Lancashire County Councils on reopening the line. It was broadly supportive but raised some concerns, which the then Transport Minister cited, on passenger flows and whether the funding environment at the time was

“conducive to investment in rail capital projects”.

As the Minister will be well aware, since 2005, the number of passenger journeys on our rail network has risen dramatically, from about 1 billion then to some 1.7 billion today. I hope the Minister agrees that the current Government are much more “conducive” when it comes to investing in our railways.

Earlier this year, the same councils, along with the Lancashire local enterprise partnership, and the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding local enterprise partnership, commissioned a further report. Entitled

[Andrew Stephenson]

“Central Trans-Pennine Corridor East-West Connectivity: An Economic Study”, it was prepared by Cushman & Wakefield and SYSTRA. I know the Minister has read it—he told me he had done so when I asked him about it in Transport questions on 30 March—and I hope he remains familiar with it and enthusiastic about its conclusions.

The comprehensive, 92-page report clearly sets out the opportunities from improving trans-Pennine connectivity, and some of the dangers if action is not taken. Reopening the Colne-Skipton line is not the only way to improve trans-Pennine connections, but the report makes it clear that there needs to be investment. It makes several points that, to my mind, suggest that as the solution. The report makes it clear that, across Lancashire and Yorkshire, huge economic growth potential remains untapped, largely because of the constraints in east-west connectivity. It concludes that there is a

“robust and compelling quantitative and qualitative economic case for enhanced East-West Connectivity across the Central Corridor”,

an area that includes the Colne-Skipton line.

The report considers a mix of road and rail improvements and finds benefits to both. There are certainly strong arguments for improving road connections, for example at the end of the M65. However, the report also finds that there are “diminishing returns” from highways improvements, showing that there is likely to be a limit to what improving trans-Pennine roads would achieve. The report finds that there would be

“‘more bang’ in terms of wider economic impacts”

from even limited improvements to rail travel, due to the

“very poor quality of rail services in East Lancashire at present”.

Simply put, past failures to invest in east Lancashire’s railways mean that massive improvements are possible now, and are just waiting to be tapped into. The report describes the potential benefits from rail investment in general, and from reopening the Colne-Skipton line specifically, as “transformational”.

There are a number of reasons why improvements to road infrastructure, although welcome, will not be enough without complementary investments in rail. Despite lower than average rail usage, east Lancashire also contains areas of low car ownership—a problem that we need to bear in mind if we are serious about tackling pockets of deprivation. The road network also lacks resilience, with unreliable journey times on roads such as the A59. People without cars need predictable transport options, and we need other means of transport to take pressure off the roads at peak times or if there has been an incident. The geography of the area limits road improvements, but the Colne-Skipton track bed is already there. In recognition of the poor state of our railways, Rail North sees potential for a 25% reduction in generalised costs across the northern rail network. I fail to see how that can be achieved if east-west connections such as Colne to Skipton are not restored.

Like the national economy, the local economy of my constituency of Pendle has recovered well under the Conservative Government. Unemployment has fallen substantially, and the businesses I visit report growth, and that they are taking on more staff and investing in

apprenticeships. Indeed, Rolls-Royce has just begun a major £50-million investment in its site at Barnoldswick in my constituency.

However, the Lancashire economy could be doing so much better. It is being held back by a failure to make progress on improving local infrastructure. According to Lancashire’s strategic economic plan, it lags behind national average economic performance by about 20%, in terms of gross value added per person, and growth has lagged behind national and regional performance for at least a decade. The LEP must act to rectify that long-term underperformance.

Lancashire is aiming for 50,000 new jobs, 40,000 new homes and £3 billion in additional economic activity by 2025. There is ambition, but there has been a failure to push effectively and secure the resources that the region needs to improve its infrastructure. East Lancashire is expected to deliver 10,000 of the new jobs. I believe we will be able to deliver them, but we cannot reach our full economic potential if the M65 growth corridor remains a transport cul-de-sac. In rail terms, we are literally at the end of the line.

The report identifies mismatches between the supply of and demand for skills, all the more so in those sectors with the most growth potential, and low levels of agglomeration, which undermine productivity and force northern employers to draw workers from a smaller area than the area drawn on in the south of England. That prevents east Lancashire from securing high-wage, high-value employment opportunities and, if it is not addressed, the whole region will miss out on inward investment, which is already comparatively low. In effect, Yorkshire and Lancashire operate as two unconnected labour markets, which restricts opportunities for workers and businesses in both great counties.

I hope the Minister will discuss with his colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport how to open up the north of England for tourism. That is a key issue for the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding LEP. The area has Scarborough, Whitby and two national parks, which Pendle residents cannot at the moment easily reach by train. We in Lancashire also have so much to offer. Just in Pendle itself, we have the Forest of Bowland area of outstanding natural beauty and, of course, the iconic Pendle hill.

The Minister may be pleased to see that the importance of Blackpool’s visitor economy is recognised in the report. Reopening this line could shave an hour off the journey time to Blackpool from Skipton. I am sure he would welcome that.

Let us remember that it is not just Pendle or even east Lancashire that stands to benefit. The area covered by the report has a combined annual GVA of £70 billion, which is 5% of the national total and more than a fifth of the northern powerhouse economy, covering at least 32 parliamentary constituencies. As the report makes clear, improving east-west connectivity can enhance the wider economic prosperity of the north as a whole.

It is not just regional train hubs such as Preston, Leeds or York that will be better connected. Leeds Bradford international airport aims to double its passengers to 7 million per year by 2030, but it needs better connections to realise that aim. The Skipton-Colne line cannot fix the problem on its own, but it can help to open up the airport to more people from the west.

Manchester airport would benefit, too. Both airports are vital to the future of the northern economy. We should also note the rapid growth of the Leeds city region—it is the fastest growing city region in the UK. Bradford and Calderdale are so close to east Lancashire, but they are unconnected by rail. Better connections to those areas are seen as key in the west Yorkshire transport strategy.

Even our ports stand to benefit, especially if new rail freight lines can be opened or freed up by passenger journeys moving to new lines. Ports from Heysham to Hull could see a boost from better trans-Pennine transport links. The report cites the example of Drax power station, which imports biomass through Liverpool. Currently, the trains take seven hours to get there when the journey time should be nearer to three hours. There is a huge need to improve connections to northern ports, and the Colne-Skipton line could be part of the answer.

I stress that reopening the Colne-Skipton line would be consistent with and complement much current Government policy, aims and recent achievements. The northern powerhouse is delivering massive investment across the north, closing the economic gap with the south and doing much to enhance connectivity across the region. The north is receiving excellent backing through the local growth fund. In Pendle, the £32 million transformation of Brierfield Mills is going ahead thanks to funding from central Government via the growth deal. In January, I secured a further £4 million for the extension of the Lomeshaye industrial estate in Nelson, creating an additional 1,100 full time jobs. However, the Government's northern transport strategy identified how the lack of east-west transport capacity constrains the northern economy. The northern powerhouse strategy published in November states, rightly, that

“the government will...continue to consider other routes across the Pennines”.

The electrification of lines between Manchester, Liverpool, Preston and—of course—Blackpool, with better rolling stock, is bringing long-term improvements to the northern rail system. However, those benefits are yet to reach east Lancashire. Our rolling stock remains poor-quality, services are slow and few, and connections are poor. This is undermining the economic productivity of Lancashire as a whole, but especially east Lancashire. Sectors such as advanced manufacturing—especially aerospace—health innovation, digital and the low carbon energy sector are all distinctive prime capabilities of the northern economy. According to the latest research, they all stand to benefit from improved connectivity, as do logistics, food and drink, and other sectors. In particular, advanced manufacturing is a priority growth sector on both sides of the Pennines. Lancashire has the largest concentration of aerospace production in the UK, employing more than 20,000 people, including 1,000 at Rolls-Royce in Barnoldswick in my constituency, but the area will have no train link unless the Colne-Skipton line is restored.

Page 91 of the “Central Trans-Pennine Corridor East-West Connectivity” report models the outcome of reopening the line as generating £43.47 million in GDP each year. Every study so far has shown that the economics of the scheme make sense—I would even go so far as to say that it is a no-brainer. Over recent months, I have written to Transport for the North, North Yorkshire

County Council, Lancashire County Council and the Lancashire local enterprise partnership urging them to take a lead.

In my maiden speech back in 2010, I backed reopening the line and paid tribute to the work of SELRAP. Seven years on, I repeat what I said, and if I am re-elected on 8 June, I will keep on saying it. All parties, including the local authorities behind the study, now recognise the benefits of reopening the line. However, they all seem reluctant to prioritise it. I hope the Minister will continue to do all he can to help me to move this vital scheme forward.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) on securing the opportunity to speak on this issue. He is quite right to have done so. Like him, I was first elected in 2010. One of the first emails I received was from SELRAP—I am sure that he received one too—asking me to put down my name in support of the project, and I was happy to do so. I know full well that he has been an immense supporter of SELRAP's work from day one. Even if no election were in the offing, I would still say that his commitment to and passion for the project have been noticeable. I have followed rail policy as a member of the Transport Committee, as a rail Minister and in between the two roles, and I cannot remember a time when he has not been raising the Skipton-Colne line in the Chamber, in Westminster Hall and with Ministers. He deserves credit for that.

My hon. Friend is right to identify so many of the benefits that will come from the line. As a Blackpool MP, the health of the visitor economy is always at the forefront of my mind. Train links from the Pennine towns to the resorts are always important for ensuring that people can access the coast. I welcome anything that improves those links. Just the other week, I passed through Skipton on the Flying Scotsman, which was reopening the Settle-Carlisle stretch of the railway after Network Rail's tremendous efforts to revive and restore the line since the landslide that disrupted it. I thank the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway for hosting us. We started at Keighley and went through Skipton to Settle. As I passed through Skipton I thought, “Yes, maybe one day, with all the focus on reopening lines around the country, Skipton-Colne will be a reality and we will be able to get there from Lancashire.” What could be a better round trip than going from Blackpool to Preston, Colne, Skipton, Settle, Carlisle and back to Preston? That is a day trip that we can all dream of doing one day. My hon. Friend is quite right to push for the reopening of the line.

It is worth putting things in a wider context. The era of Dr Beeching's reductions and the days in the '70s when we were looking at scaling back the rail network are long gone. The focus is now on looking for lines to reopen to expand the capacity of our network. We need only look at the Borders Railway in Scotland, which shows the opportunities that come from reopening railway lines. Reopening lines has brought much bigger benefits than anyone ever predicted, particularly in terms of passenger numbers. Now, if ever, is the time to ensure that, if lines can be reopened, we properly ensure the practicality, feasibility and cost of doing so.

[Paul Maynard]

My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of the northern powerhouse and of investing in the north of England. I have always shared his view that, when we discuss trans-Pennine connectivity, eyes always drift northward to the links between Cumbria and Newcastle, or southward to the Woodhead pass and the links from Manchester to Sheffield. We almost forget that the M65 ends on the wrong side of the Pennines—or in my case the right side, which is Lancashire, of course. There are far more opportunities for enhancing connectivity in the middle of the county. As he says, getting from Lancashire to North Yorkshire is not always the easiest or most obvious journey to take. Commuting levels are quite low, despite the sizable employment opportunities on either side of the Pennines—opportunities that, because of the work he has been engaged in, will only grow.

It is important that we understand the opportunities for trans-Pennine connectivity. The reopening of the line has to be properly considered by all partners in the region. I am sure my hon. Friend shares my frustration that that is not always the case with all regional stakeholders. LCC, and by extension the local enterprise partnership, seem not to have fully embraced the project to the extent they might have done down the years. It was not as prominent in Lancashire County Council's transport strategy as I expected it to be, given the interest that so many in the county show. It is not just my hon. Friend's constituents who want the line reopened. In my constituency, I have had people down the years writing to me, asking me to prioritise the reopening.

One might think, "Why does it matter that local stakeholders are not being as enthusiastic in wanting the Government to get on with it?" It matters because a clear policy of the Government is that we want local organisations and agencies to identify the priorities in their areas that we can support through the growth deal. We want to see the local enterprise partnership identifying projects that will bring the most benefit to the region, as my hon. Friend so eloquently explained. We look to the regional bodies to take the lead. If we are to properly build the northern powerhouse, we have to make the investments in transport connectivity that he talked about, which are east-west as much as north-south.

A lot of attention goes on north-south connectivity. It is not just a matter of HS2, but inter-city services, too. East-west matters just as much in the north of England. That is why we are supporting the idea of northern powerhouse rail and look forward to the recommendations that Transport for the North will come up with. There is also the TransPennine operator for services between Manchester and Leeds. As well as the investment that we would hope to see one day in Skipton and Colne, should we reach a point where we feel it can be reopened, all the railway lines need improvement.

Before turning to that line specifically, it is worth reflecting on many of the investments we have been making in the region. They will benefit my hon. Friend's constituents in Pendle in particular. He has already mentioned some of them, such as investment in the Burnley-Pendle growth corridor. There are the benefits provided by the M65, where I understand work on junction 12 is complete.

Andrew Stephenson: Almost complete.

Paul Maynard: I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend wishes some projects had planted a "Finished" flag in the ground a few weeks earlier. Junction 13 will be finished shortly, perhaps. We have announced the third growth deal with Lancashire LEP, which will provide further funding on the M65 corridor for junctions 4 to 6, and the north-west Burnley growth corridor. Both of those will bring further benefit to east Lancashire.

We have funded improvements to the Blackburn to Bolton rail corridor, which will enable a more frequent service between Blackburn and Manchester Victoria. Work is now complete and additional services should begin at the next timetable change next spring. That, of course, is not the only improvement we have delivered on the east Lancashire rail network. Thanks to our regional growth fund and my hon. Friend's lobbying at the time, we reinstated the Todmorden curve after years of waiting. We have had faster connections to Manchester Victoria via Rose Grove since May 2015. I am sure it was on my hon. Friend's election leaflets at the time, and he can now say he has achieved that.

We are delivering improvements across the region and undoubtedly there are more to come. Over the next few years, we will see major improvements to the Northern rail network, creating better journeys for passengers, supporting trade, supporting investment and creating a stronger economy. Through the Northern and TransPennine Express franchises, we are investing in modern trains, delivering more comfortable, more frequent, faster and more direct journeys. All the Pacers will be gone, replaced by a mix of brand new trains and refurbished trains upgraded to an as-new standard. Passengers will notice that transformative investment. We have already seen the impact the new trains have had on services between Manchester and Liverpool through electrification. It is a transformative new deal for the franchise.

Investment in the network will include improvements to the Calder Valley line and to the central trans-Pennine corridor, including line speed improvements, improved signalling, improved resilience, more capacity and better journey times. Once the full complement of infrastructure and new trains is delivered, Bradford will have an increased train frequency to Manchester and new direct connections to Manchester airport, via the Ordsall chord and Liverpool. The Ordsall chord matters not just for Manchester, but because of what it enables across the north-west. Many of those new service patterns and the new innovations we want across Lancashire's rail network are enabled by improving the through-flow in Manchester city centre. Anyone who is passing through the city needs to go and look at what is occurring at Ordsall, with the new bridges and the engineering work. It is one of the most complex pieces of civil engineering we have undertaken in over 100 years, but it will transform rail services in the north, and it cannot come soon enough in my view.

My hon. Friend focused on Skipton to Colne rather than everything else. The line was closed, as he rightly points out, in 1970. It took until 2001, surprisingly, for SELRAP to establish itself, but it has been diligent ever since in putting its name at the forefront of local campaigning. It has been an excellent example to many other campaigns around the country. SELRAP wants to protect the former railway track bed from development

so that it can feasibly be reinstated as a main railway line. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to its work over the last 16 years to raise the profile of reinstating this 12-mile link between east Lancashire and Yorkshire.

As we have consistently explained to both the partnership and local representatives, local bodies have to determine whether a rail reopening is the best way of addressing local and regional economic development needs, and to secure appropriate funding, including that which we make available through the growth fund and devolution deals. I understand the frustration and the bemusement that this project has not come to the forefront of all the growth deals we have been negotiating with Lancashire. I urge my hon. Friend to consider whether the next round is the chance to do just that.

My hon. Friend made valid points about the role that cars can and cannot play in local economic development. I notice that the level of car ownership is not high in parts of my constituency, rather like in his seat. People need public transport alternatives that are accessible to them. In Blackpool, that could be the tram. In his patch, the Skipton to Colne railway might be part of that. That is why we are funding far more local community rail partnerships, to try to reconnect people with their railways. Too many people do not realise the opportunities that rail can bring for accessing employment. I know what good work they are doing in east Lancashire with the community rail partnership, and the support that Northern, in particular, is giving to community rail partnerships is to be praised.

We have also been looking carefully at the reports that have been produced, not least the economic study that my hon. Friend cited into the trans-Pennine links. Once again, it is full of important, helpful and sensible information and assessments of the potential benefits. We have been negotiating with Lancashire County Council to undertake a study of key improvements in passenger connectivity between towns and cities and strategic freight capability. Much of that work is also being carried out by Rail North and Transport for the North, looking at the strategic overlay.

Part of northern powerhouse rail is trying to assess what benefits we want to achieve for passengers. If we understand what changes we want to make, it is far easier to identify which inputs, in terms of infrastructure investment, will bring us to what passengers want, which is faster and more reliable journeys and a greater range of destinations that they can access from their local stations. I am confident that we will get some good news on that front when we hear the final views of Transport for the North in the near future. We also need to keep working with all the regional bodies and actors identified to improve east-west connectivity across the Pennines. I do not want to prejudge what the outcome of that might be—whether it is road, rail or whatever—but my hon. Friend made a powerful case as to why rail has to be part of that mix.

The report that my hon. Friend identified does not necessarily seek to make the case for particular investment in either road or rail, nor does it assess the potential costs of any of these interventions. The key point is that we need to be much more certain about what the costs of reopening Skipton to Colne would be. I recognise that it is almost a Catch-22, because to get a robust cost estimate costs money in itself. That is the next big hurdle that SELRAP will have to overcome.

No one could say that my hon. Friend has not made a powerful case today, just as he did in his maiden speech. I very much hope that, in his next speech in the Chamber after 8 June as the newly re-elected MP for Pendle, he will make a powerful case for the opening of Skipton to Colne. Perhaps I will still be the Minister and be able to deliver that. Who is to say? We have many weeks of uncertainty ahead, but one thing is certain: that track bed is not going away. It will still be there, ready to be reopened, whatever the public decide on 8 June. I hope we can one day travel on it together.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Whirlpool: Product Safety System

[Ms JOAN RYAN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Whirlpool and the product safety system.

Thank you, Ms Ryan, for the opportunity to open this debate today in Westminster Hall on a subject that I have become heavily involved with and extremely concerned about during the last year. May I also say what a pleasure it is to experience your chairing of a debate for the first time? I am sure it will not be the last.

This issue affects many people across the UK and I am very pleased that hon. Members from throughout the country are here today. Members will probably recall that I led an Adjournment debate last September on tumble dryers, as a direct result of a tragic incident in my constituency. On 19 August 2016, Debbie Defreitas, a constituent of mine, was in the kitchen of her home on the seventh floor of Shepherds Court, an 18-storey block of flats overlooking Shepherd's Bush Green, when she became aware of a burning smell. Her Indesit tumble dryer, which is a make owned by Whirlpool, was running and had caught fire mid-cycle. The fire subsequently tore through the block and 120 firefighters had to attend the scene to put out the blaze.

The incident resulted in 100 families being evacuated from the block and 26 were found temporary accommodation in hotels that night. Luckily, there were only minor injuries, but London Fire Brigade has said that if the fire had happened late at night the outcome would have been far worse. It is clear from other fires caused by white goods that such incidents can lead, and indeed have led, to tragic loss of life. It is a great relief that that was avoided at Shepherds Court.

Today, five of the flats affected remain out of action and the tenants from those properties are still in temporary housing provided by Hammersmith and Fulham Council. Although those tenants are being adequately housed, they experienced substantial trauma and upheaval as a result of this incident, as I am sure people appreciate. I visited the block last weekend. Most residents are now back in and the local authority has redecorated the floors, but the legacy of the fire will last for many years.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the shocking thing about this situation is that Indesit knew for 14 months that there was a problem, and it took action from Trading Standards, which issued enforcement notices, the Local Government Association and a pressure group to get notices sent out to the small number of people that Indesit knew had these machines, telling them they should unplug them and not use them again until they had been repaired?

Andy Slaughter: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and I am also grateful to the large number of Members attending this debate, which shows the degree of interest in the subject. I will go through what happened—hopefully not at great length, but with some precision—to show just how culpable Whirlpool has been and to outline the specific tasks that we want

the Government to ensure are carried out, so that there is no repetition of last year's fire and this particularly serious issue is resolved.

The key point is that my constituent had followed Whirlpool's safety advice to the letter, which at the time of the fire was:

"You may continue to use your tumble dryer whilst waiting for the modification, however we require that you do not leave your dryer unattended during operation".

Ms Defreitas was supervising her tumble dryer when the fire broke out, as she had been advised to do. However, in reality many people would not do so and why should they? In the 21st century, manufacturers should make products without fault that do not pose a risk to life and property. Although it is perhaps inevitable that products are occasionally faulty, in such instances a manufacturer must take immediate action to inform consumers of the fault, and it must also issue an immediate and full recall. Anything less is hugely irresponsible.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this very important debate on an issue that has had an impact on the lives of many people throughout Britain and also in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that Trading Standards must be forced to do a lot more in relation to this issue, and that currently there is a serious gap between faults that manufacturers and suppliers of electrical goods know about, and what consumers are aware of?

Andy Slaughter: I absolutely agree and I know that a number of Members from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, some of whom are here today, have been putting a lot of pressure on. I hope that pressure will continue, because clearly the current Trading Standards regime does not work. That is why we need the Government to intervene and not simply say that this is a matter that can be resolved at local authority level.

Given that the Shepherds Court fire was more than eight months ago, I am disappointed that I have had to come back to the House today to raise the matter again, as I had hoped that by now both the Government and Whirlpool would have taken action to remedy this situation. Unfortunately, however, there has been little progress: Whirlpool has not properly rectified the problem; and the Minister and the Government have not acted decisively. As a consequence, I believe lives are still at risk.

In particular, Whirlpool's complete lack of accountability and responsibility for those consumers whose daily lives have been—and indeed are still being—put at risk, is simply unacceptable. The company's behaviour throughout this whole process prompts the question of why anyone would want to buy a Whirlpool tumble dryer, or indeed any other product made by the company, in future.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this debate. I have a constituent who has a very similar story to the one he has just outlined. She asked me not to reveal her name, but she was using her tumble dryer and it actually exploded. Flames went up and hit the roof. We talk about the consequences of such fires for people's lives. She lost pretty much everything and unfortunately she was not insured. This happened some time ago and she is still living with the consequences. All that time, as the

hon. Gentleman said, Whirlpool seems to have been completely ambivalent about the consequences of these incidents for people's lives.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because I believe that Whirlpool is cynically trying to delay everything from legal actions on liability through to inquests, to resist what in the end will undoubtedly be very substantial payments that it will have to make. However, the consequences of these incidents, particularly for poorer people who may not have insurance and who—as is the case with some of my constituents—have lost all their belongings as well as their homes, are absolutely devastating.

Since the fire in Shepherds Bush, Whirlpool has failed to answer the most basic questions in my correspondence with the company, and its letters in response are often written not by the company itself but by its PR agency, Ketchum.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, particularly given the experience of one of his constituents. Of course, the hon. Gentleman and I have been in correspondence on this matter over a number of months. When I first raised this issue, I did not just raise it on behalf of constituents; I myself happen to be the owner of one of the tumble dryers in question.

I never revealed to Whirlpool that I am an MP. Why should I? I should be treated just like any other member of the public. When I first contacted Whirlpool about this issue as an MP, it did not have the courtesy to respond to me. When I first received a letter from Maurizio Pettorino, the managing director of Whirlpool UK, in September 2016, in which he profusely apologised for not having responded to me in the first place but only after I had raised the matter in the House of Commons, he said to me that in my South Leicestershire constituency there were 5,000 customers affected by this situation.

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): It is a very long intervention.

Alberto Costa: What does the hon. Gentleman say about the fact that I then received a letter dated 28 March from Mr Pettorino, which told me that 16,900 of my South Leicestershire constituents are affected by this situation?

Andy Slaughter: I thank the hon. Gentleman; since his own personal experience of this matter, he has been assiduous in pursuing it. In response to his question, frankly I do not think it would have made much difference if he had originally said he was an MP, because when MPs have attempted to get Whirlpool representatives to come to this House to speak to Committees and all-party groups, they have refused to attend. His story does not surprise me, and the different figures that he cites are a sign either of Whirlpool's incompetence or that they simply do not care what they say.

I am incredibly frustrated by Whirlpool's lack of engagement with MPs and its refusal to co-operate with them. That is despite the fact that we continue to hear in the press of tumble dryer fires across the UK almost daily. London Fire Brigade sent me details of a fire that it attended last weekend. The occupants of a flat with a faulty tumble dryer—it was a Hotpoint tumble dryer—

managed to escape, but a 96-year-old woman in the flat above had to be rescued and taken to hospital by firefighters.

There is a real risk to life and limb here. The Local Government Association has reported that firefighters are now attending three fires a day caused by tumble dryers. Figures I received from the London Fire Brigade ahead of this debate show that there have been 1,520 fires caused by tumble dryers and washing machines since 2009 in the London fire authority area alone. Overall, in London—I refer to London not because this is not a problem across the country, but because the London Fire Brigade is one of the few to have retained a research department following cuts to fire services, so it is able to collate and act on information—tumble dryer fires increased by 24% between 2015 and 2016.

On the wider issue of product safety, each year between 250 and 300 house fires in London are caused by white goods. We know from organisations such as Electrical Safety First, which is a charity that campaigns for our constituents to use electricity safely in the home, that electricity is the cause of many house fires and that fires caused by electricity are increasing. The Minister must therefore look closely not only at the issue with Whirlpool and tumble dryers, but the wider context of fires caused by all white goods and electrical goods, such as mobile phone chargers and refrigerators. Just this week, we had an inquest into the death of someone who sadly died escaping from a fire caused by a fridge-freezer.

It is clear from the statistics that the Government must get to grips with this escalating problem. There are far too many unsafe electrical appliances in our constituents' homes. Has the Minister spoken to the Home Office about the rising number of fires caused by electrical goods and the effect faulty tumble dryers are having on the figures? What does she intend to do to reduce the number of fires and protect consumers from these faulty goods?

I am not the only one who has raised these issues in the House, as is clear from the number of Members here today. We just heard from the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). He spoke in my previous debate of his total frustration with Whirlpool as one of their customers. He called then for the resignation of the managing director, and I doubt he has changed his mind. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on home electrical safety, has raised the issue several times with the Minister and has been excellent in raising awareness among MPs.

I am sad to say that my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) is stepping down as an MP, but as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee he has tried to engage with Whirlpool with limited success. My hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), who sadly cannot be here, and my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who is here, have also been instrumental in supporting the campaign and in coming with me to meet the Minister. Many Members have tried to engage with Whirlpool and the Government, but they have been ignored and have received answers that are simply unacceptable.

Mrs Moon: I think my hon. Friend is personally responsible for protecting and saving the lives of many people who have these risky appliances. I think we all

[Mrs Moon]

owe him a debt of gratitude. Our hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has also been raising this issue, but I wrote to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy asking about the final report on the recall system, which the working group on product recalls and safety was commissioned to do. I was told that the report had been received and would be published in due course. Given the impending general election, we cannot wait for another two months and let this drift. Is it not right that the Minister should give us the decision today on what the Government will do to protect lives?

Andy Slaughter: Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her comments and for raising that issue. I will conclude my speech by putting that matter to the Minister. If, when the new Parliament is elected, we still do not have satisfactory answers, I hope that whoever then chairs the BEIS Committee will pursue the matter with the Government and Whirlpool.

Having mentioned many Members, I want briefly to pay tribute to the campaign organisations, without which we simply would not have got this far. It is invidious, because some always get left out, but they include Which?, Electrical Safety First, the London Fire Brigade, the LGA and the Chief Fire Officers Association. They have all been extremely helpful in keeping the issue on our agenda and ensuring we are properly briefed. In particular, Which? has led a campaign specifically on Whirlpool's unwillingness to undertake a recall. That resulted in a change in Whirlpool's safety advice in February. Last December, Which? sought a judicial review into what it regarded as failures by the trading standards team overseeing the case in Peterborough. As Members may be aware, Peterborough trading standards has been acting as Whirlpool's advisers, and the review would have looked into whether Peterborough trading standards acted lawfully in this capacity. Which? said at the time:

"We believe that the way Whirlpool has handled the tumble dryer safety issue is absolutely appalling and to add insult to injury Peterborough Trading Standards has failed to do its duty to protect consumers. We have decided to step in and take legal action because we want Peterborough Trading Standards to properly protect Whirlpool customers and carry out its role as an enforcer of product safety laws."

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Is it the case then that Which? forced Peterborough trading standards' hand and moved the issue on as a result of the threat of judicial review?

Andy Slaughter: Absolutely. Trading standards and Whirlpool had to be dragged kicking and screaming. Peterborough trading standards said Which?'s action was premature, which is extraordinary given what happened in my constituency. In February, Peterborough changed its mind and finally issued an enforcement notice. After resistance and presumably after it took legal advice, Whirlpool changed its advice to consumers, at last telling them to stop using the faulty machines. The London Fire Brigade and many others had been advising that all along. It is clear that if it was not for Which?, the previous advice would still be given to consumers, putting them and their families at risk. While that change of advice was a step in the right direction, it is

simply not enough. The organisations I have mentioned, along with my hon. Friends and I, want to see a full recall of these faulty machines, and we will not rest until that has been implemented.

Finally, in terms of acknowledging who is on the side of virtue, I would like to say—Members do not always do this—that we have had huge support for a full product recall not only from the public, but from the media. I must mention Alice Beer of ITV, as she is here and has done fantastic campaigning work, as has Lynn Faulds Wood. The *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Guardian*, the BBC and ITV have all taken the time to provide ample coverage of this issue, and the petition I set up calling for a full product recall has now reached the magic 100,000 signature mark. If the matter is not resolved by the time the new Parliament comes in, I hope it will be considered for a fuller debate on the Floor of the House.

It is clear that the issue is not going away, and the public are incredibly dissatisfied with the response they have had. The Minister said in my previous debate that she was satisfied with Peterborough's actions at that time, so will she please explain what discussions the Government have had privately with Trading Standards and Whirlpool since that debate? What is her assessment of Peterborough trading standards' actions now? Does she recognise that Peterborough trading standards was wrong last year when it failed to take effective action against Whirlpool? Does she believe that it is now right to have done so, albeit only when threatened with legal action? Does she accept that the Government played no part in that and can take no credit, but that they have an opportunity to act now?

The Minister's brief includes consumer protection, but for her to be able to claim that she really does protect consumer rights, we need substantive action. At the moment, we are leaving many people with dangerous tumble dryers in their homes. What discussions has she had with Whirlpool recently? When will she acknowledge the daily problems that people are having with their tumble dryers, which they are now told not to use because of the risks to life and property? How many more lives need to be lost before firm action is finally taken? Is this not just the tip of the iceberg of a wider problem with white goods and recalls that needs to be urgently addressed?

That brings me to the BEIS working group. We have already had one review—I mentioned Lynn Faulds Wood—which made very sensible recommendations, such as creating a single register for all product recalls, which the fire brigade has long been calling for. However, that was ignored by the Government and another review was set up. In the previous debate, the Minister said that the working group was

"primarily focusing on three work strands: establishing a centre of excellence, or official website...considering how to ensure that we have more reliable, detailed guidance on product recalls, which would, I hope, improve the rate of recall from its current one in four success rate; and establishing a mapping process whereby all organisations involved in product recalls can have access to better data and information sharing."—[*Official Report*, 13 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 875.]

She also mentioned that that work would take two years, and that was a year after Lynn Faulds Woods had reported. We were told to expect an interim report at Christmas. Four months later, there is no sign of that

report. Where is it? Has it now been buried as a result of the general election, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) suggested? When will the Government take action to protect consumers? Will they include any of Lynn Faulds Wood's recommendations, such as the creation of a single register for product recalls?

Brexit also raises a number of issues for the Minister's Department about important EU electrical safety regulations and consumer regulations that we need to ensure are maintained in UK law. Will the Minister confirm where the report is and whether it will include considerations on Brexit? What is her Department doing to ensure that we maintain important EU consumer laws when we leave the European Union? My concern is that her Government will seek to deregulate consumer protection, rather than increase it, as they are seeking to do with environmental regulations.

Returning to the faulty dryers, do the Government know how many unregistered machines are still out there posing a risk? We know that millions of affected Whirlpool machines are missing from any registration scheme. What are the Government telling Whirlpool to do to ensure that consumers do not use those machines in the meantime? We were told that there was press advertising; I cannot say that I saw it, and it was certainly not sustained over a period of time. Do the Government have any faith in Whirlpool's modification programme, particularly given that some consumers have reported that their dryers continue to catch fire after modification?

Alberto Costa: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's generosity in giving way a second time. I witnessed my own tumble dryer being fixed. Whirlpool claims that the modifications have been tested by independent experts. Which? informs me that it has not been forwarded any of the details associated with those tests. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in the interests of transparency and consumer protection, that information should be shared? If it has been shared with the Government, I urge the Minister to share it as soon as possible, so that we can identify whether the modified tumble dryers, let alone those that still await modification, are safe.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful for that point, because one of the features of this issue is how secretive Whirlpool has been, to the extent that it still does not publish a full list of the models affected. It appears to put what is left of its public reputation before the safety of its customers.

I ask the Minister to make these inquiries, as Whirlpool is not responding to individual Members. How does it intend to compensate customers for the losses they have suffered through fires that have already occurred? When is it completing its rectification programme? Is that rectification or replacement programme itself safe? Importantly, how will it raise public awareness? London Fire Brigade estimates that there could be as many as 3 million machines still out there unmodified, with owners who simply do not know, unless they have been lucky enough to see a news programme or are perhaps members of Which?.

This has gone on for far too long; delays are costing lives and destroying people's homes, as we saw in my constituency. Whirlpool is a brand seriously damaged by its own incompetence and a series of own goals—a

lack of engagement and an ignorant and arrogant attitude to its customers and Members of this House. It is a textbook case in how not to do it.

The Labour party will introduce measures to improve the product safety and recall system if we are elected on 8 June. I appreciate that the Minister might today be responding for the last time in her post. I know that she has taken an interest in the issue and I hope she can answer some of the questions. Will the BEIS working group's report be published before the election or has it become less of a priority? Why have we not heard anything about it? Why has Whirlpool failed to engage with MPs and the Government? Will the Government push Peterborough trading standards to implement a full product recall, as they should have done months ago, before any more lives are lost?

The Whirlpool tragedy should be a watershed. Perhaps a million machines have been modified. Perhaps, as Whirlpool estimates—it is only an estimate—another million have gone out of service because they are redundant, given that the problem dates back to 2004. However, there are potentially up to 3 million machines still out there. Can we have an assurance from the Minister today, finally, that this will act as a catalyst for a proper registration scheme and a proper recall system?

One of the most shocking aspects for me, other Members and constituents is that we believed that there was an effective system of product safety in this country. The Whirlpool tragedy has exposed that there simply is not—but it is possible, because it happens in the US and in other countries. If the Minister is to have a legacy in this job, it could be to commit this or a future Government to saying they will go forward with a proper system of registration and recall, as well as ensuring that the disaster that is the Whirlpool scheme is finally put to rest.

2.56 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I commend the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for bringing forward this issue, on which he has been a champion in debates in the House, including in a shorter Adjournment debate, when he fully put forward the issue and was supported by many of us here today and those from further afield. I thank him for bringing it forward today and am fully supportive of his purpose. He gave much detail on what has happened, and I will try to give my speech without repeating it.

I have had constituents in my office who are anxious and concerned about being told, "Just stay in the house," when the machine is in use. Let me set the scene with an example of one constituent. My constituent and her husband work full-time jobs and also work some additional shifts to pay the mortgage. She leaves the house with her two-year-old and her one-year-old baby at 8.30 am. She returns at 6.30 pm, gives the children their dinner and bath and has them in bed for 8 pm, at which stage her 18-year-old babysitter takes over, to allow her to go to her evening meetings. She does not have the time to sit for the washing and drying cycle to complete, and cannot leave an 18-year-old in charge of a fire hazard with sleeping babies upstairs—that is unrealistic.

Her option is to sit and watch the washer-dryer cycle throughout the night. That is certainly ridiculous, but it is the reality of what the firm wants people to do, as the

[*Jim Shannon*]

hon. Gentleman set out in his introduction. Is it a joke? No, it is not, and that is why in Westminster Hall today, with the Minister in her place—she has a very wide-ranging portfolio, given what she was here responding to yesterday and what she is doing today—we believe that legislation needs to be put in place that makes firms accountable and protects consumers, which it quite clearly does not at this moment in time.

I read the very succinct briefing provided by Which?—I am sure we have all had sight of that. Where a product could cause a risk to life or serious injury, Which? expects it to be promptly recalled by the manufacturers. What could be clearer or simpler than that? Yet we have firms who clearly disregard that and have a blasé attitude in how they respond. I ask again: how can we make those firms act with the urgency that we really need? All right-thinking people expect that, but we must make what is expected from manufacturers crystal clear.

As we know, Whirlpool acquired the Indesit Company, including its brands Hotpoint, Indesit, Swan, Proline and Creda, in 2014. In August 2015, Whirlpool informed Peterborough trading standards, as its primary authority partner, that up to 5.3 million dryers in the UK were affected by a fault discovered in more than 120 models. The magnitude of that number! The 5.3 million dryers in more than 120 models is nearly everything it has. Why has it not been coerced, persuaded or made to act more quickly? Those driers were also at risk of catching fire and required urgent modification to address the problem.

In August 2015, the company admitted what had to be done and notified trading standards, but the number of driers and models is very large. By 2016, about 750 fires had been reportedly linked to Hotpoint, Indesit, Proline, Swan and Creda tumble driers. Of course, since then there have been even more. A fire in a tower block in Shepherd's Bush—I am sure the hon. Member for Hammersmith or other hon. Members will talk about it—left 50 people unable to return to their homes. The London Fire Brigade found that it had been caused by an Indesit tumble drier. We could see the horror that it caused on TV: it did not affect just one person, but all the other residents of the tower block. There are other examples—the fire brigade gave us one. Does Indesit not realise the danger? We do as elected representatives, and the people who own the driers and those whose homes have been damaged certainly do as well.

Which? found that those affected have been forced to wait far too long for a repair or replacement, and that customer service staff have given incorrect and potentially dangerous advice.

Mrs Moon: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that some of the machines have been sold on? When houses go up for sale, electrical goods go with them, and perhaps the second owners do not appreciate that the machine they inherit with their new home is dangerous, so they will not be looking to see whether it should be repaired.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that very wise intervention. I had not given much thought to that. Sometimes the machines are sold on, but where is the follow-on? How does the company find out about those

people? The people who have got them know about the problem from the adverts on TV, the stories in the papers and so on, but in many cases they do not know that they have something dangerous sitting in their home. The hon. Lady is right. We are trying to be positive in our questions to the Minister, but perhaps she will give some thought to that issue.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith spoke about home fires, and the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) spoke about some personal examples. There is a record of damage, and the company admits that there is a problem, so surely it should be held to account and should award compensation to people who have had massive fires in their flats and properties. Let us be honest: it is only for the grace of God that people have not been injured or died as a result of this issue.

Whirlpool has not acted in the best interests of consumers. It resisted a recall of the affected models and failed to repair and replace affected machines in a timely way. The affected consumers were told not to use their tumble driers. When someone is told not to use their tumble drier, they expect the company to come and repair it or replace it with something that works correctly.

Ms Ritchie: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that regulation is an issue? A series of recent product safety issues have brought into sharp focus the need for proper regulation and enforcement. Does he agree that the Government should focus their attention on that issue, too?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for those comments.

Clearly, the issue for us all is safety. As I said, it is only by the grace of God that nobody has been injured or killed. It is unrealistic to expect consumers not to use their tumble dryer for months on end, so it is possible that further fire and safety incidents will occur as a result of continued usage. Whirlpool should issue a full recall of all affected models immediately. If there are 5.3 million dryers, we will get them all back. If there are 120 models, we will work on that and get it done.

Which? reported that one in five—22%—of the affected customers surveyed in April 2016 were still waiting for their machine to be repaired or replaced. Does the company have no sense of urgency or safety? Are these issues lost on it? The Minister must be able to feel our frustration and anger. Other Members who speak after me will reiterate that. We need to be on the ball to ensure action is taken.

A third of customers who had their dryer repaired or replaced said they were dissatisfied with how the manufacturer handled the situation. I'll tell you what, if I had been waiting since 2016, I would be very dissatisfied. I would be wondering what the company was doing and whether it had got the notification of the repairs to be done in a tray in a locked room where nobody ever goes. Six in 10, or 62%—it is rising all the time—of those who were surveyed for the first time in November 2016 and had decided to wait for a repair were concerned about using their tumble dryer, so the vast majority of those who own those dryers are concerned. One quarter—26%—of affected customers were told that they would have to wait longer than six months for their tumble dryer to be repaired. If only it did take six months to have it repaired, at least we would have a date. One in five—22%—were told that the wait would be between

three and six months. Where is the company's understanding of the inherent danger that those delays compound?

I will conclude with this comment because others wish to speak. We must ensure that consumer protection legislation is in place to deal with this issue. Current legislation allows that to take place. I believe the power is with the Minister: she can do this. I respectfully ask her, in the short time she has, to ensure that action can be taken after the election. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that this does not happen again. I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith and all those who have come to Westminster Hall to support the safety not only of my constituents but of people throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, who rely on legislation to force manufacturers to do the right thing. The fact is that we have to force them. I believe we must deal with this issue.

3.7 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. We have this pleasure very infrequently, but I am very pleased that you are presiding over business today. I am also pleased to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) not only on securing this important debate and on his excellent speech, which comprehensively detailed all the issues he has been working on, but on leading the campaign to hold Whirlpool to account and to ensure that this matter is not forgotten in Parliament. He has done a sterling job and we all owe him a debt. He led a group of us to meet the Minister last year shortly after the fire. I have to say that the meeting was very reassuring. The Minister was very positive and made all the right noises and promises. It is therefore a trifle disappointing to say the least that, although we expected a report at the end of last year, we are still waiting for her conclusions. I hope that she will offer us some more assurances today. She clearly got it—she knew that there are deficiencies in the system, and she clearly wanted to do something about the issue—so I look forward to her comments.

I want to thank three organisations that sent us briefings: London Fire Brigade—not because I am a former employee, but because it provides a great research service on such issues, as my hon. Friend outlined—Which? and Electrical Safety First. Their briefings are essentially consistent on the major issues, but they emphasise different points. For example, they agree on the need for a single register for all UK product recalls, they are all unhappy with the present system, and they all criticise Whirlpool's performance. The London Fire Brigade also states that organisations such as insurers should be under an obligation to have evidence that a fire has been caused by a faulty appliance to inform Trading Standards. Notwithstanding the weakness of Peterborough trading standards, many trading standards offices are excellent. At least if the information is in the public domain, matters can be taken forward.

The London Fire Brigade also requires that all appliances should be marked with the model and serial number, so that they can be identified in the case of a fire and matters can be taken forward as a result of working out what caused the blaze. The cause can be tracked down, traced and dealt with.

Electrical Safety First makes various key points—the gap between faults known to manufacturers and suppliers and the awareness of consumers is too great; there should be transparency and shared information. ESF says there should be a more efficient recall system, similar to the one in the United States. It requires a Government website—perhaps the Minister will comment on this—so that consumers can check whether their goods are at risk.

There should also be increased product registration—a matter we discussed with the Minister—but the evidence is clear that people do not fill out product registration forms when they buy goods because they are frightened they will be bombarded with sales literature and marketing information about future products from the companies from which they procured the goods. We are all sensitive to that. We do not like cold calls and trashy leaflets coming through our doors. People should be able to register at the point of sale and therefore be advised of recall. According to ESF, the recall success rate is 20% or below. It is very worrying that people do not understand that they own products that could jeopardise them, their families and their homes.

I will conclude shortly, because I know that a lot of colleagues want to speak and time is limited, but I want to mention two paragraphs that Which? has drawn attention to. Which? stated:

“Where a product could cause a risk to life or serious injury we expect it to be promptly recalled by the manufacturers. We do not believe this is happening in the case of Whirlpool's fire risk tumble dryers given the known risks. Which? believes Whirlpool's handling of the tumble dryer safety issue is unacceptable and exemplifies the weaknesses of the product safety system and the need for the system to be reformed. Which? wants Whirlpool to issue a full recall of their affected dryers and Government to reform the product safety system”—

a point that was so well articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith. Which? also states—this was the matter that I intervened on him about—that Peterborough trading standards was forced into taking action because of the legal action that was taken in the judicial review. In that instance, that is a very unsatisfactory situation. My last point, and the most worrying one, is that it should not need a judicial review or the threat of legal action to force a trading standards organisation to force an international, respected manufacturer to protect its customers against the risk of fire and the risk to life, limb and home.

I look forward to the three Front-Bench responses to this debate, particularly the Minister's, because she has shown a clear interest in this matter. She gets all the issues and is the only one in the room who has the power to take this matter forward. I hope she can give us more reassurance today.

3.13 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) for securing this important debate and for the work that he has done on the topic so far. I am relieved that this debate has finally been granted and pleased that I have the opportunity to take part. For some time I have been deeply troubled by the dangers posed by Whirlpool-owned tumble dryers and Whirlpool's lack of response. I hope that today's debate will be a wake-up call for both Whirlpool and the Government. They must act now.

[Corri Wilson]

Whirlpool initially refused to admit fault with any of its machines. Its advice then changed to the astonishing recommendation of watching the machine while it was on. Frankly, I think people have much better things to do with their time than watch a tumble dryer. People are now advised to unplug the affected appliances and refrain from using them. That is a clear admission of fault. If Whirlpool has recognised that its machines pose a fire hazard, why are they still in homes up and down the country?

Although Whirlpool has carried out maintenance on some machines, there are hundreds of thousands still to be looked at, and an estimated 3 million more that have yet to be identified. On top of that, it is not even certain that the maintenance carried out is an effective solution. Whirlpool's response to the issue has been too little, too late. To check whether a machine is one of the models affected, people have to search through various pages on the Whirlpool website where the information has been buried under promotions and advertisements.

The consumer group, Which?, has found that those lucky enough to be made aware of the fault are being forced to wait for months to have their machines repaired. More than a quarter of people were told they would have to wait, as we have heard, up to six months. People's lives are at risk and the response has been totally unacceptable.

In my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock I have seen the damage that such inaction has caused. I was contacted last year by a local family whose home had been completely destroyed by a fire caused by a Whirlpool tumble dryer. The family, already struggling to make ends meet in austerity Britain, were left homeless with only the clothes on their backs. Having lost everything, Whirlpool offered them £175 in compensation. That is an absolute disgrace. I strongly urge the Government to show some humanity for once and ensure that all those affected by fires are properly compensated.

The No. 1 job of a Government is to protect the population. Despite repeated calls for action, the Government continue to sit on their hands, offering small snippets of advice to Whirlpool, while millions of homes across the UK live with potentially life-threatening appliances. There is no time to waste.

Last year the Government rejected two petitions relating to faulty tumble dryers: one on the basis that it was unclear what was being requested from the Government, and the other because it was not something the Government were responsible for. Well, the Government can no longer shirk their responsibility. Whirlpool and Trading Standards have the power to recall faulty products, but so do the Government. A new petition, which has now been signed by more than 100,000 people, is crystal clear. The Government must urge Whirlpool UK to recall all faulty tumble dryers immediately, or step in themselves.

The Whirlpool issue also raises broader questions about the future of consumer protection in the country. As was mentioned earlier, EU legislation currently requires that all appliances meet specific standards relating to product safety, environmental impact, and consumer protection. As is the general theme of Brexit, we have absolutely no idea what the Government plan to replace it with. I think even the Government do not know.

The Government have a duty to ensure that consumers are not put at risk following Brexit and that legislation is more robust than it has been under EU rules. The Whirlpool issue is just one example of the UK's inadequate product safety and recall system. I therefore urge the Government to use Brexit to introduce a new national regime that puts the safety and rights of the public, not the profits and interests of companies, at its heart.

Although I understand that the Government's energy is now focused elsewhere, the Whirlpool issue cannot go on any longer. With up to 5.5 million faulty tumble dryers sitting in homes across the UK as we speak, the stakes could not be higher. I therefore urge the Minister to take immediate action in agreeing a full recall of all affected appliances and to ensure that families, such as the one in my constituency, whose lives have been torn apart by this matter are fully compensated. It is the Government's duty and it is the right thing to do.

3.17 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I am pleased to take part in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing it.

Along with other hon. Members here, I am a member of the all-party group on home electrical safety, so I declare that interest. I have come to the debate because of the historical links that my constituency has with electrical appliance manufacturing over many years. I will therefore focus my remarks on issues to do with product safety and how faulty electrical products are damaging consumer confidence in the UK.

In Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney we have a proud history of the manufacture of washing machines. We led the way for many years, making the post-war kitchen appliances modern and convenient. The Hoover factory opened in Pentrebach in my constituency in 1948 as part of the Labour Government's work to ensure manufacturing advances in the UK after the war. Hoover soon became a market leader in the UK because the products were made to a high standard and were not imported, unlike many of the products manufactured today. By 1973, Hoover's 25th anniversary in the town, 5,000 people were employed making washing machines, tumble dryers and dishwashers. Manufacturing in the UK had reached its peak. Unfortunately and tragically, it has been allowed to drift and we now rely on cheaper imports.

In March 2009, manufacturing came to an end in Merthyr Tydfil. The surrounding area, including my constituency, is still proud of the legacy of appliances being built locally, giving jobs to the local economy, and benefiting people's lives.

I do not want to focus just on Hoover's 2009 decision, devastating as that blow was. Many other manufacturers have also decided to send production overseas, and now import electrical goods into the UK. How can we be sure of the credibility of the component supply chain to large companies, and how do we ensure proper quality of the finished product and that it is built to last? Perhaps our departure from the European Union will offer an opportunity for us once again to galvanise the great range of talent that remains in the UK manufacturing sector and to encourage our trusted British brands to

return manufacturing to the UK. Perhaps the Minister will give her view on that. The car industry has been supported, but what about UK white goods manufacturers?

As we have already heard today there is a serious ongoing issue with Whirlpool tumble dryers, which is still having a huge impact on many of our constituents. Given the often wet weather in Wales—

Mrs Moon: No!

Gerald Jones: Well, it certainly is in parts of Wales; so many of my constituents rely on tumble dryers, and many of those are made by Whirlpool, which owns the Hotpoint, Indesit and Creda brands. Figures from South Wales Fire and Rescue Service show that over the past two years seven fires have been caused by tumble dryers in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. Across south Wales there have been 43 fires, with more than 55% of those attributed to the Hotpoint, Indesit or Creda machines sold by Whirlpool. Those cases highlight the serious failure in product safety across the country. It seems that a well-known, trusted manufacturer has been allowed to place on the market potentially dangerous machines that have the ability to cause serious damage, injury and worse. What will the Minister do to ensure that the products that are manufactured overseas and sold in the UK are safe?

Through our membership of the European Union we have benefited from a range of legislation, cross-border working and co-operation on product safety, market surveillance and consumer protection to ensure that only products that meet strict minimum safety standards can enter the marketplace; additional safeguards have been created for our constituents and they have been provided with rights to redress when things go wrong. What work is the Minister doing with colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union to ensure that that can continue after Brexit?

I understand from research undertaken by the charity Electrical Safety First that there has been an increase in the number of second-hand goods sold online via social media, including a large number of white goods. Vulnerable people, including those in my constituency, who now have less disposable income owing to Tory austerity, may now buy a second-hand product rather than a new one. The item may be unsafe or previously have been recalled by the manufacturer—something that neither the seller nor the buyer may be aware of. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) said, such things may be acquired through moving home. Will the Minister look at the number of previously recalled second-hand goods that have been sold, to find out the impact on product safety and on the safety of our constituents in their homes?

What will the Minister do to reassure us and our constituents that the Government are taking the issue seriously? What are the Government doing to ensure that product safety legislation is fit for purpose? I understand that Whirlpool is struggling to contact a large number of people who may have one of the faulty machines in their home. What work is the Minister undertaking with Whirlpool to ensure that those machines are found and that our constituents are kept safe? One of the Minister's roles is to ensure consumer safety. Will she now demonstrate that it is possible for our constituents to be confident that manufacturers will take responsibility

for their products, and that they will act to prevent more of the incidents with tumble dryers that have happened recently, the consequences of which have been so devastating? I hope that the Minister can provide answers to my questions.

3.23 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing the debate. Mine will be a speedy speech, as I have crossed out three quarters of it already. I want to say a big thank you to Electrical Safety First, which has been the secretariat for the all-party group on home electrical safety, of which I am proud to be the chair. I am grateful for all it has done.

The continuing problem with tumble dryers is becoming increasingly serious, and we are now at a crossroads; the Government must intervene. The issue is not just about the fact that machines are faulty; I can tell the House of a case in Wales where there was loss of life. Last weekend the Welsh media reported on the deaths in 2014 of two young men, in a tumble dryer fire caused by a Hotpoint machine. Time is running out for Whirlpool to rectify the wrong.

I appear to be the only person in the debate who has had a face-to-face conversation with Whirlpool. It happened last year, and was with not the managing director but, if I recall correctly, a communications officer, or perhaps the head of communications. I have refreshed my memory of the meeting from my notes, so that I can share it with the House today. The representative provided me with a short background to the situation, stating that, while the number of machines affected was 5.3 million, because of the period of time that has passed, the number likely to be still in use is 3.5 million. The individual was keen to highlight that the company had proactively approached Trading Standards about the matter, rather than waiting, and that all the actions taken had been approved by Trading Standards. That was of course with reference to Peterborough, although we had no further discussion about Peterborough at the time.

The representative stated that Whirlpool had sent out 3.5 million letters to those for whom it was possible to get contact details, and the company at that time expected to complete 640,000 modifications. It had given itself until March 2017 to complete the modifications—a deadline that I am confident has not been met. The representative informed me that to undertake the task Whirlpool had recruited the services of 1,500 engineers—so many that, in the company's words, there were now no more qualified engineers available for it to recruit. I was advised that the company had increased the options for those affected, who could receive a replacement machine for either £50 or £20, depending on whether it was being delivered, and the old machine collected, or whether they were to pick it up from a recognised retailer.

Throughout the meeting, I persisted in arguing that the matter should have resulted in a full recall. In response Whirlpool highlighted the fact that the tumble dryer market in the UK is about 1 million units a year, and that it is responsible for more than 50% of that—something that makes the situation all the more terrifying. When I asked about its advice that machines could be used, I was told that they could be used but not left

[Carolyn Harris]

unattended; but the company gave that advice with regard to all electrical appliances, anyway. It seems a little strange to me.

Another thing that was highlighted was that the company believes there is a customer blame issue, to do with consumers not following the advice given in product instructions about caring for the product—emptying the fluff collector, in this case. Apparently people in other countries are much better at that. Whirlpool did not want to blame consumers publicly, but the company believes that more should be done to raise awareness of the need to care for products.

Since the meeting, my hon. Friends the Members for Hammersmith and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) and I have been in regular correspondence with the company, seeking clarification of specific issues and requesting meetings. As yet, nothing has happened. I wrote as the chair of the all-party group, requesting someone from Whirlpool to attend a meeting, but my office had to chase up the correspondence for two months. It transpired that communication between Whirlpool and its public relations company had been lost. Why is a PR company answering letters from MPs on behalf of a company? Why does not the managing director's office deal with us directly? I find that attitude to the House contemptible.

I am going to leave out much of the rest of what I was going to say in my speech—apart from telling the House about an interesting tweet that I had at the weekend, from someone who is not a constituent. He sent me a photograph of his tumble dryer being repaired, 18 months after he brought it to Whirlpool's attention. He was delighted that it was being repaired, but he told me that he has an acutely autistic little boy, who has spent the past 18 months believing that the tumble dryer is a very dangerous piece of equipment. He cannot now convince his child that the machine is safe. Anyone with experience of working with people with severe autism or similar health issues will know that the anxiety that that little lad is now experiencing, having had one of the defective machines in the house, is causing trouble not just for him but his family.

I thank the Minister for her positive responses to my correspondence and the little notes on the bottom. I appreciate that she has taken everything that I have hounded her about very seriously. I am surprised by the Department's reluctance to publish the working party report, which I understand the Minister has had sight of since Christmas. I can only hope that the sensible measures that Lynn Faulds Wood outlined will be in that report.

We must not allow any further delays in either the publication of the report or action against Whirlpool. The Government must step in to ensure that protection and guidance for consumers is paramount. Whirlpool must take responsibility, and it must be made accountable, by facing us MPs or being answerable to Ministers, or in the law courts. It must be accountable now.

3.30 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this important debate. He made some valid points, one of which was

about loss of belongings in fires, which we do not take into account in a big way but which causes great distress. Both he and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) mentioned that the petition has now reached 100,000 signatures. I hope we will be able to debate it in the Chamber after the general election.

I say not only as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on home electrical safety but as an MP with constituents who have real concerns about the safety of electrical products in their homes that this debate is important. I also speak out on behalf of constituents who may be unaware of potentially dangerous appliances in their homes and trust the systems that should protect them. We should do all we can to reduce the number of house fires caused by faults in electrical equipment and appliances. Statistics supplied to me by Electrical Safety First show that, of the accidental house fires caused by electricity in my home council area, South Lanarkshire, in 2015-16, 12%—24 house fires that could have been avoided—resulted from an electrical fault.

Reform of the product safety system is not a panacea—there is much work to be done to tackle the trade in counterfeit electrical goods, for instance—but it would play an important role in reducing risk for people and families across the UK. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) spoke about second-hand goods being bought online due to financial constraints. We need to help ensure that people are kept safe in their own homes.

The Whirlpool debacle exemplifies why it is crucial that we get this right. We have heard that, following its 2014 acquisition of Indesit, including the brands Hotpoint, Swan, Proline and Creda, Whirlpool identified that up to 5.3 million or 5.5 million tumble dryers in the UK were affected by a serious fault, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. That fault in more than 120 models meant that those appliances were at serious risk of catching fire. Which? reports that by 2016, around 750 fires had been linked to those tumble dryers. As we heard from the hon. Member for Hammersmith, a significant fire in a tower block in Shepherd's Bush, which we all heard about due to media reports, was found by London Fire Brigade to have been caused by an Indesit tumble dryer. As he said, the legacy of that fire will last for years.

Troubling though that is, the handling of this debacle since it first came to light is even more worrying. We heard from the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) about his personal experience with a tumble dryer. It was only when he revealed that he was an MP that he actually got a proper response, which is ridiculous, but he has shown great perseverance. It shocked me that Hotpoint revealed to him that there could be 16,900 affected customers in his constituency. That is a shockingly high number.

Mystery shopping investigations by Which? looked into Whirlpool's handling of the modification programme for faulty tumble dryers and found that affected people are being forced to wait far too long for repair or replacement. Alarming, Which? also discovered that incorrect and potentially dangerous advice was being given by customer service staff. Which? deserves recognition for its efforts to keep Whirlpool customers safe, and particularly for securing action against Whirlpool by Trading Standards in February, which resulted in the

company being required to update its safety advice warning to consumers to instruct them to stop using their machines immediately and unplug them until they are repaired. I am sure we all agree with the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) that Trading Standards must do more.

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Lady is making a compelling case. Does she agree that Trading Standards should also look at Whirlpool's delay in dealing with repair requests? People should not have to wait an inordinate time suffering a great deal of worry and concern.

Margaret Ferrier: No one would disagree that it has been far too long. People are still using these appliances and could be at serious risk, so I take the hon. Lady's point.

Since becoming aware of the issue, Electrical Safety First has argued that the product safety notice issued by Whirlpool was inefficient and has called for a full recall so that at-risk machines are repaired or removed from homes. When there is such a risk to consumer safety, there is no excuse whatever for Whirlpool not to act in the best interests of consumers, yet it cannot claim to have done so, since it has resisted recalling affected models and failed to repair or replace affected machines quickly. Regrettably, corporate operations seem to have got in the way of consumer wellbeing, as we heard from several Members.

The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group, mentioned that a PR company, not Whirlpool itself, seems to be answering MPs' letters. That is absolutely shocking, but it is therefore unsurprising to learn of the Which? findings. A third of customers who had since had their dryer repaired or replaced said that they were dissatisfied with how the manufacturer had handled the situation. As we heard, a quarter of affected customers have been told that they will have to wait longer than six months, which is shocking. That is not an acceptable way to treat consumers, and it certainly is not a responsible way for the company to handle the situation.

There is also a serious gap between faults that manufacturers and suppliers of electrical goods know about and what consumers are aware of. The product recall system in the UK is complicated and, unfortunately, self-regulated. There is clearly the potential for unsafe products to be left in people's homes, and that is exactly what is happening. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) made the good point that many of these tumble dryers may be passed on in house sales and their new owners may not be aware of the major issues with them.

All that has led to the current situation with Whirlpool tumble dryers, of which there are millions in people's homes. Companies such as Whirlpool do not even know where faulty products are or who owns them. That is shocking. We evidently need a much more efficient product recall system, and it is incumbent on us all to ensure that that happens. We need to put in place a proper system in which manufacturers and retailers co-operate to encourage consumers to register their products at the point of purchase.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned that consumers are put off registering electrical products because they see it for what it often is: a marketing exercise for companies. Product registration must be primarily for safety purposes,

and that should be made clear to consumers when they buy a product. Statistics show that 61% of consumers would be more likely to register a product if they knew that they would be contacted only for the purposes of safety. Electrical Safety First advocates the creation of a dedicated Government website similar to that in America, which centralises all information on product recalls, and where consumers can report concerns and obtain advice. The Whirlpool debacle, and the Shepherd's Bush tower block fire in particular, should serve as the impetus to move on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock shared a shocking story about a family being made homeless after their home was completely destroyed and being offered £175 in compensation—fellow hon. Members gasped at that story. I hope the Minister takes all of this on board. We cannot wait for another serious incident to occur. I have today put on the record these concerns and potential solutions, and hope that the Minister responsible following the general election, whoever that is, will see fit to take them forward. We all want that commitment from the Government today. Failure to act will undoubtedly lead to loss of life in the future. We must do all we can to avoid that eventuality.

3.40 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this important debate and on his actions in leading this campaign. I also thank hon. Members present for their thoughtful, eloquent and constructive contributions. We agree that being faced with a fire in one's own home is a terrifying thought. We have heard some terrible stories—particularly of the deaths of two young men that my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) detailed so eloquently.

Overall, I am very disappointed that we are in this situation at all. Whirlpool's actions have been wholly inadequate—that is the best way I can put it—and the Government have not done nearly enough to remedy the situation. That such a serious failing of consumer protection has happened calls into question the whole product safety regime. That is all the more disappointing because, as other hon. Members outlined, the Government commissioned an independent consumer product recall review by Lynn Faulds Wood in 2015, which was published on 18 February 2016. The Government's response to that review was sadly limited. Where is the interim report that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith mentioned? I hope the Minister can explain.

We have very little certainty over what will happen to consumer protection standards throughout the Brexit process. We have certainly been given little comfort in that regard—it seems at this point that consumers will not be championed during that process. Other hon. Members spoke of the horrendous danger and extremely serious consequences of fires in tumble dryers and other white goods and electricals. That Whirlpool has not issued a full recall at this point in time is staggering. It must fully recall the affected tumble dryer models now, before Parliament dissolves, because lives are still in danger. Peterborough trading standards and the Government should intervene and urge Whirlpool to issue that recall.

[Gill Furniss]

We must also see a serious reform of the consumer protection regime. I hope the Minister will outline the steps she will take in that regard because, when people's homes are destroyed by fire and their possessions turned to ashes, when people have died due to white goods and electrical fires, and with the state that the product recall and product safety regime is in, it is unconscionable that we should continue as we are. What assessment has the Minister made of an independent national system to monitor and enforce consumer protection?

Organisations such as Which? have done a vast amount of good work in investigating and bringing attention to this issue. The Government would no doubt prefer that work to be done by external organisations, but they have a duty that they are not fulfilling. Statistics from Electrical Safety First show that the success rate of an electrical product recall in the UK is typically below 20%. Will the Minister explain what steps her Department has taken to improve that abysmal recall rate?

The product recall system is not working. Customers do not register because they rightly suspect that they are asked to so that they can be spammed by companies about future products. If consumers had confidence that product registration was only for recalls and safety concerns, we might see some change. Electrical Safety First has argued for a centralised website for product registration similar to that in America. Perhaps a similar approach could work here. Many hon. Members asked the same question.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith described the extent to which Whirlpool has avoided engagement, dialogue and responsibility. Again, it has been left to consumer organisations such as Which? to pursue legal action. While Peterborough trading standards should have enforced the appropriate actions by Whirlpool when the faults became apparent, instead Which? had to take it to court to get it to act. Only then did Whirlpool take the straightforward step of updating its product guidance. Does the Minister find that the actions taken so far by Peterborough trading standards to be sufficient and appropriate?

We need a robust product safety system that is fit for purpose. Anything less will continue to endanger people's lives. Be assured that a Labour Government, if elected on 8 June, would prioritise reform of the product safety framework to protect consumers, and to make companies such as Whirlpool take proper responsibility for their products. The people of Britain deserve better, and we should make no apologies for preventing further incidents and fatalities. Please deal with Whirlpool robustly.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) on securing this important debate and echo the remarks of hon. Members about his spearheading of the whole campaign.

We have made considerable progress since I last had the opportunity to engage in a debate on product safety. However, I see from hon. Members' remarks, to which I have listened carefully, that that has perhaps not been communicated as effectively as it should. Allow me to

put that right. I reiterate that the Government take consumer product safety extremely seriously. On the safety issue identified in Whirlpool tumble dryers, I and my officials have been in regular contact with Whirlpool and its management. I must say that I have been shocked to hear the extent to which Whirlpool has not engaged with other hon. Members; I think that it might come to regret that. I hope that, in the new Parliament, it will manage to put that communications issue right.

I met the chief executive of Whirlpool and emphasised the need to resolve the situation quickly and pushed the company hard on meeting its obligations. I have repeatedly pressed it in further correspondence on the need to ensure that consumer safety remains paramount and that consumers have accessible routes to resolve their issues with the company's products quickly and effectively. I am concerned about the number of unregistered machines still on the market; as hon. Members have mentioned, second-hand machines and people moving into homes with an existing machine and not realising the safety issues make it a complex situation. I will come back to that when talking about the working group that we have set up.

I am concerned to hear of the experiences of some consumers who have registered their machines with Whirlpool and who have faced unacceptable delays in having their machines modified.

Mrs Moon: The advice given to one of my constituents was to unplug her tumble dryer, to plug it back in only when she was going to use it and to then watch it. I do not know if the Minister has ever tried to move a tumble dryer or washer dryer when the plug is at the back, but it is not something that can be done. The manufacturers have to take far greater responsibility for keeping our families safe than they do at the moment.

Margot James: I agree with the hon. Lady; that is not practical advice.

Whirlpool has, however, been taking action to address the concerns that we have debated this afternoon. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is the only one among us, apart from myself, who has met Whirlpool. What Whirlpool said to her is largely right, in terms of what it has lived up to following the proposals that its representatives made when they met her some time ago.

Whirlpool has increased its engineer workforce by 50%, allowing it to resolve approximately 100,000 cases per month. It has now exceeded the number of cases that it anticipated resolving when it met the hon. Lady. It has modified more than 1.5 million machines—almost 90% of the total number registered with the company—but, of course, that leaves 10% unresolved, to say nothing of all the other machines out there that nobody knows of. Whirlpool now employs the UK's largest technician workforce, at 1,700-strong, which is almost three times the size of the next largest one in the country.

In response to demands for a full recall, I understand the attraction of that proposition, but the key must be to take whatever action is most likely to achieve the outcome we are all aiming for, which is to ensure that consumers are protected from unsafe products. That may be statutory recall in some instances, but other forms of corrective action, including making modifications to products in a consumer's home, may be more

proportionate, appropriate and effective in other cases. It is often better and more effective to encourage a company to accept its responsibilities and take action proactively.

Alberto Costa: I appreciate that time is short, but on that point, will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will give way to my hon. Friend, who has reappeared.

Alberto Costa: I had important constituency business to attend to. The Minister is correct in saying that modifications at home might be the correct course of action. Indeed, I witnessed a modification to my tumble dryer. However, the issue I have is that Whirlpool is not disclosing to Which? or to any of us the independent expert analysis stating that such modification makes the tumble dryer safe.

Margot James: I am sorry that my hon. Friend has not had satisfaction from Whirlpool on that. Whirlpool wrote to me on 4 November outlining its engineer training programme and auditing programme of the machines that it has modified. I am happy to share that correspondence with him and other hon. Members.

We hear from industry and other experts that recall programmes typically have a success rate of resolving between 10% and 20% of affected products. In this case, Whirlpool's resolution rate is over 40%, which is well above the industry norm. We can therefore posit that the action taken by Whirlpool in co-ordination with Peterborough trading standards has achieved more in terms of resolving cases than recalls typically achieve, meaning a greater number of consumers have been protected from potential harm.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will give way once more. There is more material that Members will be interested in.

Jim Shannon: We are talking about 5.2 million machines and 120 different models. Is there a timescale for how many years it will take for resolution to be arrived at and all those machines to be repaired or replaced?

Margot James: I can only reiterate what I have already said. Of those machines, 1.5 million have already been modified, and only 10% of cases registered with Whirlpool are outstanding. Whirlpool is modifying machines at roughly the rate of 100,000 per month.

The role of Peterborough trading standards has been discussed. That team has ensured that Whirlpool has taken responsibility for resolving the issue and agreed actions deemed proportionate to the level of risk. The initial risk assessment was peer-reviewed and agreed by two other trading standards departments, at Norfolk County Council and Hertfordshire County Council. As a responsible regulator, it has kept the issue and the evidence under continuous review and made decisions accordingly. It issued enforcement action to ensure that Whirlpool gave clear advice to consumers not to use the product before it had been repaired, and it has been in close contact with Whirlpool to agree and oversee the corrective action programme.

I note hon. Members' comments about Whirlpool's motivations and the extent to which it was moved by the threat of judicial review. It is impossible for me to comment on that speculation, but I would point out that Whirlpool had already resolved the majority of those 1.5 million cases prior to the threat of judicial review, which was later removed. As a result of Peterborough's actions, Whirlpool did not, as Members implied, sit on its hands; it commenced a programme of corrective action back in November 2015. I have covered issues about Whirlpool's customer service, so I will move on.

I want to acknowledge the remarks of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) about the manufacturing of white goods. I was sorry to hear of the manufacturing losses in his constituency, but I am pleased to report that Whirlpool tumble dryers and some of its other white goods are manufactured not abroad but in Bristol.

I will turn to the working group on product recalls and safety. I take to heart the suggestion by the hon. Member for Hammersmith that the Government should look at the safety of all electrical goods and not just tumble dryers. That brief has been given to the working group. An online hub of information on product recalls, known as "Recall Central", has been developed on gov.uk. That follows up one of Lynn Faulds Wood's recommendations, cited by the hon. Gentleman.

When I took on the product safety brief, I reviewed the remit of what was then called the recall review steering group. Like the hon. Gentleman, I considered two years far too long to wait for discernible improvements in the system. In October, I rebooted the group and established the working group on product recalls and safety to develop credible options for improving product safety and the recalls system, setting a more challenging timetable of six months. I asked the working group to focus in particular on identifying the causes of fire in white goods and the action needed to reduce that threat.

The group is better resourced than its predecessor. Officials in my Department are supporting the group and are in regular contact with the Home Office about fire prevention. The group consists of experts in the fire services, trading standards, consumer groups and industry, including Electrical Safety First. The chair, Neil Gibbins, has extensive experience of fire safety, as former deputy chief fire officer for Somerset and Devon, and a background in enforcement.

I am grateful to Neil Gibbins and members of the working group for their work. They submitted their initial recommendations in December, which were published on gov.uk. Each meeting has had its notes published on gov.uk, and hon. Members can visit that site. The group submitted its full report to me earlier this month, which might explain why I have not yet published it, in less than the six months given to it. If it had not been for the Easter recess and the calling of the general election, I would now be planning the publication of the report. The group has already commissioned the British Standards Institution to develop a code of practice on corrective actions and recalls to improve consistency and transparency.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) raised the issue of consumer behaviour and attitude, which is very important. The working group has commissioned consumer behavioural insights research, which I gather has almost concluded, to help ensure

[Margot James]

that the code of practice, and indeed the whole process of encouraging and motivating consumers to register their appliances, is taken forward in the optimum way.

I must leave time for the hon. Member for Hammersmith to wind up the debate, so I will conclude. In terms of Brexit, I would like to reassure Members that the Government have absolutely no intention of watering down consumer protection and consumer safety. The opposite may well be the case. I would also like to reassure the House generally that the Government take these issues very seriously indeed, and I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's concluding remarks.

3.59 pm

Andy Slaughter: There is only time, in half a minute, to say a profound thank you to all the Members who have taken part in this debate. I really do appreciate their support and the work they have done. I also want to say to the Minister that the issues of liability, compensation, whether the replacements and repairs are sufficient, what will happen to the unregistered machines and, above all, a robust system of registration and recall, will not go away. I hope she will continue to pursue them. I place that on record so that, whether it is her or someone else responsible, we can pursue those issues in the next Parliament. It is vital that we do so.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Learning outside the Classroom

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered learning outside the classroom.

We are considering the subject of out-of-school learning, or learning outside the classroom, as it is known on the Order Paper. I do not want to get your title wrong, Mr Paisley; are you Dr Paisley or Mr Paisley? I want to get it right.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): “Mr Paisley” is fine—you do not need to promote me.

Mr Sheerman: You always seem highly educated to me, Mr Paisley.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): Thank you. Flattery will get you everywhere.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Not that educated!

Mr Sheerman: I am being barracked: the comment “Not that educated” is coming from behind me.

I have been involved in the issue of out-of-school learning for a very long time. I had a very good run as Chair of the variously named Education Committee—it had a number of names, including the Children, Schools and Families Committee. Indeed, the Minister who will answer this short debate was a brilliant member of the Select Committee. We had great fun working together on a lively Committee.

I became somewhat obsessed with out-of-school learning, for two reasons. When one is Chair of a Select Committee of that kind, it is one's job to visit as many schools as possible, in all parts of the country and at every level. In those days, we covered topics ranging from pre-school learning and nurseries right through to further education, apprenticeships and higher education, so it was a wide-ranging brief. However, when I got to schools, particularly in the primary and secondary sectors, I found that those schools that had the ability to take children outside the classroom transformed young people's lives. All the research that has now been done on the issue shows that. A report that we did goes back 10 years. We did not have so much research evidence, but since that report came out 10 years ago from the Education Committee, we have been able to conduct research to show just how much young people are stimulated by getting outside the classroom and particularly into the countryside, and I became passionate about getting children out of the classroom and giving them an experience.

One of the wonderful things about getting a class of 30 kids out of the classroom is that we can do wonderful things for them and with them. Let me describe what all the research showed when we did our first inquiry. We have a treasury in London and in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales because we have free museums—what a wonderful treasury, what a wonderful learning experience. But tragically, when we delved into who among our

children goes to those museums, we found the following. We found that more middle-class children went to them with their parents regularly. Going to them is a wonderful experience. Now, in London and Leeds, there are all-night stays in museums. That is an incredibly innovative and fun thing to do—sleep-ins at the museum, sleeping with dinosaurs. What a wonderful experience. However, all the research showed that more ordinary kids, from more ordinary, less affluent homes, did not go to the free museums—not even the free museums.

If the people from a less privileged background did go to the free museums, they went with their school. All the research showed what we needed to do if we wanted to reach out to all the children in this country, not just the more privileged—and I do not mean 5% or 10%, but something more like 60%. A very high percentage of kids living in this country, in our towns and cities and in the countryside, do not visit those wonderful museums unless their school takes them out of school to do that. They do not do it, or certainly they do it in lesser numbers and on fewer occasions, so I became dedicated to the view that it should happen.

Then I mixed up one passion with another. I do not know whether I should be indiscreet, when we are getting close to the general election, about falling in love with someone—it might get in the popular press—but I fell in love with John Clare, the English poet. He has been dead a long time: he lived from 1793 to 1864. When I went to school, I had the privilege of having a wonderful teacher who loved John Clare and imparted some of that enthusiasm to me, and I became dedicated to John Clare and giving him a wider audience.

When John Clare was alive, he had only 100 poems in print. The special thing about John Clare is that he was not a posh vicar or a Member of the House of Lords, as many poets were. He was an ordinary working man; he was called the Northamptonshire peasant poet. He was a day labourer, a farm labourer, and his father was a farm labourer; they threshed together in the village of Helpston. However, John Clare went to a dame school and learned to read and write, and after he left school at 12, he never stopped reading and writing. He briefly became popular in the Victorian period, when rustic poetry was popular, and 100 of his poems were in print when he died.

Then, in the 1960s, a treasury of wonderful poetry by John Clare was found. We think that his mental challenge was that he was bipolar. He could have been treated easily these days, but he was bipolar. The well-wishing people who looked after him put him in the Northampton general asylum. He was there for many years—he lived until his early 70s—and we discovered in the 1960s that he had been writing and writing and writing, even better poetry than the poetry that he had already published. One thousand of his poems are now in print, and more are being published.

Then I had the strange fortune of my eldest daughter marrying an academic who happened to be a John Clare scholar, from Cambridge University. He is now senior tutor at Fitzwilliam College and he has written a book about John Clare. I do not know how this happened, but I became the chairman of the John Clare Trust; I bought John Clare's house; and we raised £3 million to turn John Clare's cottage into a centre for children to visit. It is for everyone to visit, but we have a particular campaign called Every Child's Right to the Countryside.

I have seen the work that we and other people in the same field have done transform the lives of children; their lives are transformed by going to the countryside. One does not have to love poetry, art, music or what I often called—all my daughters studied English at famous universities—arty-farty people. They do not like that, but you know what I mean, Mr Paisley. I am a social scientist, trained at the London School of Economics in economics, so I can sometimes be disparaging about some of the more literary pursuits.

However, I know that if we take a child into the countryside and use technology, innovation, science or any subject under the sun, we can transform the experience of that child in that environment. Of course, John Clare writes about the woods and hedgerows and the plants and animals of our country, many of which are now very challenged in terms of their very existence. What we found in our work, which we did in partnership with others, was that if we want our country to have a countryside and our people to love it, they must visit it. Our secret—but not very secret—mission is to get people in this country, especially new generations of young people, to come to the countryside to learn and to really find their spark. I come across so many people in this country, even my own constituents in Huddersfield, who would benefit from that. I am sure that other hon. Members feel the same.

Jim Shannon: It is always nice to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley—I think this may be the second or third time.

The hon. Gentleman raised those who wish young people to see and be involved with the countryside. I am very aware that in Northern Ireland we have underachievement by Protestant males because they are not academically inclined, but their disposition might be towards the countryside. One organisation that has enabled those people at least to achieve something from a physical point of view is the Prince's Trust. Has he had any opportunity to work with the Prince's Trust to enable people who are not academically inclined to look towards the countryside, because they might find a job and perhaps a realisation of what they could do there?

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman reminds me that we are not talking about an exclusive society of brethren. There are a lot of us, including the Scouts, the Prince's Trust and lots of other wonderful organisations. The wonderful chief executive of the National Trust came to visit John Clare's cottage in Helpston only a month ago. We need to work with the National Trust and all the organisations that can offer wonderful destinations to more and more schools. I would be wrong not to mention the Institute for Outdoor Learning, whose chief executive Andy Robinson was very helpful as soon as he heard that I had secured this debate. There are a lot of organisations out there.

All the research shows that it is good for children to come to the countryside. It shows the real improvement in academic subjects, as well as in achievement across the board, from getting children out for a day in the countryside, a museum or somewhere they can get a different perspective on their learning.

Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I absolutely share his passion for outside learning. My most vivid

[Jonathan Lord]

memories from primary school are of visits to museums and nature walks in the countryside, but I never got to visit a mosque, a synagogue or a Hindu temple. My own children are now at school. What better way to illustrate a religious education lesson about Judaism than with a visit to a synagogue? Does he encourage schools and other organisations to do that for our young people as well?

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I was going to come on to historical places. He is also right about mosques, synagogues and the diversity in our country of religious buildings in which young people can learn and can better understand the lives of other people who live not far from them.

I secured this debate because not only does all the research show that it is good for children to go out into the countryside, but it highlights a problem that still exists. More privileged children, from homes that are better off and have more money, get the chance to go to the countryside regularly, but a very substantial number of young people in this country never get that chance. Many children in our urban centres and in not so urban centres never go off their estate. That is a shame, but the research shows that it is true. There are children in Huddersfield who do not often go even into the centre of Huddersfield, let alone into the lovely, medieval Bradley wood or to the perfect hunting lodges of Henry VIII that are still around. What a wonderful habitat for them to visit if they had the opportunity!

What is the secret? I have a very good proposal for the Minister. I want him, or somebody, to give me a little bit of money—do you know, Mr Paisley, that there is a magic sum of money if you go to a school? In the old days, when we did our first inquiry—the Minister will remember this—people used to say, “No, we don’t want to go.” One of the big teaching unions said things like, “No, we’re not going to co-operate any longer”, “It’s a bit stressful for teachers”, “It’s more than our jobs are worth”, “What about health and safety?”, and all that. Our report put the lid on that. Health and safety has become not such a big issue; the forms to fill in have been made much easier and the guidance is much better.

The real secret of a school that opens itself to adventure and takes children out is having staff who want to do that and who see its value. When schools do it well, it is nearly always because they have trained one or two members of staff to be the experts who know about the subject or the organisation, who are inspired and who have the passion. That gives comfort to the school and gives focus to the challenge, so that children end up going to the right place at the right time in a safe and rewarding way. We need teachers who are trained and up to speed.

The other thing that we need to do, which is most important, is go to schools with £500 in our back pocket. We have found that that is the magic sum for getting a school much more interested in travel. The organisation goes to the school and says, “This won’t cost you anything. We’ll take 30 of your children into the countryside to have wonderful learning experiences of various types, beautifully mediated by trained teachers or mediators. We’ll take care of the travel and look after the children for the day.”

I have a wonderful challenge for the Minister and any Member who is listening to the debate. I hope that we can go back to it in the new Parliament—I hope that you, the Minister and I will all be re-elected on 8 June, Mr Paisley. I want to continue my programme of challenging every Member of Parliament to raise £5,000, which would cover 10 schools in their constituency—as long as I can persuade them to include schools that do not usually visits.

I am selling some wares in this debate, because we need children in this country to learn better. We need to find and liberate that spark, that talent and that potential in them. If we can do it through the medium of getting them out of school, we will have learned a lesson from good research and good experience. It works here and it works for other countries like ours, so we can draw conclusions from that.

My message is simple. I want more children to come to the countryside and fall in love with it. I want more children to go to museums, mosques and synagogues and learn outside the classroom. There is nothing wrong with a classroom, as long as the teachers in it are good, inspired, well qualified, well motivated and well paid. I will not go into political territory today, but we all know that it is much easier to get kids to go outside the classroom in Maidenhead than in Huddersfield. I am sure that it is very comfortable in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, but I do not represent a constituency in it. Like you, Mr Paisley, I represent a much more diverse constituency, where I look at the schools and want the children in them to have all the same advantages as children who live in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

Mr Speaker—sorry, Mr Paisley—I want several things. I want every school to dedicate itself to being open to more out-of-school visits. I want every Member of Parliament to be energised to find 10 schools right across their constituency to go into the countryside and learn. I will not be parochial. They do not necessarily have to go to the John Clare cottage, although we always like to see people in Helpston, which is a lovely place just between Peterborough and Stanford, and halfway to Huddersfield. They could come to Huddersfield to see some of our attractions; it has more listed buildings than Bath or York, as I am sure you knew, Mr Paisley.

If children want a day out, they can go to Huddersfield, to the John Clare cottage or to the Minister’s constituency. Let us inspire them. Let us get them thinking in a totally different way about the countryside, about their lives and about their potential. That is the message of my speech and my reason for trying to secure this debate for some time: it is vital that we get children out of the classroom to learn.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): It is not often that I am addressed as Mr Speaker, so I will savour today as never before.

4.19 pm

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) on securing this debate. I very much enjoyed his passionate contribution. I know how long he has championed learning outside the classroom, all the way back to his chairmanship of the Children, Schools and Families Committee. When I was

still a fledgling Member of Parliament, he showed me the ropes in the ways of Parliament and I am indebted to him for giving me an insight into how to make things happen in this place. Obviously I now have to do it through a different route as a Government Minister. Nevertheless, he gave me a sense that this place can make a difference, on this issue and on many others.

The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, because of the timing of this debate—it is the penultimate Westminster Hall debate of this Parliament—I am unable to set out anything more than the current Government policy on learning outside the classroom or to commit to any further funding or policy. Be that as it may, it is clear that learning outside the classroom has a key role to play in children's education. His most successful route to championing it during the next six weeks may be to influence his party's manifesto and to see whether his proposal can be taken forward. We are all beavering away trying to ensure we get our own ideas into the literature of our respective parties.

When outside activities are structured and organised effectively, they can provide young people with stimulating experiences that build on the knowledge and understanding they gain through the formal lessons with which most of us are familiar. It is up to individual schools and teachers to use their professional judgment to decide how learning outside the classroom meets the needs of their pupils, and to plan lessons and use their budgets accordingly. There are plenty of excellent examples of schools doing just that, which I will say a little more about later.

The national curriculum includes specific requirements for schools in relation to learning outside the classroom in certain subjects. For instance, the national curriculum programme of study for PE includes specific requirements for outdoor and adventurous activities through key stages 2 and 4. Geography is another such area, with outdoor learning through simple fieldwork and observation of key human and physical features in the surrounding environment. There are opportunities through the national curriculum for children to get outside and envelop themselves in what the environment has to offer. Under the new geography GCSEs and A-levels being taught in schools, GCSE pupils need to carry out at least two pieces of fieldwork outside the classroom—that requirement was not there before—and fieldwork is required in both A-level and AS-level content for geography.

Traditionally, science has been seen as one of the ways into learning outside the classroom. The national curriculum provides guidance that schools should use their local environment throughout the year—we are a country that has four seasons—to explore and answer questions about plants growing in their habitat, as well as to provide opportunities to support the aspect of working scientifically in the science curriculum. The guidance specifies the understanding of the nature processes and methods of science for each year group that should be embedded with the content of biology, chemistry and physics. We all remember going outside with a quadrilateral, triangle or square to try to come up with some leaf litter that was interesting. Those types of memories when people recall what they learned as a child at school are very powerful.

Jonathan Lord: Does the Minister agree that, in order to learn outside the classroom, pupils do not need to go miles and miles away? West Byfleet Junior School in my

constituency has a tiny patch of woodland in the corner of its site. It has turned it into the Willows forest school—children follow a forest school curriculum during the course of a year. It is like going into another world. The school itself is only 50 or 100 yards away, but it is a magical place where younger children can explore nature, animals, bugs and science.

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is so much opportunity out there for children if they are given the permission to experience it. Someone who lives in the countryside and is surrounded by fields of cows might learn where milk comes from, but there are also city farms—there is one just down the road in Vauxhall—as well as forest schools. When I was training for the marathon in Delamere forest near where I live, I passed a forest school for early years—two to five-year-olds—run by the Forestry Commission. There are lots of ways into the subject, but we need to give children the chance, rather than making them feel that they have to stick with the classroom for all of their learning experience.

As the hon. Member for Huddersfield said, seeing original paintings, sculptures and historical artefacts in art galleries and museums is a very different experience from seeing printed images. Attending a live concert can enhance pupils' understanding and enjoyment of music. Seeing a live performance of a Shakespeare play or—dare I say?—a recital of a John Clare poem, which the hon. Gentleman is clearly taken with, can provide pupils with different insights from studying a play or a poem on paper. We have recently updated the subject content for GCSE drama and A-level theatre studies to try to reflect that, and to ensure that students study those subjects with an entitlement to experience live theatre. I am not sure whether the House of Commons would qualify in that regard, but it is an important step forward.

A key element the hon. Gentleman raised was how disadvantaged children can get that equal opportunity of experience outside the classroom. I think back to one of the first children my family fostered. He was four or five years old and we took him on a holiday to north Wales. As we came over the brow of a hill and he saw the Irish sea for the first time, he looked at it and said, “Is that a big puddle?” He had never seen the sea before and did not know what it was. That is the challenge. Yes, we have free museums and we make sure that teachers feel equipped and confident to use learning outside as an important life-skill approach to enhancing learning, but the challenge is to ensure that no child gets left behind when we provide that opportunity.

That is why we support a museums and schools programme to deliver high-quality opportunities for all school pupils to visit museums that are linked to the national curriculum and support classroom learning. Last year, 72,870 pupils from 1,215 schools took part in that programme, including at the Barnsley Museum, the Great Yarmouth museum, SS Great Britain and many others. The £6 million for the programme since 2012 will be supplemented by a further £1.2 million over the next financial year. We are expanding the National Citizen Service for 16 and 17-year-olds.

Mr Sheerman: I hope the Minister is going to mention the critical point that I was trying to put over about having someone in the school who is trained. He and I

[Mr Sheerman]

have put up for too long with a variety of jobs—even careers—that were never done well. It was Buggins's turn simply because someone had a light timetable and could fill in and do it. We need trained people who know about the potential of out-of-school learning to lead it with passion.

Edward Timpson: I agree that it is crucial to embed that into the school, and that there should be strong leadership, not just from the headteacher but from governors, who are in a more powerful position than they have ever been to influence what makes a school outstanding.

The John Jamieson School and Technology College in Leeds, just up the road from Huddersfield, is for children aged three to 19 with a range of complex learning difficulties. Every child in that school is given access to a wide range of school activities, and provision is highly differentiated so that no child is excluded. Within that, there will be children who are on free school meals or who have more challenging backgrounds. It is those children whom we need to capture. They need to have that experience and widen their horizons so that I am not in the position I was in when I visited a school in the north side of Manchester a few years ago. When I asked one child whether he went into the town centre much, he said he had never been. He was 10 years old and the town centre is less than a mile down the road. That is still the reality and, although we are making progress, there is clearly still some work to do.

Question put and agreed to.

Upper Catchment Management

4.30 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered upper catchment management.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, for what will be the last Westminster Hall debate of this Parliament. Upland catchment management is an important subject to focus on. Many Members in the Chamber today will have experienced flooding in their constituency, as I did in York Central on Boxing day 2015. We know the devastation that came from that. In York, 453 residential homes were flooded and 174 businesses experienced flooding. There are families who are still not back in their homes and businesses that are yet to reopen, such as the Blue Bicycle restaurant on Fossgate, which is still waiting for repairs to begin. Although we celebrate places such as Jorvik, which reopened over the Easter recess with a new exhibition—I encourage all Members to visit and to send their constituents there, as well as to the Merchant Adventurers' Hall, which has also been restored—there is still so much to do. The insurance systems still are not working, and resilience is still an aspiration, not a reality. We need far tighter flood governance to support people when planning, during flooding and afterwards too.

To make a real difference, we have to look upstream at how we prevent flooding downstream. I am sure all Members present would agree that to address flooding in our country properly, the resource and focus need to switch upstream. With climate change, we know that flooding is a reality in this country, so we have to get on top of the agenda. I have been saddened that the Government have not prioritised climate change in the past couple of years in the way we would want. I know for sure that Labour will ensure we tackle the causes of flooding, as well as flooding itself. That phrase may resonate with people as a commitment, and they will see the actions that we will put behind that.

I know that instigating methods of prevention is always better than having to mop up after a disaster. That was why I was so disappointed by the Government's "National Flood Resilience Review". It talked about spending money on defences and moveable defences—it is only a little bit of money, mind, that is being put into that—without getting resource where it is needed upstream. The review also said that would not happen until the next comprehensive spending review. I am pleased to say that after the election, Labour's comprehensive spending review will address this very issue to ensure we address flooding at source.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I fully understand what the hon. Lady says, but we only have to look a few miles to the west of York, to my constituency of Calder Valley, to see what the Government have done. They have done a tremendous job in developing a full catchment plan that looks at how agencies work together, tree planting, leaky dams, grip blocking and the management of reservoirs. Does she not agree that the Government's focus, particularly since the Boxing day floods, has moved away from the bog standard, "Let's build a wall", to having an upper catchment plan, which is exactly what we have in the Calder Valley?

Rachael Maskell: I am sure we will talk about different schemes that have been put in place. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who represents my not-quite-neighbouring constituency, is here, and we will consider what has happened at Pickering. We need to ensure that all such schemes slow the flow, because that is really important in addressing these issues.

I am sure all hon. Members agree that it is important that we build evidence—the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton is nodding—about what produces the best solutions for addressing upland management, which is why it is deeply disappointing that the Government have cut the research budget. I want to talk about a specific piece of research that I am going to ask the Minister to review. The University of York has carried out research into moorland management. This extensive piece of work, which is the most comprehensive of its kind, has run for five years at a cost of £1 million to the Government. The university is asking for a further five years of research funding—£660,000—to complete that innovative research, which covers 500 different patches across a whole catchment to look at how best to manage the moorlands. The groundwork has been done, so it is nonsensical not to see it through to completion. Doing so would enable us to see the impact over 10 years, which in turn would have a real impact on constituencies such as mine.

I believe it is best for Government to look for opportunities to save spending money. If that research runs for a further five years, it will address issues such as complete management rotation and the impact of the regrowth of vegetation. We will see the impact across the whole catchment, as well as the impact of time, and what 10 years produces, as opposed to just five.

I said that £660,000 is the upper limit for that piece of research, and that £1 million was spent on the first phase. So far, the university has been able to secure £353,000 from other sources, so it needs only £307,000. The Stockholm Environment Institute will put 20% towards the research, so that figure comes down to only £246,000. I am sure the Minister will agree that spending £246,000 over five years—£49,000 a year—is better than spending £2.3 billion to mop up the disaster from floods and putting barriers in places where they will perhaps not be needed if the research is complete. This is about investment and saving money for the Treasury, which I am sure the Minister would welcome.

My shameless plea is for us to apply some common sense and to extend that unique piece of research, which will improve our climate, reduce flood risk and reduce the prospect of spending so much money downstream. I am all for trying to reduce Government spend if we can invest it in the right places. As a keen walker, I am out and about across the moors and the dales, and I have seen the way the uplands are managed. This research, which is entitled “Restoration of blanket bog vegetation for biodiversity, carbon sequestration and water regulation”, speaks to the need to use evidence to ensure we have better management.

There is more that will come from the research. It has excited academics beyond our shores, and has encouraged them to look at what we are doing. They want it to be completed, which is why we have got interest from Sweden. The Moorlands Association also said it is vital, which is why it is willing to put resource into it. Members

of the public—it is their taxes and their money—do not want to see future floods. Therefore, they want their money to be spent prudently. At £49,000 a year, we could not get a better investment in something that will be so significant.

The research has concluded that how the uplands are managed has an impact on the amount of water that comes downstream. We had a debate on grouse moor shooting and how to manage the moors in that context. If we look at burning versus mowing the heather, it brings a 10% to 20% reduction in the amount of water coming downstream, which is significant. In a place such as my city of York, we are talking about 40 cm of water, which would have greatly reduced the damage caused on Boxing day 2015. That is significant.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a good point about burning versus mowing, but does she understand that some locations on the grouse moor cannot be mowed because the terrain is not suitable for mowing? The people who manage the moors mow when they can, but other areas need burning rather than mowing.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman has a point, but the research also looks at other management of the moorlands. Some sites, for instance, are left fallow to see what the impact is and there can be absorption. The research looks not only at heathers but at the wider biodiversity that comes from the upland management. That is why a 10-year research programme is so much more significant. Measures arising from the research already conducted would bring flooding down in York by 40 cm. Looking at the regeneration of certain species over 10 years could reduce that level further. If we consider York and the 40 cm, many of the barriers now being discussed, and how high they are raised, might not need to be in place and could therefore save even more money. If we then reinvest that money into planting trees and, as in Pickering, having leaky dams upstream and other forms of water catchment, we could be talking about significantly more water not coming downstream: perhaps 45 cm or 50 cm, and each centimetre is significant. That proves the research is crucial to drive forward a programme that really addresses the issues.

Craig Whittaker: I want to challenge the 40 cm figure. If my memory serves me correctly about the research that the hon. Lady quotes, there is a line that clearly says the flow is unimpeded. As we know, in the uplands we do not have unimpeded flow, so that is an incredibly worst-case scenario if we had flat moors and the flows came straight down the hill. The evidence quoted is not evidence because it uses unimpeded flow.

Rachael Maskell: I dispute the hon. Gentleman's point because I sat down with the research scientists and looked through the evidence they produced. They say it is 40 cm, but that could increase beyond that for certain scenarios. They want to carry out a 10-year research project to make sure that the data have even more rigour than the five-year research project carried out to date. Although there are differences in the way in which the water flows, and we want other measures such as filling in the grips and so on, the evidence clearly suggests that a different form of moorland management will make a difference in the amount of water that comes downstream.

[*Rachael Maskell*]

We do not get the benefit from only the water flow. There are many other by-products. For instance, different management of the moorlands will produce greater soil resilience, which means that there would be less summer drought in the moorlands, thereby sustaining the bio-habitat over the summer and for a longer period, which is a real benefit, and we would increase the quality of the soil. We know from the debate we had on soil quality how important that is. Improving absorption is also important. On a climate issue, burning puts carbon into the atmosphere, leaving charcoal behind as a by-product as opposed to holding that in the soil.

It is also important to see this matter as part of a wider environmental strategy. I am sure the Minister will remind us that all of that will be discussed in the 25-year environment plan. To her embarrassment, I am sure, the plan was going to be produced before summer 2016, and then we were told we would get the framework before Christmas—so we cannot even use the Brexit argument now—but we are still waiting on that 25-year plan. It is a 25-year plan to write, I am convinced.

The Environmental Audit Committee has also recognised the need for more joined-up thinking about the benefits of such a framework. Bringing in issues such as how we improve planting and planting in the right place is vital in catchment management.

There is recognition that where heather is burned, we get greater germination of the seeds, which then bring heather. However, it has been shown that mowing means we get more shoots coming off the heather. For those who go out grouse shooting and support it, which I do not, mowing is better for that sport—if we can call it a sport; I probably would not. Mowing is also less labour-intensive, so it is good for those managing the moorlands.

Air quality, water quality, soil quality and biodiversity all come together here, and a 10-year study of the impact on all of them is significant. Anyone who is keen on the environment and on seeing environmental measures advanced will want to support that research, which I remind the Minister would cost only £49,000 a year. That study is required. It is long term, and it will improve our environment.

I say to the Minister, on behalf of my constituents who face the devastation, that this is about their money and their future. They have experienced real difficulties during the flooding and still are. Building evidence-based policy, which is surely what the Government want to do, by investing in a little piece of research will make a significant change. I trust that she will commit today to review that piece of research and its second phase and agree to fund the small price that it costs.

4.47 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this very important debate.

As the hon. Lady said, one of the beautiful market towns in my constituency is Pickering. It is not only a beautiful town but a gateway to one of the finest landscapes in this nation—the North York Moors, with its Wimbledon colours of green and purple. On a sunny day, we can enjoy the delights of the North York Moors

railway, chugging gently through that wonderful landscape and enjoying the beautiful “Heartbeat” country of places like Goathland.

Beautifully concealed within that landscape is the Pickering “Slowing the Flow” project. It is a pioneering project involving bunds, which are dams—some of them deliberately leaky, and some more substantial; heavy tree planting on riversides, farmland and floodplains; and small-scale ponds and swales. All those things are to slow the flow. There is also some more conventional concrete flood storage, but in my constituency it is almost like modern art; it is beautifully executed.

Pickering has a long history of flood issues, with four significant floods since 2005. One in 2007 flooded 85 homes and businesses in Pickering, causing £7 million-worth of damage. Pickering had a one-in-four chance of flooding. The deep channels of Pickering beck, which are deeper over time, meant that the water could not get away before the “Slowing the Flow” project. Other conventional schemes were considered. In 2004 a concrete scheme was brought forward that I think would have blighted the beautiful town. However, it was seen as too expensive. It would have cost £7 million in 2004, which is probably more like £15 million in today’s money, with inflation and the cost of contracts these days.

The scheme was run by the local community, in partnership with Forest Research, which is part of the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency, the North York Moors national park, academics from Durham University and Natural England. It was funded by DEFRA—prior to our excellent Minister’s tenure but very important funding nevertheless; perhaps the hon. Lady might recognise that some moneys have been committed to these kinds of projects—but also local authorities, landowners including the Duchy of Lancaster and the community itself. The project was chaired by Jeremy Walker, who has great knowledge of these issues, and it was delivered for £4 million, rather than the £10 million or £15 million it would be in today’s money. It was a completely new, pioneer scheme; I know the Minister is very keen to see these pioneer areas and pioneer schemes.

One simple question is whether it worked. The jury is still out; the scheme was completed only in 2014-15, but we saw significant rainfall in 2015. It was analysed by the Forestry Commission, the Environment Agency and the partnership to see if it actually worked. They looked at not just the rainfall but its intensity and how wet or dry the land was before the rain came. The hon. Lady pointed to the fact that many houses downstream in York were flooded on Boxing day 2015. That also happened in my constituency—in Malton particularly, but also in some smaller villages. However, Pickering did not flood, despite there being similar conditions to previous floods in 2008 and 2009. The research showed that the intensity—the peak flows—were reduced by about 15% to 20% because of those attenuation measures. The researchers are clever academics.

These are very complex schemes; they are not simple schemes to design and implement. The staging of the water flow is critical to making them work. With a high degree of certainty, it was established that that scheme worked; in fact, the comment was “better than expected.” Beck Isle, which is a small area of Pickering and one of those areas that floods every time there is a flood, saw no flooding of any properties, although the flooding

came very close to homes. The dams I talked about earlier impeded the flows, which then pushed back into the backwaters behind and forced the waters out of the banks and into those riverside areas where trees had been planted. Of course, the trees then take up the water and make it less likely to push downstream.

About 50% of the reduction in peak flows was down to natural flood management measures and about 50% was due to flood storage, so the measures have been a real success. One could say, "Okay, that's great, thank you very much. Let's move on to Cumbria or Calder Valley or some other part of the country", but I want the Minister to think of something other than that. There are additional measures that would make perfect sense at this point in time, such as gathering data, which the hon. Lady mentioned. That is one of the key things that we could do now to reinforce and multiply the effects of these measures.

The Yorkshire Derwent Partnership has been formed and, again, is chaired by the excellent Jeremy Walker, who has great knowledge of these areas. It is a catchment-wide project—2,000 sq km across that catchment. The Minister can straight away use that knowledge and experience. It has ready-to-go projects and three key things that it would like to do. It would like to gather data to see the effects of the projects, particularly when they are brought together across a catchment; the multiplier effect could be profound. There are also more measures for other communities.

Some of the beautiful places in my constituency, including Helmsley, Sinnington and Thornton Dale, which are stunning, chocolate-box villages, also suffer from these issues. Another project could be done on Thornton beck that would help Thornton Dale and across that whole catchment area. As the hon. Lady mentioned, such approaches have wider benefits. They do not just prevent flooding but create new habitats, benefit wildlife and improve water quality and management, and they still allow the public to access these beautiful areas.

The Department has allocated £15 million for slow the flow schemes in pioneer areas. I argue on behalf of the Yorkshire Derwent Partnership that the Derwent catchment is unique. It already has two sub-catchment areas with natural flood management projects that are working now. We could multiply those to see how they work, create more data and inform the debate so that such projects can be rolled out across the country where there are similar conditions.

All this can be done for only £175,000. A lot of money has been allocated, but I understand that there is about £1 million still to be allocated. The Environment Agency has the details of the Yorkshire Derwent Partnership's proposal. Of course, lots of other proposals certainly deserve consideration. I would be neglecting my duties if I did not say that we also need more conventional flood attenuation measures such as dredging—our farmers really want me to say that word—but £175,000 would make a phenomenal difference to my area and the whole catchment area, and I believe that the work would be of national significance.

4.57 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for

securing this debate on a topic in which I think most of us are interested. I heard on Radio 4 this morning that climate change is only going to get worse. I do not know how far north other hon. Members go, but my north is certainly a wee bit further than theirs. I look forward to addressing a topic that is dear to everyone's hearts.

The hon. Lady made a particularly interesting comment about the £49,000 a year that is required to fund research to help resolve a problem. By anybody's standards, that is a pitiful amount to find. If that research would help to resolve a problem, the Government should, without any doubt whatever, be able to find that money.

Rachael Maskell: If the Government make that funding commitment, other people may come on board, so that figure could go down even further than £49,000 a year.

John Mc Nally: I appreciate the hon. Lady's point. She is a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on flood prevention, which I chair, and I am always impressed by her knowledge of and passion for her area and the wider field. I commend her for everything she does. As chair of the APPG, I had plans to visit some areas, but unfortunately a general election has come along in the middle of those plans. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) painted a picture of Pickering as a place of modern art, so if we are both re-elected, I will take the opportunity to visit that area, too.

Flooding is the UK's predominant natural hazard, and a significant increase in properties at risk is projected in the years to come. As we all know, flooding is rarely good business. For small and medium-sized enterprises, it is sometimes a matter of survival. I learned that all too well as a councillor in Falkirk. When the River Carron is in spate, it is the second fastest flowing river in Scotland and, I assume, in the UK. During that time, I found myself helping people and businesses affected by flash flooding and saw first hand the disruption that was caused to traffic and the community.

Getting involved in finding a solution opened my eyes to the value of preventive measures. There is no doubt that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Mitigation measures such as weirs, widening and increasing the height of bridges, and some hard defences are all needed, and mostly they are planned under the area's flood risk management strategy. We also introduced fish ladders and a mini-hydro project, which are starting to bring additional benefits to the community. To emphasise what the hon. Member for York Central said, once one person is brought in, that seems to attract another. Groups follow, and are motivated by other people's initiatives, including the one I am describing.

As chair of the all-party group on flood prevention and a member of the EAC, I took it upon myself recently to visit various areas—Tadcaster, Leeds, Ballater, Newton Stewart and Hoy—and began to put together, to present to the Minister, the evidence about small and medium-sized enterprises and how they are affected. I understand that a lot of good work has been done in Calder Valley. The community is extremely resilient, but there is still a continuing problem for small and medium-sized enterprises. I believe that insurance brokers there formed their own insurance funding, to help to cover such enterprises that could no longer afford to insure their businesses and properties, or, indeed, the excess amounts given to them.

[*John Mc Nally*]

I have heard people identify the need for better catchment level co-ordination between the bodies responsible for flood management in England and I have had an insight, from seeing and hearing things at first hand, into the willingness of communities to take part in flood risk management; but I have also heard their frustration, and I have heard about the reluctance of the Environment Agency, local authorities and other agencies to work with those local groups.

A water body's catchment is the entire geographical area drained by that water body and its tributaries. Since the system is all connected, flood risk in a given part of the catchment area will be heavily influenced by what is happening above it in the catchment. Traditional flood management has focused on building hard defences and of course, as I have said, they are needed; but upper catchment management treats the catchment area as a single system, and it is vital to use natural flood management measures to slow the flow of water towards vulnerable areas. The approaches complement each other. Slowing the flow of water decreases pressures on hard defences and, most importantly, reduces the maintenance costs and the risk of failure of those already established flood defences.

Natural flood management has already been a lifeline for communities such as Pickering in Yorkshire that are too small for hard defences to be cost-effective. Such measures can have additional benefits, as has been said—trapping sediment and agricultural pollution and providing human amenities such as parklands and habitats for wildlife, including game.

The use of natural flood management at catchment scale is still in its infancy, and measuring the effects of a given flood management measure across something as hydrologically complex as a large catchment is difficult. I am certain that that fact is realised by those employed in the industry. There are risks as well as opportunities. As far as I know there is no conclusive evidence that natural flood management can be used at a catchment scale to reduce flood risk.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point; does he agree that while hard flood defences are important we must remember that that is only moving the problem further downstream? A number of villages in my constituency, such as Acaster Malbis and Naburn, south of York, support the flood defences in York; but ultimately those only move the water downstream and move the problem elsewhere. That is why upper catchment is so important, and it is why we must look at the whole. That has been well illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

John Mc Nally: I could not agree more. It is a great example of how water does not know anything; it just goes where it has to go and there is no doubt that we need to think about how to manage the problem.

As I have said, there is no conclusive evidence that natural flood management can be used at catchment scale to reduce flood risk; if water storage capacity is added in the wrong place it, too, can increase rather than decrease the risk of flooding, so it must be considered very carefully. That is all the more reason for proper

research and funding. There is a pressing need for research and projects—I know that there are projects under way around the country—but we must be careful that that is not used as an excuse for inaction. Natural flood management options have already been shown to be cost-effective management tools for managing localised flood risk in pilot projects such as the one carried out in Pickering, but even in the absence of catchment-scale flood risk reductions, it would make sense to identify areas where there is an opportunity to use NFM on a smaller scale, or where it might itself increase flood risk.

Catchment-level maps of natural flood management opportunities and risks are maintained in Scotland as part of the indicative flood maps provided by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. As far as I am aware, in England, opportunities for natural flood management have been mapped only for a few catchment areas in Yorkshire and Cumbria. The Environment Agency has produced detailed maps of England showing where there is potential to restore different types of wetland, but not where that might impact on flood risk, which is an important point to remember.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the mapping that the Environment Agency has carried out. It is incredibly frustrated that it cannot get on with putting the schemes in place and with getting the research to show the best mechanisms for slowing the flow. Does that not make a further point about another agency that would benefit from the research by the University of York?

John Mc Nally: Once again, I agree with the hon. Lady. At the last APPG meeting, we could hear that there is an urgency for all people to work together. One of the points emerging, every time we go to a place, is that no one seems able to take a lead. Everyone is waiting on someone else to do it. It is not a lot of money in the scale of things, and it will cost an awful lot more not to do it than to do it—so I absolutely, totally agree.

We also hear the argument that NFM might not provide protection against the most extreme rainfall events. Those arguments do not seem to take it into account that by taking pressure off hard defences downstream, NFM could decrease the risk that those defences might fail, and reduce their maintenance costs.

The cost of installing and maintaining the measures is very low compared with traditional flood defences. Most use natural materials obtained on site and are easily implemented by landowners or volunteers. If anyone takes some time to look at work that has been carried out, they would be impressed by how little it takes to make these things happen.

For example, in Stroud, Gloucestershire, the local authority designed and implemented a NFM scheme that was credited with sparing the town from flooding in March 2016. The total cost so far has been circa £215,000. Previous flooding in 2007 affected 200 properties. A reservoir built in 2011 to enhance the protection of 350 properties in Gloucester cost £1.5 million. I think that makes the point clearly.

The Government announced in the autumn statement that they will invest £15 million in natural flood management in England, yet they are evasive about its allocation. Thanks to investigations undertaken by Friends of the Earth, we know that before the announcement was made,

the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was commissioned by the EA to draw up plans for £20 million worth of NFM projects. When pressed about its allocation, the then Secretary of State would only say that the money would be used to test the methods. Given that large studies into the effectiveness of NFM are already under way, it seems to me that the Government need to give communities in flood-prone areas assurance that the money will be spent on implementing NFM, rather than on projects for consultants.

We have probably all heard of the Chinese saying that the best time to plant a tree is 25 years ago, and the second best time is today. Flood Re will run for roughly another 23 years. Either we implement a programme of action, or many of the 350,000 properties eligible for Flood Re will become uninsurable. Given the time that trees and wetlands need to become established, the implementation of upper catchment management has to be made a priority if it is to play a role in meeting that need. I urge the Minister to act urgently.

5.9 pm

Mary Glendon (North Tyneside) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who is also an extremely able former shadow Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. She has done well in securing such an important debate. Both she and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) have shown a great talent for making a pitch, which any salesman would be rightly proud of.

My hon. Friend has highlighted how the lives of families and business people in the beautiful and historical city of York have still not returned to normal after Boxing day 2015, and she made an in-depth case for the Government to support the research by the University of York to improve moorland management.

I do not want to repeat all that my hon. Friend has said, as she spoke with her usual eloquence and passion, and laid out the evidence to back up her argument very clearly; I would say the same of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton. Surely, therefore, the Minister can see that the case presented by my hon. Friend makes sense, especially as the Government have already invested £1 million to fund the first phase of the research. I am confident that the Minister can make a case to her Department and the Treasury, particularly because there are so many benefits to be had from the study, perhaps most importantly and immediately for the people of York and the businesses based in that great city.

Following their national flood resilience review, the Government said their 25-year environmental plan would introduce catchment measures to minimise flooding. That was seven months ago. Similarly, in response to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's report, "Future flood prevention", which was published last November, the Government said they supported a catchment approach, alongside engineered defences, and that such an approach would be at the heart of their 25-year plan. The Government also agreed that is important to build up more evidence to support the catchment-based approach.

Unfortunately, here we are at the end of this Parliament and we are still waiting to see the 25-year plan, which is of little comfort to those who live in areas prone to

flooding and who have to face flooding on a regular basis. I personally have never had to face flooding, but I know people whose homes have been flooded, so I know how important it is to get work done in the right way at the right time to alleviate flooding and mitigate its impact. It is of great importance.

Can the Minister say what progress has been made on the Cumbria Pioneer project, which the Government believe will be an important step in understanding the value of catchment management in larger catchment areas, as well as influencing the development of good practice and innovative solutions? Will those solutions include taking local knowledge into account, which would prove invaluable as well as helping to build the confidence of communities, who often feel that the value of their experience of flooding is not taken fully into account?

At the end of this Parliament, I hope that the Minister can give Members and the public more reassurance than has been the case hitherto, especially as the Government have failed to take forward any key recommendations from the EFRA Committee's report.

In an earlier debate, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), who unfortunately cannot be here today to respond to this debate on behalf of Labour, said that

"we need to look at the whole river catchment."

She also said that we need some quick fixes to reassure "nervous" communities, as well as investing in long-term solutions. In addition, she said:

"we need to stop talking about flood prevention. We cannot prevent flooding, but we can manage it and make our communities properly resilient."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2017; Vol. 622, c. 71.]

No one could fail to agree with that and as this is the last Westminster Hall debate of this Parliament, perhaps a good parting gesture from this Government would be for the Minister to agree to the request from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central. I am sure that the Minister will answer my suggestion favourably and I now await her response with eager anticipation.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, in what will be the last debate in Westminster Hall in this Parliament. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this debate on upper catchment management, and I thank those Members who have joined us today in what is a busy week individually and for Parliament.

I am aware of the impact that flooding can have on a community, as it has happened in my constituency of Suffolk Coastal. I am absolutely committed to reducing the threat of flooding, as well as ensuring that we continue to improve our environment as a whole. The Government have played a key role in improving protection for those at flood risk. By committing to invest £2.5 billion by 2021, we will better protect the country from flooding. That money will go to more than 1,500 flood defence schemes to protect more than 300,000 homes. We will also increase maintenance spending in real terms to more than £1 billion.

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

The key change from which local communities have benefited is that we set out a six-year funded plan that will help the Environment Agency to efficiently and properly draw up schemes, rather than having the hand-to-mouth existence caused by annual budgets, which lend themselves to a stop-start approach. York, like many other places, suffered greatly in the 2015-16 floods, which as we all know were somewhat caused by record rainfall that winter. The hon. Lady will be aware that 627 properties were flooded in York alone. The Government made an additional £175 million available to support the worst-affected areas.

York itself received £45 million of that, which will better protect 2,000 properties with ongoing schemes. A further £35 million each is going to Leeds and the Calder valley. Cumbria received £33 million. The York five-year plan, which was published last December, sets out how the investment will build new defences and investigate new ways to reduce flooding in the city and surrounding area, giving priority to areas of the city that currently do not benefit from formal defences. The hon. Lady will be aware of the further £19.4 million being invested to upgrade the Foss barrier. By December 2017, construction will be complete and the barrier will be able to pump flood flows in excess of the record level experienced on Boxing day, thus protecting the heart of York.

Beyond the current plan for the city, and understandably after the general election, the Environment Agency will consult with stakeholders on the first stage of the York long-term plan, which will identify catchment measures to reduce flood risk in the city. Integrated catchment management is integral to our ambitions for the future of our environment, and we remain committed to holistic planning for our water to maximise benefits to people, wildlife and the economy. There is a consensus around the importance of conserving upland moorland habitats for all the benefits they bring, which include: the filtering of an estimated 70% of our drinking water, storing significant amounts of carbon and providing an excellent habitat for grouse and other wildlife.

The hon. Lady referred to the York University study. She will be aware that DEFRA has invested nearly £1 million in that research already, but following a rigorous prioritisation process, the Department will not be funding a second stage of the project. She will be aware that the learnings of the report will be out later this year, and there may be an opportunity to take lessons from that, but nevertheless, peatland restoration continues to be a priority. As announced earlier this month, DEFRA will be investing £10 million into peatland restoration projects over the next five years, recognising their importance.

Rachael Maskell: I have sat down with the academics on this research. Given that the Government have already invested £1 million in the first part of the research and that to complete this groundbreaking research comes at a very small cost of £49,000 a year—as compared with the huge figure of £2.5 billion that the Minister has talked about—surely that investment is worth making. I ask her to go and look at that decision again, for the sake of having a really solid evidence base for policy making.

Dr Coffey: As it stands today, I will not be looking at the matter again. I can assure the hon. Lady that the decision went through a rigorous process within the

Department, and the decision was made by appropriately qualified officials. She will recognise that we will continue to invest in peatlands and continue to work on moor owners and stakeholders to further improve practices and conditions.

Catchment management is not restricted to the uplands. Enabling whole catchment management requires bringing together local government, internal drainage boards, landowners, third-sector organisations and communities to identify the issues and solutions that provide the maximum opportunities to manage and mitigate water in that catchment to the benefit of residents, businesses and wildlife. We are proactive in supporting local decision makers in catchments to ensure a co-ordinated approach in a catchment, including for water quality, supply and flood management. We intend to strengthen focus on integrated catchment level planning as we prepare for the next cycles of river basin and flood risk management planning. There are already very good examples of partners coming together to consider whole catchment management, some of which we have heard about today, including the work of the flood action groups and the catchment partnerships around the country, which encourage all those who use and depend on water to share in its stewardship.

The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glendon) asked about catchment partnerships. Last month, we announced a £6.3 million investment this year to continue to facilitate and build capacity in catchment partnerships and to fund projects focused on meeting local priorities, building partnership working and securing multiple benefits, consistent with integrated water management.

Actions under the Cumbria and Calderdale flood action plans, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) referred—I visited him in Mytholmroyd to see some of the progress on them—and which were published last year, include an integrated approach to managing catchment areas. Both areas are now considering how those flood plans can be incorporated into a wider catchment-based approach that considers not just flooding, but water quality, supply and environmental improvements. Of course, we must recognise that each catchment is different, so the solutions will be tailored to each area. We need to encourage more areas to take similar approaches. The Pioneer project we have started in Cumbria will explore that approach, and its learnings will be shared with others, but it is still too early to share any of those learnings.

Natural flood management can play an important role in the management of our catchments, and can have multiple benefits in encouraging biodiversity, habitat creation and improvements to water quality. In York and Yorkshire, the Environment Agency has already worked with consultants to model what and where NFM measures could be introduced into the Foss catchment upstream of York, and in Cumbria the Environment Agency has worked with the Rivers Trust and JBA to model potential natural flood management schemes across four catchments.

Between 2009 and 2015, we invested £4.1 million at Pickering in North Yorkshire—my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) has already referred to that. We also invested money in Holnicote in Somerset and Upper Derwent in Derbyshire. Those projects found that the measures could be effective in helping to manage flood risk when carefully incorporated into a wider suite of catchment measures.

The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) asked about the natural flood management projects. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently announced £15 million of funding for projects across England, £1 million of which has been ring-fenced as a competitive fund for local organisations to bid for. I ensured we set out that £1 million, as it was requested by some members of the National Flood Forum, who wanted the opportunity to have a much wider range of smaller-scale projects. I have also agreed that business cases should be developed for a number of projects across the country, including in Yorkshire and Cumbria, but I cannot give further details of the locations due to purdah. I note the pitch of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton for a Yorkshire and Derwent partnership. I am sure that will be carefully considered, as there is a small amount of money—I am not sure there is £175,000 left, but we will see.

I established the principles and chose the business cases we wanted to progress because I felt that we need schemes of different sizes that can be achieved at a good pace, so that we can gather evidence and take forward the learnings about the benefits of natural flood management in different catchment landscapes. I specifically ruled out some projects that would not be able to start for a few years' time. We want natural flood management solutions to be fairly assessed and supported where they offer a viable way of reducing the damaging impact of flooding. However, we cannot expect that such measures alone will offer protection in areas of the greatest risk or in the face of the most significant flood events, so good integrated catchment management will consider those, along with more traditional flood protection schemes, as the Environment Agency already does in its capital programme.

The need to gather more data and evidence has been mentioned. The Oxford Martin School recently published a restatement of evidence, which looked at previous research and reviewed findings. It reached the conclusion that NFM can provide support in up to 100 sq km of smaller floods, but more research is needed into the impact on larger floods. The Natural Environment Research Council has provided £4 million of further research for natural flood management, and the Environment Agency and DEFRA are developing a directory of evidence and maps to support future projects.

The hon. Member for York Central invited me to visit York. I am certain that I will take her up on that offer in the next six weeks or will certainly be in Yorkshire. This is an important issue, and I am proud that it is our Government who have invested those funds, which will better protect more than 2,000 properties. I will be making clear which particular Government provided that.

Kevin Hollinrake: When the Minister visits Yorkshire, will she also take the opportunity to come to the jewel in the crown of North Yorkshire—the North York Moors and Pickering—to look at the scheme there and what further measures we might put in place to finish the job?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend tempts me. I know that his part of Yorkshire is one of the most beautiful parts of our wonderful British Isles. However, I am sure he recognises that I will have to prioritise my time in the next few weeks. If I am lucky enough to be re-elected to

this House and reappointed to this role, I am sure that at some point I will be able to do that. I thought he had already grabbed my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to visit at some point; he cannot be too greedy.

This has been a very useful opportunity to discuss the benefits of upper catchment management. I am confident that the House agrees that by working closely together across catchments we can make significant improvements. The Government have said that we want to be the first to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. Strong local integrated catchment management can be a way to help to achieve that ambition.

5.26 pm

Rachael Maskell: It is a shame that that ambition will not be met, by the early calling of the general election. Clearly we want to ensure that there is a strong evidence base. The Minister talks about eye-watering sums. To say that we should not go ahead and build a strong evidence base to ensure that money is spent wisely is something I find deeply concerning, especially as she did not state the criteria she was looking at.

The world outside is saying that this research is so groundbreaking that they want to see it continue. That is why we have even seen organisations such as the Moorland Association committing £100,000 to the research. The cost of the research has been reduced. In the light of that reduced cost to the Minister's Department, I want to know whether she would reconsider the opportunity to build a sound evidence base through a unique piece of research on catchment management, including biodiversity and soil, water and air quality. It could make such a significant difference for such a small spend.

I cannot comprehend not doing so, and nor will my constituents. I have to say that I did not invite the Minister to my constituency. I do not believe she would be very welcome there, because she is not putting funding into an issue that has turned out to be catastrophic for them. I know from meeting my constituents that they really want this research to go ahead.

Rather than being so stubborn, why does the Minister not go back and look at the research? She did not talk about the detail of the research, so I am not even convinced that she has read it. *[Interruption.]* Well, it does not seem, from her gestures, that she has looked at the detail of the research, which is negligent on her part. The research is powerful and says how important it is that we carry out this work. Given what flooding has cost my constituents personally, let alone financially, doing a bit of research to build an evidence base for policy making will make a difference.

When we are talking about looking to the future and building a sound evidence base, this academic research—*[Interruption.]* I am trying to concentrate on what I am saying, but the Minister seems to want to mutter her way through my concluding remarks. The reality is that we need to ensure investment is put into building a strong evidence base.

Dr Coffey: We have invested.

Rachael Maskell: The Minister says that the Government have invested, but the academics—who, with respect, know their field—are saying that this research is absolutely

[Rachael Maskell]

crucial. They are world leaders in their work. It is crucial that we listen to the experts and ensure that we see this research through to a conclusion.

Public money to the tune of £1 million has been spent on the first phase of the research. To not see it through to the final phases is, some could say, a waste of public money. I ask the Minister once more to take back to her Department the request to look again at funding this

research at a reduced sum, due to the generous contributions of other institutions, including the Stockholm Environment Institute, which see how crucial the research is for addressing flooding in our nation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered upper catchment management.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 26 April 2017

EDUCATION

Higher Education and Research Bill: EVEL Analysis

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): I am pleased to announce the publication of the Government's analysis of English votes for English laws in relation to amendments made to the Higher Education and Research Bill in 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 they will provide information to assist the Speaker in considering whether to certify a 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 also provides an assessment of Government amendments tabled in lieu of Lords amendments, for the purposes of English votes for English laws. The Department's assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill.

This analysis reflects the position should all the Government amendments be accepted.

The memorandum can be found on the Bill documents page of the Parliament website at: <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/highereducationandresearch.html> and I have deposited a copy in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS616]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Syria: Provision of Equipment

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The situation in Syria remains extremely fragile. An estimated 400,000 people have been killed since the war began six years ago, many of them innocent civilians. The Assad regime continues to use the most barbaric military methods and tactics available, including the use of indiscriminate artillery fire, chemical weapons and barrel bombs. The UK remains committed to doing all it can to promote a political settlement to end the conflict, to alleviate the humanitarian suffering, and to protect UK national security through countering terrorist and extremist threats.

In November 2015, my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), issued written statements setting out our plans to give equipment and training to groups selected from the moderate armed opposition's (MAO) southern front, creating a border force and casualty evacuation capability in opposition-controlled areas of

southern Syria. The Southern Front border force (SF-BFOR) working together with other MAO groups and in co-ordination with the Jordanian authorities, has interdicted Jordanian citizens illegally entering Syria. They have also stopped smugglers carrying money, weapons and narcotics from Syria to Jordan, and Daesh fighters attempting to carry weapons, explosives and money in and out of the besieged area of the Yarmouk basin. The Southern Front casualty evacuation capability (CASEVAC) is designed to provide vital medical support to the MAO and has, to date, established and equipped three medical teams with a command and control element attached to each. Primarily designed to support MAO fighters, they have provided treatment to over 100 injured MAO personnel in recent fighting in Dera'a city. These teams have also provided treatment to civilians wounded in the fighting often working alongside the Syrian Civil Defence. Other international donors have contributed to both initiatives.

The UK intends to continue its support to these programmes by providing targeted operational equipment—for patrolling and observation, and for provision of medical care to wounded fighters—as well as building the command and control capacity. We will give £3,438,338.54 in equipment to SF-BFOR and £2,779,970.30 in equipment to the CASEVAC medical units. For SF-BFOR the list of equipment includes vehicles; day/night observation aids; communications equipment; metal and line detecting equipment to find and avoid improvised explosive devices; uniforms; and combined load carrying/protective vests. The list of equipment for the CASEVAC medical units includes vehicles; communications equipment; medical treatment equipment; uniforms; and load-carrying/protective vests. We expect to spend a total of £10 million this financial year on both programmes of support.

The use of these funds to cover the costs of the programme has been approved by the Syria conflict, stability and security fund (CSSF) board, the middle east and north Africa CSSF regional board and operations committee. The equipment has been scrutinised to ensure that the provision of this equipment is consistent with export controls and complies with our international obligations. Recipients have been carefully selected and vetted to prevent equipment being given to those involved in extremist activities or human rights abuses. All equipment transfers are approved by HMG immediately before delivery. All our assistance is carefully calibrated and legal, is aimed at alleviating human suffering and supporting moderate groups and is regularly monitored and evaluated. We monitor the situation on the ground carefully.

[HCWS617]

Syria: Provision of Equipment

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The situation in Syria remains extremely fragile. An estimated 400,000 people have been killed since the war began six years ago, many of them innocent civilians. The Assad regime continues to use the most barbaric military methods and tactics available, including the use of indiscriminate artillery fire, chemical weapons and barrel bombs. The UK remains committed to doing all it can to promote a political settlement to end the conflict, to alleviate the humanitarian suffering, and to protect UK national security through countering terrorist and extremist threats.

In June 2016, my predecessor, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond), issued written statements setting out our plans to give equipment to Syria Civil Defence and the Free Syrian Police teams operating in opposition-controlled areas of Syria. The UK subsequently distributed the equipment to both teams along with comprehensive training packages. Syria Civil Defence teams have now saved over 70,000 lives by rescuing civilians trapped in damaged buildings, fighting fires and providing emergency first aid. The Free Syrian Police continues its valuable work to prevent looting and to support the distribution of humanitarian aid. Other international donors have contributed to both initiatives.

The UK intends to continue its support to these programmes by increasing their communications capability and mobility of the teams, providing more targeted operational equipment—whether for search and rescue, or tracing explosives—as well as building up the capacity of these organisations to deliver on the ground. We intend to give £2 million in equipment to Syria Civil Defence and £4 million in equipment to the Free Syrian Police. For Syria Civil Defence, the list of equipment includes cutting and rescue tools; personal protective gear including helmets; uniforms; communications equipment; medical supplies; equipment for the disposal of unexploded ordnance; office supplies; vehicles; and fire-fighting equipment. For the Free Syrian Police, the list of equipment includes vehicles; communications kit; traffic signs and cones; uniforms; and generators. We expect to spend £19 million this financial year on both programmes of support.

The use of these funds to cover the costs of the equipment has been approved by members of the middle east and north Africa conflict, stability and security fund (CSSF) regional board. The list of equipment has been scrutinised to ensure that the provision of this equipment is consistent with export controls and complies with our international obligations. Recipients have been carefully selected to prevent equipment being given to those involved in extremist activities or human rights abuses. All equipment transfers are approved by HMG immediately before delivery. All our assistance is carefully calibrated and legal, is aimed at alleviating human suffering and supporting moderate groups and is regularly monitored and evaluated. We monitor the situation on the ground carefully.

[HCWS618]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): In 2016, the UK granted asylum or another form of leave to over 8,000 children. By the end of 2016, the UK had resettled more than 5,000 people under the Syrian vulnerable persons' resettlement scheme and the vulnerable children's resettlement scheme, as part of our commitment to taking 23,000 people by 2020. Our resettlement schemes allow children to be resettled with their family members, thereby discouraging them from making perilous journeys to Europe alone. In 2016, we transferred over 900 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from within Europe to the UK, including more

than 750 from France as part of the UK's comprehensive support for the Calais camp clearance. And over 200 children have already arrived in the UK under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016. The UK has pledged over £2.3 billion in aid in response to the events in Syria and the region—our largest ever humanitarian response to a single crisis. Within Europe, the UK has also established a £10 million refugee children's fund to support the needs of vulnerable refugee and migrant children arriving in Europe. The fund includes targeted support to meet the specific needs of unaccompanied and separated children.

In my written statement of 8 February 2017 I announced that, following consultation with local authorities, the Government would transfer the specified number of 350 unaccompanied children from Europe to the UK under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016.

The Government have very recently become aware that, due to an administrative error as part of collating the figures, one region pledged 130 places which were not accounted for in setting the specified number. As part of the consultation local authorities were asked to let their strategic migration partnerships know how many places they could offer, and then the strategic migration partnerships provided the regional number to the Home Office. The Home Office continued to work with the strategic migration partnerships throughout the consultation process, and believed that two regions in England had not provided responses after the consultation closed. Both of these regions had already stepped up to take a number of children from over-burdened councils elsewhere in the country so it was assumed they would continue to support the national transfer scheme as and when they could, but were not able to provide specific numbers which the Home Office could then allocate to section 67 cases. The Home Office recently discovered that one of the regions had sent a return and we are now including their pledges in the specified number for the purposes of section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016.

In order to ensure the specified number of children to be transferred is a true reflection of the responses to that consultation, I am today announcing that, in accordance with section 67 of the Immigration Act, the Government are increasing the specified number from 350 to 480. As outlined in my original statement, the specified number includes over 200 children already transferred from France as part of the Calais camp clearance. It does not include children transferred to the UK pursuant to the family reunion criteria of the Dublin III regulation.

The Government remain fully committed to the implementation of our commitment under section 67 to transfer unaccompanied children to the UK from Europe and no eligible child has been refused transfer to the UK as a result of this error. The Home Secretary has written to her counterparts in France, Greece and Italy and we are working closely with member states, as well as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and NGO partners so we can identify and transfer children to the UK as soon as possible. Home Office officials have met with their counterparts in each of the countries in the past few weeks to plan future transfers. We have secondees in Greece and Italy working on transfers of unaccompanied children to the UK

under both the Dublin III regulation and section 67 and we published the criteria for future transfers on 10 March.

Over the coming months, the Government will continue to work with EU member states and partners to implement section 67.

[HCWS619]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 26 April 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	1099	WALES—continued	
Engagements	1100	Hendry Review	1098
West Midlands: Economy and Public Services	1099	Industrial Strategy	1096
		Industrial Strategy	1098
WALES	1089	Leaving the EU: Effect on Wales	1089
Great Repeal Bill	1093	Leaving the EU: Effect on Wales	1091

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 26 April 2017

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	63WS	FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE—	
Higher Education and Research Bill: EVEL		<i>continued</i>	
Analysis	63WS	Syria: Provision of Equipment	64WS
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE	63WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	65WS
Syria: Provision of Equipment	63WS	Immigration	65WS

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Wednesday 3 May 2017**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 26 April 2017

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1089] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Construction Industry (Protection of Cash Retentions) [Col. 1118]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Alan Brown)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Digital Economy Bill [Col. 1121]

Lords amendments considered

Criminal Finances Bill [Col. 1149]

Lords amendments considered

Higher Education and Research Bill [Col. 1158]

Lords amendments considered

Petitions [Col. 1185]

Diesel Fumes: Islwyn [Col. 1188]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

School Funding: North-east of England [Col. 503WH]

Colne to Skipton Railway [Col. 528WH]

Whirlpool: Product Safety System [Col. 537WH]

Learning outside the Classroom [Col. 562WH]

Upper Catchment Management [Col. 570WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 63WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
