

**Tuesday  
18 July 2017**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Tuesday 18 July 2017**

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# House of Commons

Tuesday 18 July 2017

*The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

### MIDDLE LEVEL BILL

*Motion made,*

That the promoters of the Middle Level Bill, which originated in this House in the previous Session on 24 January 2017, may have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—  
(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*To be considered on Tuesday 5 September.*

### RICHMOND BURGAGE PASTURES BILL [*Lords*]

*Lords message (11 July) relating to the Bill considered. Resolved,*

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—  
(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

### UNIVERSITY OF LONDON BILL [*Lords*]

*Lords message (11 July) relating to the Bill considered. Resolved,*

That this House concurs with the Lords in their Resolution.—  
(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

### MOUNCHER INVESTIGATION REPORT

*Resolved,*

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Paper, entitled Moucher Investigation Report, dated 18 July 2017.—(*Graham Stuart.*)

## Oral Answers to Questions

### TREASURY

*The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—*

#### **Wages**

1. **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What fiscal steps he is taking to help increase the average level of wages paid by employers. [900546]

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** The key thing that we can do to increase productivity is to ensure that we invest in education and improve skills. We have more people going to university and doing apprenticeships, and we are investing in our rail and roads.

**Martyn Day:** Unlike the Scottish Government, the UK Government voted for the public sector pay cut. Moreover, this Government's so-called national living wage is not based on the cost of living. What new measures will this Government bring in to provide people with a wage that they can live on?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We have made sure that basic rate taxpayers are paying £1,000 less tax by raising the personal allowance. We are also introducing the national living wage, bringing in a £1,400 rise in take-home pay for the lowest earners.

**Mr Mark Harper** (Forest of Dean) (Con): The important thing for ensuring that people get a wage from an employer is to make sure that they have a job. Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury welcome the record fall in unemployment to a 42-year low, particularly among young people, which is giving them much better opportunities in Britain than those available in most other European Union countries?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My right hon. Friend is right. We now have the lowest levels of unemployment since 1975, thanks to the economic policies pursued by this Government to improve skills and infrastructure, and to take sensible decisions on public sector pay.

**Laura Pidcock** (North West Durham) (Lab): As has been clearly demonstrated, the Government are celebrating falling unemployment without any critical analysis of the nature of the employment being created. Many residents of North West Durham are in work that exacerbates their financial difficulties because their pay is low, their terms and conditions are poor, and they do not have regular hours. Will the Minister update the House on the number of people who are currently working on zero-hours contracts? Will she also accept that looking at employment figures in a vacuum does nothing to help us to understand whether people are any more secure or any better off?

**Elizabeth Truss:** Fewer than 3% of people are on zero-hours contracts and, as Matthew Taylor recognised, many people want that flexibility so that they can combine their work with the other things in their lives. We need to ensure that people have the skills to get better jobs in the future, and that is exactly what this Government are investing in.

**Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary to the Treasury join me in welcoming the fact that 75% of the 2.8 million jobs created since 2010 are full-time jobs, and that zero-hours contracts account for just 3% of all jobs?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Is it not amazing that not one Labour Member has welcomed the fact that we have the lowest unemployment since 1975, or that we have lower youth unemployment? In fact, the Opposition model their policies on countries such as Greece, which has exceptionally high youth unemployment, and they take for granted the progress that we have made over the past seven years.

**John McDonnell** (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): First, let me welcome any increase in jobs in our society, but when it comes to commenting on wages, does not the Chief Secretary to the Treasury agree that it ill becomes a multi-millionaire earning £145,000 a year, admittedly in a temporary job, and living in two grace-and-favour properties at the taxpayer's expense to attack public sector workers—our hospital cleaners, nurses, teachers and firefighters—as being “overpaid”? Public sector

workers' pay has fallen on average by £4,000 in the first six years of this Government. One in five NHS staff are forced to take a second job, and teachers are facing a further cut to their salaries of £3,000 by 2020. Does she not think that the Chancellor should just do the right thing and apologise?

**Elizabeth Truss:** Yet again, the right hon. Gentleman is not giving the House the full picture of what is happening with public sector wages. Last year, teachers' pay went up by 3.3%. More than half of nurses and other NHS workers saw a pay rise of over 3%, and the armed services saw a pay rise of 2.4%. The cleaner he talked about was employed not by the public sector but by Serco. The right hon. Gentleman needs to get his facts right.

**John McDonnell:** That is true—the Government privatised the jobs.

I note that the Chief Secretary did not dispute the fact that the Chancellor said that staff were overpaid. The Chancellor tried to justify his attack on public sector workers by trying the classic divide and rule between public and private sector workers, citing public sector pensions. Is the Chief Secretary aware that those supposedly generous pensions across several professions pay on average the princely sum of just £5,000 a year, and that low pay has forced many public sector workers to opt out of their pension scheme? Eleven per cent. of those in the NHS have opted out; if that figure continues to rise, the whole scheme could be undermined. Will the Chief Secretary recognise the damage that the Chancellor is causing and lift the pay cap so that public sector staff can have some hope of a fair wage settlement—and, yes, a decent future pension?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The right hon. Gentleman still has not acknowledged the truth of the figures that I cited—the 3% pay rise for over half of nurses and the 3.3% rise for teachers. He simply will not look at the facts. The reality is that public sector workers are, rightly, paid in line with the private sector to allow the public and private sectors to flourish so that we can create wealth in this country. In addition, public sector workers have a 10% premium on their wages in pension contributions, and that is in the Office for Budget Responsibility report.

### National Debt

2. **James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the national debt. [900547]

6. **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): What progress is being made on reducing the national debt. [900551]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** Debt has climbed steadily since 2009 as a result of the high levels of deficit. Since 2010, we have reduced the deficit by three quarters, so national debt will now peak at just under 90% of GDP this year. As the OBR's "Fiscal risks report" of last week makes clear, that level of debt—a legacy of Labour's recession—leaves us vulnerable to future shocks, which is why the Government have committed to eliminating the deficit and reducing the level of debt as a share of GDP. As a result of the actions taken to bring the public finances back under

control, the OBR now forecasts that debt will start falling next year and will be below 80% of GDP by 2021-22.

**James Cartlidge:** Those figures are welcome, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that were the Government to pursue a policy of wiping all outstanding student debt, that would cost in excess of £100 billion and cause the national debt to surge? Will he also confirm that the biggest beneficiaries by far would be the top-earning graduates in the country?

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He might have added that were anyone to suggest that they were able to do that, they could be accused of practising a deception on the people to whom they were offering that proposal. The cruelty of that would become apparent when it would have to be admitted that the proposal could not possibly be delivered. We face a debt challenge in this country, and we cannot borrow our way out of debt. The Opposition would do well to acknowledge that. Stronger growth and sound public finances are the only sustainable way to deliver better financial services, higher real wages and increased living standards.

**Michelle Donelan:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that last week's OBR study shows that the debt level is 89% of GDP, highlighting that we must continue to be responsible with the public finances to weather any future uncertainty and to ensure that the Wiltshire economy continues to thrive?

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend is right to express concern about the vulnerability created by the high level of debt. As the OBR made clear last week, that debt means that if the economy were to face an external shock, we would not be in a position to respond in the way that we would ideally like. That is why we have to get debt down, and the only way to get debt down is to get the deficit down. That means responsible fiscal policy, not the kind of rubbish we hear from Labour Front Benchers.

**Mr Chris Leslie** (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Was it not clear from the OBR report last week that it is a hard Brexit that presents the biggest threat to our national finances? Just a 0.1% decrease in productivity could lead, over 50 years, to a 50% increase in the ratio of debt to GDP. If the reports are true that the Chancellor is prepared to champion a longer transition from the single market for the UK, such welcome news might secure a lot of support on both sides of the House.

**Mr Hammond:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution. On an issue as important to our nation's future as our exit from the European Union, I welcome any opportunity to build consensus across the House and the nation. He is right to draw attention to what the OBR said. Even a very small decline in our productivity performance would add huge amounts to the debt and would reduce, by significant amounts, our projected growth in GDP. That is why it is so important that we now act responsibly in maintaining fiscal discipline and ensuring that we reduce our debt over time.

**Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): How is the Chancellor's consensus building around the Cabinet table going? Will he update the House on his assessment of the trade

deals that will be done after we leave the single market? He knows that Brexit is going to cause a fiscal shock. Is it true that he has challenged the Secretary of State for International Trade to disprove Treasury calculations that show there is no trade deal we can do after leaving the European Union that will make up for the huge loss of trade that Brexit will create?

**Mr Hammond:** The hon. Lady is assuming that we will lose trade with the European Union. It is clear to me that, all other things being equal, the ability to enter bilateral trade deals with third countries will be a positive for our economy. Of course, we also want to protect our trade with the European Union. My focus is on ensuring that we get a Brexit deal that protects our existing patterns of trade and commercial engagement with the European Union, as well as, over time, allowing us to explore new opportunities beyond the European Union.

**Rishi Sunak** (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): The Chancellor will be aware that the current cost of Government borrowing is at a historical low, with gilt yields at 1%. Does he agree that, if markets lose confidence in our ability to live within our means, the cost of that borrowing would spiral, costing us billions of pounds? That would mean less to spend on our public services.

**Mr Hammond:** My hon. Friend is right to warn of the danger of a loss of market confidence in UK fiscal policy—I am looking very hard at the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). If markets lose confidence in UK fiscal policy, they will re-price lending to the United Kingdom. We already spend more every year on servicing our debt than on our armed forces and police services together. It would do a huge disservice to taxpayers in this country if we created conditions that would cause the cost of that debt to rise.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): An enfeebled Chancellor has been forced to give a £1 billion bung to the Democratic Unionist party, to cough up £1.3 billion for a schools funding U-turn, to scurry around to find £2 billion to pay for his humiliating national insurance contributions debacle and to bail out his nightmare neighbour's social care retreat with £2 billion. Why should this House believe a word, a promise, a claim or a target on reducing the debt?

**Mr Hammond:** I was glad to see the hon. Gentleman smiling by the end of that little rant. I do not know which planet he lives on, but I do not feel particularly enfeebled. I do not know what the Labour Treasury team does all day, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education made it clear in her statement yesterday that she has put extra money into the frontline schools budget by reprioritising the wider education budget and finding efficiencies across her Department. That is the way to do a fiscally prudent protection of our public services.

**Peter Dowd:** Yes, the Government have taken it off some children and given it to others.

The national debt has risen by £707 billion since 2010 and is rising. It is barely a year since the Chancellor was given the keys to No. 11, and in that time public sector net debt has not been reduced. According to the Office for National Statistics and the OBR, it has increased by

£122 billion. Given that lamentable record, has he been given notice of eviction by the woman in the bunker next door? Perhaps they may leave Downing Street in the same removal van.

**Mr Hammond:** The hon. Gentleman will know—I say that, but perhaps he will not—that public sector net debt will continue to grow until the deficit is eliminated. That is a simple arithmetic fact. His Government pushed our deficit up to almost 10% of GDP, and we have spent the past seven years getting it down to 2.4% of GDP. We will carry on getting the deficit down so that this country's public finances get back into balance. We are a responsible Government, planning for Britain's future.

### Infrastructure: Private Sector Investment

3. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to incentivise private sector investment infrastructure projects in the nations and regions. [900548]

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones):** This Government are committed to supporting private investment, which finances about half our infrastructure. We have a trusted and stable regulatory system, and through the UK guarantees scheme we have supported projects worth more than £4 billion. We are also introducing innovative support such as the digital infrastructure investment fund, which will accelerate the roll-out of the ultrafast network.

**Ian C. Lucas:** The north Wales Mersey Dee region hosts world-beating businesses such as Kellogg's, Airbus and JCB, but we need competitive infrastructure in order to ensure that we remain competitive. For that reason, and in the absence of the public sector investment we are crying out for, may we please have the ability to deliver private sector investment? What are the Government going to do to deliver roads and rail?

**Andrew Jones:** I simply do not recognise what the hon. Gentleman says; investment in our infrastructure is at a record high. We are seeing investment in roads, rail and south-east air capacity—in all modes of transport. The point is how we deliver that investment, and it is a combination of public and private. He is clearly right to champion the requirement for infrastructure in his area and to highlight its impact on the economy, but to say we are not doing anything is just factually wrong.

**Robert Neill** (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): One disincentive for the private sector to invest in infrastructure is the delay that sometimes occurs in bringing major projects through to completion and commencement. The private sector is already committed to making a significant contribution to the funding package for Crossrail, but we have been waiting since March for a decision to take it forward. Will the Minister do all he can, across government, to speed up that regional and national infrastructure project?

**Andrew Jones:** I see significant merits in Crossrail 2, just as I see them in northern powerhouse rail and projects right across our country. I will of course take on board my hon. Friend's point and relay it to the Transport Secretary.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Private investment thrives on stability, but we have a Cabinet in a state of anarchy when it comes to the terms of our exit from the European Union. Do the Government agree with Labour Members that an early announcement on transitional arrangements is therefore essential? If the Minister does agree with that, will he tell us the Government's position on the latest date such arrangements could be announced—or are we more likely to see a transitional Chancellor than a transitional deal?

**Andrew Jones:** I am not going to speculate on the negotiations, as that would be way above my pay grade. I just refer the hon. Gentleman to the Chancellor's answer a moment ago on the merits of a Brexit deal that secures our economic future.

### Infrastructure: Government Investment

4. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of Government investment in infrastructure since 2010. [900549]

7. **Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effect of Government investment in infrastructure since 2010. [900552]

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones):** Infrastructure is at the heart of this Government's economic strategy, and our investments will boost productivity and growth. Since 2010, more than a quarter of a trillion pounds has been invested by the public and private sectors, about 3,000 individual projects have been completed, we have almost completed Crossrail, and more than 4 million homes accessed superfast broadband for the first time.

**Vicky Ford:** Nearly 100 years ago, the world's first radio broadcast was sent out from Britain—from Chelmsford. Does my hon. Friend agree that the digital infrastructure investment fund will give a massive boost to fibre and superfast broadband so that the UK can continue to lead the world in the digital and communications sectors?

**Andrew Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I have just learned something about Chelmsford and its history in the development of our digital and radio infrastructure. The investment will boost Britain's internet, making it more reliable and consistent and easier for people to live and work more flexibly, which will of course boost productivity right across the UK. Fibre is the technology of the future, just as radio was 100 years ago, and this fund will significantly assist small and medium-sized enterprises with capital to roll it out, with both Chelmsford and the UK benefiting.

**Mims Davies:** Investment and infrastructure projects are absolutely key to keeping our nation moving. As the Minister knows, Chickenhall link road and Botley bypass in my constituency were helped to do just that and to improve the quality of life of my constituents. I welcome road funding through the national productivity investment fund. Will Ministers meet me to discuss the delivery of those projects, which will affect my constituency in Eastleigh?

**Andrew Jones:** My hon. Friend is a great champion for her constituency and for these projects. I have absolutely no doubt about the importance of them locally. If nothing else, we have met on the subject a number of times, and she is very tenacious. These projects not only open up opportunities for development, but help to relieve the congestion in the heart of her constituency. I will of course ensure that she meets the Transport team as soon as possible to progress those projects.

**Chris Evans** (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): The electrification of the Great Western Railway between Paddington and Swansea was to provide huge economic benefits for businesses along that line. Unfortunately, the project has now overspent by £1.2 billion, and not a yard of the line has been electrified. What are the Government doing to ensure that projects such as this do not run over and waste taxpayers' money in future?

**Andrew Jones:** The efficiency in the way that we deliver our infrastructure is a critical consideration when the Government are putting in so much money to transform our infrastructure. The points that the hon. Gentleman makes about Network Rail will have been heard by my hon. Friends in the Transport team, and I will highlight his comments to them.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Last month, the Institute for Government produced a report on infrastructure spending that said that decision makers do not know whether projects deliver value for money. It also believes that Parliament and the public are misinformed. What action are the Chancellor and his Department taking to ensure that future infrastructure spend delivers value for money and that costs do not spiral out of control like they have for Hinkley Point C?

**Andrew Jones:** I simply highlight the extremely rigorous business case process, which every single project has to go through before it receives approval. The idea that these schemes are not considered is just wrong.

**Kirsty Blackman:** The Scottish Government have committed to delivering 50,000 affordable homes by 2021. We recognise the calls that are being made by organisations such as Shelter Scotland and Big Issue, which believe in prioritising affordable housing. Why are the UK Government committing to build only 40,000 affordable homes in the same period?

**Andrew Jones:** Again, that is a question that will have to go to colleagues in another Department. I will make sure that they hear the hon. Lady's comments.

### Corporation Tax

5. **Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): What assessment he has made of how to balance the needs of (a) business and (b) the Exchequer in setting the corporation tax rate. [900550]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** This Government believe in a tax regime that is fair and competitive. Since 2010, we have reduced the headline corporation tax rate from 28% to 19%, allowing companies, big and small, to invest in expanding their business, boost wages, create jobs and lower prices. Onshore corporation tax receipts have also increased by over 50% despite the rate being lowered.

**Bob Stewart:** Does the Minister agree that if we raise corporation tax, it is normally passed on by business to customers, and that if we lower it, we hope that prices will come down?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. It is important to remember that the burden of corporation tax does not just fall on shareholders. If we were to follow Labour's policy of increasing corporation tax, we would see less investment, lower growth, lower productivity and, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said, lower wages and indeed higher prices.

**Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):** Earlier, the Chancellor acknowledged that productivity is the key to economic growth and eliminating our public sector deficit. When manufacturing businesses invest, they often lose any benefits of corporation tax reduction because of higher business rates. That acts as a disincentive to invest and increase output and productivity. Why does he not cut business rates instead?

**Mel Stride:** This Government have done a great deal in terms of providing business rate reliefs, which were announced in previous Budgets and are, I think, well known to the House. There will be more to come on that in the Finance Bill.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con):** Will the Minister tell the House by how much the corporation tax take has gone up since the corporation tax rate was cut?

**Mel Stride:** This is an important point. As the corporation tax rate has decreased to 19%—it will go down further to 17%—we have seen a 50% increase in the take, which is an amount in the order of £18 billion.

**Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op):** Most economists prioritise building business confidence and improving infrastructure and skills over cutting corporate tax rates. Is the Minister aware that lowering corporate tax rates now presents the appearance of Britain trying to undercut countries with which we need to agree a decent Brexit deal—at a time when businesses are not confident in the Government's leadership, but are instead “aghast” and “confused” at their approach to Brexit?

**Mel Stride:** We have seen a huge increase in employment in this country to a record level, and a record drop in unemployment to the lowest level since the mid-1970s. A lot of that has been driven by business. If the hon. Lady is seriously suggesting that the recipe for increasing the confidence of business is putting up its corporation tax to 26%, she has, I am afraid, missed the point.

### Economic Growth

8. **Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con):** What assessment he has made of recent trends in economic growth. [900553]

13. **Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con):** What assessment he has made of recent trends in economic growth. [900558]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** Short-term indicators of growth are volatile. Quarterly growth was 0.2% in the first quarter of this year, but this followed strong growth of 0.7% in the quarter before. The underlying economy is robust, thanks to

record employment levels. Although a recent rise in inflation, caused mainly by the depreciation of sterling last year, may temporarily dampen consumer spending—today's inflation figure for June is a little lower at 2.6%—there are signs from surveys of business that export orders and business investment intentions are up.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Select Committee on the Treasury, Nicky Morgan.

**Nicky Morgan:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Would the Chancellor not agree that a growing economy is necessary to pay for our essential public services? The Office for Budget Responsibility's “Fiscal risks report”, which has already been referred to, says that

“governments should expect nasty fiscal surprises from time to time”—

I am not referring to the shadow Chancellor there—and “plan accordingly”, but this Government also have to manage the uncertainties posed by Brexit. Should not a responsible Government not worsen uncertainties and risks by the decisions that they take?

**Mr Hammond:** Let me first congratulate my right hon. Friend; it was remiss of me not to do so in my first answer. I very much welcome her to her role on the Treasury Committee, and I look forward to being grilled or toasted by her, or whatever the correct expression is. She is of course exactly right: the only way to build resilience into the economy is to have strong public finances, and the only way to have a sustainably growing standard of living is to have rising productivity over the medium and long term, and that is what the Government's policy is focused towards.

**Andrew Bowie:** These are obviously still worrying times for many in north-east Scotland, with the continued low oil price still causing concern, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the strength of the United Kingdom's economy, now the second highest growing in the G7, has enabled this Government to provide over £2.6 billion of support to the industry, securing jobs in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine?

**Mr Hammond:** Yes. The UK oil and gas sector has made a huge contribution to the UK economy, having paid over £330 billion in total in production taxes to date, and supporting over 300,000 jobs. In the next phase of the life of the North sea basin, as many fields come towards the end of their life, we are working with the industry to ensure that we extract every drop of oil and gas that it is economic to extract, that we enable decommissioning, and enable end-of-life fields to be operated in the most effective way.

17. [900562] **Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab):** Much of the growth is due to the fact that we are spending more on imports, due to the low cost of the pound. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics reveal that our trade in goods deficit has risen by £2.6 billion over the past quarter and now stands at a staggering £34.4 billion. Does not the extra cost of imports have an impact on the cost of our exports and affect our productivity?

**Mr Hammond:** As I am sure the hon. Gentleman will know, the short-run effect of a depreciation in sterling would be expected to be a decline in our trade balance performance as we suck in more expensive imports, in sterling terms. But over time the economy will adjust—there are signs that this is happening now—with exporters increasing their output to take advantage of weaker sterling and their greater competitiveness in international markets, and indeed not just exporters, but those who would substitute imported products with domestically produced products, which is often the best way forward for smaller companies.

**Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP):** One of the ways of reducing the deficit is by increasing economic growth, rather than increasing taxes or reducing spending. What steps is the Chancellor taking to produce economic growth, and how are his efforts being affected by those who continually talk the economy down and predict dire effects from Brexit, even though their predictions to date have been proved wrong?

**Mr Hammond:** The hon. Gentleman is exactly right; those who talk the economy and its prospects down are not doing the country any favours. It is not about borrowing more or taxing more; it is about growing our economy faster and increasing productivity so that we can have sustainable jobs and economic growth that produces the taxation to support our public services as well as rising living standards for our population.

#### Youth Unemployment

9. **Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con):** What progress is being made on reducing youth unemployment. [900554]

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay):** Youth unemployment is at a record low: 5.1% of 16 to 12-year-olds are unemployed or not in full-time education. That compares with 9.4% in 2009, under the previous Labour Government.

**Luke Graham:** Although I welcome the record unemployment figures that the Minister has given this morning, youth unemployment is still higher in my constituency and in Scotland than the UK average, so will he work with me and others across the House to encourage more investment in my constituency and in Scotland as a whole?

**Stephen Barclay:** I will be very happy to work with my hon. Friend, because we recognise that work is the best route out of poverty. Indeed, unemployed households are 13 times more likely to be in relative poverty than those with people in full-time work.

**Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab):** I understand what the Minister says about less unemployment, but my concern is that this is not just about employment, but about retention. Does he agree that now is the time for hard-working, tax-paying public sector workers to get the pay rise that they have earned, and that he should scrap the cap?

**Stephen Barclay:** We can see the effects, were we to follow the hon. Lady's policy, by looking at youth unemployment rates elsewhere in Europe. In Greece it is 45.9%, and even in France it is 22%. The best way of addressing poverty is by keeping young people in work.

18. [900563] **Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con):** Government investment in Cheltenham's cyber-accelerator since 2015 is now yielding results, with numerous cyber start-ups benefiting from local mentoring from experts at GCHQ. Does my hon. Friend agree that mobilising the UK's sovereign expertise in areas such as cyber boosts jobs for young people and opportunity in places such as Cheltenham?

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones):** The GCHQ cyber-accelerator in Cheltenham is part of the Government's £1.9 billion cyber-security strategy. It allows business start-ups to gain access to GCHQ's world-class personnel and expertise, and the accelerator helps these businesses to expand, contributing to jobs and opportunities, including in Cheltenham, and it makes the UK a safer place online. I know that my hon. Friend has worked very hard on this for a considerable period of time. He makes an important point as he speaks up for his constituency, and how it is leading in the UK and across the world.

**Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** How does the Minister expect to reduce youth unemployment, given the further education budget cuts across the country, particularly in Coventry, where the budget has been cut by 27%?

**Stephen Barclay:** Actually, we are seeing record numbers of people, in particular disadvantaged students, going to university. The situation will not be helped if people are conned with the idea that student debts will be written off.

**Mr Speaker:** Well, that was a first in this place, certainly during my time in the Chair: I have never known a ministerial swap to take place mid-answer. I assume that it was inadvertent; the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury is nothing if not immaculate in his parliamentary manners. I put it down to error. But I hope that the Ministers know their own identities. I would be worried for them if they did not.

#### Rooftop Solar

10. **Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** What fiscal steps his Department is taking to incentivise businesses to invest in rooftop solar. [900555]

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones):** Immaculate parliamentary manners, but not immaculate parliamentary procedure—sorry about that, Mr Speaker; I thought we had moved on from that question.

Solar is a UK success story. In 2013, solar capacity was expected to reach between 10 and 12 GW by 2020; we now expect Government support to bring forward about 13 GW by then. Feed-in tariffs provide an incentive for businesses to invest in rooftop solar.

**Christian Matheson:** The sun might be going down on the Chancellor's time at No.11, but it remains an important source of energy and income for 44,000 microgenerators, including schools and hospitals. But since April they have seen their business rates increase by up to 800%, in some cases. Some major deployers of the technology are now pulling out of the

rooftop market. Will the Government reassess the business rate levy paid on rooftop solar, so that we can give real growth to this important environmental sector?

**Andrew Jones:** The Government are continuing to support the take-up of solar panels through business rates by maintaining the exemption for new installations of solar power generating less than 50 kilowatts of power; of course, we also have all the transitional relief schemes and the cut in business rates announced in the Budget last year, which cost nearly £9 billion. The Government have listened to the voice from solar. We are keen to see progress on solar, and these schemes will help that.

**Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): Will not the roll-out of solar panels be greatly helped by Brexit, when the very high tariffs imposed on cheaper Chinese photovoltaic cells are removed and we will no longer be protecting the inefficient German industry?

**Andrew Jones:** I thought my hon. Friend was going to say that the sun may be shining more brightly post-Brexit. We are very keen to see the progress of solar as well as all other renewables. We will have to see what happens with pricing, but the key thing is that we will be supporting solar, as it is a key part of our power mix for the future.

**Mr Speaker:** There was I thinking that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) was taking an interest in energy saving because he has six children. Apparently not.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): Have not the Government actually cut support for solar because, together with new storage technologies, it threatens to become so successful that it would kill off any case for horrendously expensive nuclear?

**Andrew Jones:** The support for solar comes directly from people's bills. When the costs of installation and generation come down, through efficiencies and economies of scale and production, so should support. We are taking steps to control the cost of support schemes and putting solar on the path to delivery without subsidy.

#### Tax Avoidance and Evasion

11. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What plans he has to introduce measures to tackle tax avoidance and evasion carried out through non-domiciled status and offshore trusts. [900556]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** The UK has effective legislation to tackle avoidance involving offshore structures and we have announced our intention to legislate further, making it harder for non-doms to avoid paying tax on funds withdrawn from trusts. I am also pleased to say that we have been at the forefront of international work that has seen 100 countries commit to exchange financial information automatically.

**Catherine West:** The Conservative manifesto said that the Government would

“take a more proactive approach to transparency”. Does the Minister believe that enough is being done to tackle companies that promote tax-avoidance schemes,

or is there still a tendency for the big four accountancy firms to regulate the big four, via the big four, in order to protect the big four?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Lady asks if enough is being done to clamp down on tax avoidance. I can assure her that it certainly is. Since 2010, we have raised £160 billion by way of clamping down on exactly those behaviours. In the forthcoming Finance Bill there will be further measures to make sure that over the scorecard period we are bringing in between £7 billion and £8 billion in addition, in corporate tax avoidance measures.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that due to steps taken by this Government, the top 1% of people now pay 27% of income tax, and that that is a higher proportion than under the previous Labour Government?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Labour party would constantly have us believe that somehow we are being soft on the wealthy and hard on the less well-off when the precise opposite is true. The top 1% pay over 27% of tax, and the wealthiest 3,000 people in our country pay as much as the poorest 9 million. Under Labour, the poor paid more tax relative to the wealthy, not less. No wonder that under our policies income inequality is at a 30-year low.

#### Income Tax/National Insurance

12. **Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): If he will make an assessment of the potential merits of merging income tax and national insurance. [900557]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** The Government are committed to simplifying the tax system. In 2015, we asked the Office of Tax Simplification to provide an independent assessment of the alignment of income tax and national insurance contributions. We have already taken action in a number of places highlighted by the report. However, alignment now would cause significant upheaval for millions. Now is not the right time for further reform in this area.

**Neil Parish:** I welcome my right hon. Friend to his new ministerial role. Last year the Office of Tax Simplification said that bringing national insurance and income tax closer together would create a simpler and fairer system for business and taxpayers. As national insurance and income tax revenues go into the same pot, would it not be simpler and clearer to merge the two and have one single income tax?

**Mel Stride:** As I said, we recognise the value of merging national insurance and income tax where that is practical and achievable, and there are some measures coming up in the Bills in the autumn that will address that in certain circumstances, but to do it right across the piece at this stage is perhaps a long-term aspiration rather than one we will be addressing in the short term.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that as people go into the higher tax threshold they stop paying more national insurance, so would one of the impacts of merging the two be to reveal that the British tax system is not as progressive as people think, and make the case for those with the broadest shoulders to pay more?

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman needs to recognise that national insurance and income tax function in different ways and have different roles in the tax system. We have one of the most progressive tax systems in the entire country. If we look at, for example, those earning above—*[Interruption.]* Well, by raising the personal tax allowance we have taken 3 million to 4 million people out of income tax altogether. For those earning over £100,000, where we removed the allowance, that, plus national insurance, means that the marginal rates are up to 62% at that level of income.

### Public Sector Pay

14. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of public sector pay since 2010; and if he will make a statement. [900559]

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** We hugely value the work of public servants—teachers, police and nurses. That is why they are paid in line with the private sector, and, in addition, receive a 10% increment, on average, for their pensions.

**Diana Johnson:** We all agree that MPs' pay recommendations are decided independently and go through automatically. However, other public sector pay review bodies take into account Treasury submissions but then find that their recommendations are vetoed by Ministers. If it is good enough for Members of Parliament, why is it not good enough for nurses, the armed forces, firefighters and teachers?

**Elizabeth Truss:** We do take notice of what the independent pay review bodies say. We have just approved the recommendations of the teachers pay review body and of the nurses pay review body. Listening to their recommendations, the pay review body for the NHS said:

“We do not see significant short-term nationwide recruitment and retention issues that are linked to pay.”

We followed that advice and gave the pay accordingly.

**Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): Increases in the tax-free personal allowance since 2010 have put £1,000 into the pocket of each basic rate taxpayer, including those who work across the public sector. Will the Chief Secretary continue to help public sector workers to keep the money they earn, through lower taxes?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The worst thing that we could do is to support the Labour party's policies, which would, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, lead to the highest levels of taxation in peacetime history.

19. [900564] **Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think the Treasury response today to the questions about the 1% pay cap are profoundly disappointing. This is the single biggest thing ensuring that inflation erodes living standards. It is impoverishing workers, and it is driving up consumer debt. When will the Treasury agree with the Foreign Secretary that the time has come to end this cap?

**Elizabeth Truss:** I point out to the hon. Gentleman that, in fact, teachers have seen a 3% pay rise, many nurses get progression pay and people in the armed forces get an X-factor supplement that is worth 2.4% a year. Their salaries are in line with private sector salaries. It would be wrong to have a significant differential between the public and private sectors, because we need businesses to thrive in addition to having well-funded public services.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Time is against us, but I want to hear a couple more of the Order Paper questions.

### Government Investment in Skills

15. **Mrs Kemi Badenoch** (Saffron Walden) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the effect of Government investment in skills since 2010. [900560]

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay):** Treasury Ministers have engaged on a regular basis with the Secretary of State for Education. We will double spending on apprenticeships over the decade to 2020, allowing 3 million apprenticeship starts in England by 2020 and giving people the best start in their career.

**Mrs Badenoch:** Since 2010, the substantial increase in apprenticeships has helped many young people into work. Stansted airport in my constituency is a great provider of apprenticeships, and its employment academy placed 700 people into work in the last year alone. Does the Minister agree that apprenticeships have contributed to the record low level of youth unemployment?

**Stephen Barclay:** I very much agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, there are 55,000 fewer young people unemployed than there were a year ago, thanks in large part to the investment that this Government are putting into apprenticeships.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister aware that if we are going to do anything about skills or productivity in our country and our communities, we have got to look to local further education colleges? Will he support, with money, resources and leadership, the introduction of a practical maths course to help young people who are waiting in colleges up and down the country, struggling to get apprenticeships? Will he talk to the Education Secretary about doing that, to get these young people on their way?

**Stephen Barclay:** The hon. Gentleman will welcome the Government's record investment of £500 million in T-levels, to tackle exactly the issue that he has raised in technical education. The Government's commitment can also be seen in apprenticeships. Whereas under the last Labour Government there were just 280,000 apprenticeship starts, there were more than half a million last year under this Government.

### Corporation Tax: Receipts

16. **Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): What effect the reduction in corporation tax rates has had on receipts from that tax. [900561]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** Since 2010 the headline corporation tax rate has been cut from 28% to 19%. Despite that, onshore corporation tax receipts have increased by more than 50%, from £36.2 billion in 2010-11 to £55.1 billion in 2016-17.

**Jeremy Quin:** According to KPMG, we have the second-most competitive tax regime anywhere in the G7. Does my hon. Friend agree that that encourages businesses to locate here and boosts our tax receipts?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. The OECD has made it very clear that corporation tax increases are the most harmful tax increases for economic growth. By keeping business taxes down, in 2015-16 we saw a record number of inward investment projects creating more than 1,600 jobs per week.

### Topical Questions

T1. [900536] **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** My priority is to ensure that the economy remains resilient as we negotiate our exit from the European Union. That means building on this Government's achievements in reducing the deficit by two thirds, delivering record levels of employment and getting unemployment down to the lowest rate since the mid-1970s, while continuing to tackle the long-term challenge of productivity enhancement and making steady progress towards balancing the budget

**Mr Wragg:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Raising the personal tax allowance has been a key achievement of this Government. What recent assessment has he made of the number of my Hazel Grove constituents who have benefited from that policy?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** I agree with my hon. Friend. The UK will have increased the tax-free personal allowance by over 90% compared with 2010, completing a decade of sustained tax cuts for working people. Over 31 million taxpayers will pay less tax in 2017-18, including 3 million taxpayers in the north-west. Since 2010, more than 4 million taxpayers have been taken out of income tax altogether.

**Rachel Reeves** (Leeds West) (Lab): Personal contract purchase plans for financing cars have gone up by 394% in the past five years, and the Governor of the Bank of England has said that we are failing to learn the lessons of the past when it comes to easy credit. What action is the Chancellor taking to ensure that lending is affordable and does not pose a risk to the wider economy?

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Stephen Barclay):** May I first congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment as Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee? As she will be aware from her Bank of England days, this is a matter for the Financial Policy Committee. Indeed, the FPC noted in its recent report that consumer credit is growing at a

lower rate than it was under the previous Labour Government, but loss rates on lending remain low, as they are at present.

T2. [900537] **Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Chancellor will know from his time in the Foreign Office that one of the great strengths of our great kingdom is the perception of fairness we enjoy around the world. Will he talk a little about fairness in financial transactions, as the hidden taxes imposed by many companies on investment are grossly unfair on those who are saving in pensions for the future?

**Stephen Barclay:** There is a theme here, because I should congratulate my hon. Friend on his election as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Government are committed to the principles of transparency. He will have noted the recent Financial Conduct Authority report on the asset management market study. Indeed, we are seeing technology—in particular, through FinTech—driving the sort of transparency to which he refers.

T9. [900544] **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on refugees, I am told by refugees that they are desperate to work once they have achieved such status, but are hindered by various fixable problems in the system. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to make it easier for refugees to have bank accounts?

**Stephen Barclay:** The hon. Lady will be aware that when the Home Office grants refugee status, it includes the biometric residence permit as proof of the holder's right to stay, but I am very happy to discuss with the hon. Lady any further measures that she feels would be helpful.

T3. [900538] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): To promote the drive towards world free trade, will the Chancellor of the Exchequer assure the House that he is absolutely, personally and enthusiastically committed to following our manifesto commitment to leave not just the EU at the end of 2019, but the single market and the customs union?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** Yes, I have made it clear on many occasions that when we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019, we will also leave the single market and the customs union. Those are matters of legal necessity. My focus is on ensuring that thereafter we put in place the closest and deepest possible partnership with our European neighbours that will allow us to continue the patterns of trade and business, patterns of security co-operation and patterns of educational exchange and scientific and research collaboration that we enjoy now. That is the best way to protect Britain's prosperity.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): Unsecured borrowing has rocketed, and lenders warn that default rates on credit cards and other products this summer will be at their highest level at any point since the height of the financial crisis. Instead of simply passing the buck to the Financial Policy Committee, what are the Government going to do in public policy to alleviate the serious risk of a household debt crisis?

**Stephen Barclay:** The hon. Gentleman misstates the position. It is an independent responsibility of the Bank of England to address that—*[Interruption.]* It is. It is of course an area where there will always be frequent discussions with the Treasury, but it is a Bank of England matter.

T4. [900539] **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): The UK Government have a strong record of supporting Scottish businesses, and the British Business Bank has provided nearly £1.5 million of support to small businesses in East Renfrewshire. However, many businesses in my constituency are disadvantaged compared with competitors and counterparts in England due to the Scottish Government's approach to business rates. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling for the Scottish Government to reverse their decision to double the large business supplement, restore rates parity on both sides of the border and allow Scottish businesses to compete on a level playing field?

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** My hon. Friend is entirely right. The large business supplement is a devolved tax matter and the supplement in Scotland is double that in England. The consequences were best summed up by Liz Cameron, the chief executive officer of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce:

“Here in Scotland, we must ensure that we are seen to be the best place in the UK to do business and that will require a fundamental reassessment by the Scottish Government of its tax policies.”

**Heidi Alexander** (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Chancellor will know from his own officials' analysis that the difference between staying in the European economic area and a Canadian-type deal, which is essentially what the Government are now aiming for, is a hit to GDP of £16 billion, which is equivalent to a 4p rise in the basic rate of income tax. How can it not be right to stay in the EEA, at least for transition?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** The hon. Lady is now asking a different question. The Prime Minister has been very clear that Britain is a very large economy in relation to our European neighbours and we would expect to have a bespoke arrangement with the European Union as our long-term future status quo, and indeed a bespoke arrangement for any interim period that is agreed. The hon. Lady is quite right that as we go forward with this process, we need to deliver on our commitment to leave the European, but to do so in a way that protects the British economy, protects British jobs and protects Britain's prosperity, and that is what we will do.

T5. [900540] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend, for the benefit of the House, confirm the cost to the economy of cancelling student debt, say whether that is affordable and explain what effect it would have on the work we have done to reduce the deficit?

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** As the Labour party admits, cancelling student debt would cost £100 billion. The Opposition made that reckless promise, which would see the debt soar, during the election campaign, but now they say it is just an “ambition”. Are they going to say sorry to the people

they made their promise to, and are they going to say sorry to the British public for threatening to bankrupt the economy?

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): Further to the questions asked by my hon. Friends the Members for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) and for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), will the Chancellor confirm, as he failed to do before, that the cost to us of Brexit will be as described by my hon. Friends some moments ago?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** The hon. Lady, I think, knows that there can be no definitive answer to that question. We do not yet know what the form of our agreement with the European Union will be and we do not yet know what arrangements will be in place for any kind of interim or transition period, so she is speculating. What I can tell her is that the Government are 100% focused on getting the best deal for Britain and delivering it in a way that protects British business and British jobs.

T6. [900541] **Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Several of my Beckenham constituents have suggested that the winter fuel allowance might be a taxable benefit. Is that being considered?

**Mel Stride:** We have no plans to tax the winter fuel allowance.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): One of the best boosts to economic growth is Government infrastructure spending, so will the Chancellor look down the back of the sofa where he found the £1 billion for the deal with the Democratic Unionist party and find more change to sign the Edinburgh city growth deal?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** At the autumn statement, I made a conscious decision to borrow an additional £23 billion for investment in economically productive infrastructure projects—a conscious decision to address one of the challenges we face in improving Britain's productivity. The Government will continue to combine a prudent fiscal approach with investment in our future through productivity-raising measures.

T7. [900542] **Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): The new Conservative Mayor of the Tees Valley, Ben Houchen, is setting up the first mayoral development corporation outside London on the former SSI site in Redcar. The regeneration of the site and the attraction of inward investment are obviously vital. Will my hon. Friend work with me and the Mayor to deliver the best outcome for the site and the local economy?

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Andrew Jones):** The South Tees Site Company is currently undertaking ground investigations to assess the levels of any contamination on the SSI site. The mayoral development corporation is leading on the development of plans for the future of the site. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend, the Mayor of the Tees Valley and others to promote the economy of the area.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In the Budget, the Chancellor promised a consultation on business rates, but we have not yet seen that. Businesses

in York are really struggling and some are leaving the city because of the astronomical business rates. When will we have that consultation—what is the date?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** We have to deal with two issues. One is the process by which we uprate business rates, and we all saw earlier this year that long periods followed by dramatic revision are not good for anyone. They cause disruption to business, so we are looking at how we can smooth the process. Secondly, we need to look more broadly at the way in which we address the perceived unfairness that companies that operate in bricks and mortar are effectively treated differently from companies that do not. That is not an easy challenge, because many of the digital companies operate internationally and it requires international co-operation.

The consultation that the hon. Lady asks for will be issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government and I will pass on to the Secretary of State her concerns about the date.

T8. [900543] **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Noting that the unemployment rate is at a 42-year low, may I inquire of my right hon. Friend what the effect has been on average personal incomes for workers in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock—and, indeed, the rest of the UK—of increases in the minimum wage and the national living wage?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The increase in the national living wage to £7.50 an hour means that a full-time worker on minimum wages has had a pay rise of £2,800 since 2010. More than 150,000 low-wage workers in Scotland are benefiting from that extra money.

**Catherine McKinnell** (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Tyne and Wear Metro is in urgent need of investment if we are to see the new rolling stock rolled out by 2021. What conversations has the Chancellor had with the Transport Secretary about funding that vital piece of infrastructure for the north-east?

**Mr Philip Hammond:** As the hon. Lady may know, I take a clear view about the confidentiality of conversations between Cabinet Ministers—[*Laughter.*] While I have had many conversations with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, I make it a rule that it is for departmental Secretaries of State to make announcements when appropriate.

**Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that lowering corporation tax to 19% has incentivised business investment in North Warwickshire and Bedworth by companies such as Aldi, which has its headquarters there, and throughout the UK?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is right, and he is rightly a champion of business in his constituency. There is no doubt that lower taxes create wealth and in turn pay for the public services that we all desire—contrary to the party opposite. I share one exchange with the House—when my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) asked the shadow Chief Secretary if he was

“aware that tax as a percentage of GDP is going to be at its highest level since Harold Wilson was Prime Minister?”,

his response was:

“Let me put it like this: if we had a Labour Government, the percentage would be even higher.”—[*Official Report*, 18 April 2017; Vol. 624, c. 579.]

**Margaret Greenwood** (Wirral West) (Lab): The TUC estimates that nurses, firefighters and border guards face losing more than £2,500 in real terms by 2020. For ambulance drivers, who earn significantly below the UK average wage, the figure is more than £1,800. Does the Minister agree that it is about time that we gave hard-working public sector workers the pay rise they deserve?

**Elizabeth Truss:** The hon. Lady should be aware that more than half of nurses and NHS workers saw a 3% pay rise last year. She needs to check her facts.

T10. [900545] **Stephen Hammond** (Wimbledon) (Con): Last night, I met a major financial institution. Does my hon. Friend agree that for London to retain its place as the leading financial centre we need a regulatory regime based on mutual recognition and an early-agreed transitional phase to provide certainty?

**Stephen Barclay:** My hon. Friend rightly champions that key sector which provides £71 billion of tax to fund public services. It is in the interests of the UK and the EU to avoid fragmentation because that will increase costs, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that we are ambitious, in terms of the trade deal that we reach with the EU, to come to an arrangement that delivers regulatory equivalence.

**Tony Lloyd** (Rochdale) (Lab): Does the Chancellor accept that the confusion and conflicting ambitions of the Government’s policy on Brexit are already having an impact on investment? In the long run, that will be massively damaging to the economic prospects of this country.

**Mr Philip Hammond:** No, I do not accept that. However, I readily agree with the hon. Gentleman that, as I have said many times in the Chamber, the process of negotiating our exit from the European Union and then executing that exit is bound to create uncertainty, and uncertainty is always unwelcomed by business. The challenge for us is to secure as much certainty as possible as early as possible for business, and that is our focus.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I am advised that the point of order flows from Treasury questions, and I will therefore take it, but if it turns out to be just a continuation of the debate, I will be pretty intolerant of it; so I hope it is pithy and something approaching a genuine point of order.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I very much appreciate your taking my point of order.

During Treasury questions, I asked the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), a question that specifically concerned an announcement in the Chancellor’s autumn statement. He did not answer it, saying that it

was not within the remit of his Department. May I ask for your guidance, Mr Speaker? Whom should I ask questions about Treasury documents, if not Treasury Ministers?

**Mr Speaker:** If memory serves me correctly, the Minister indicated that he would pass the matter on to the relevant departmental Minister. These are matters not of precise fact but of judgment, and also of some discretion so far as the Minister answering questions is concerned. Of course, when the Chancellor delivers either his Budget or an autumn statement, he inevitably makes announcements that concern expenditure covering

all sorts of different Government Departments. If subsequently a Treasury Minister is asked a question relating to expenditure in a particular area to which, because of his or her natural self-effacement and modesty—in the case of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough—he feels that another Minister would be better equipped to provide an informative answer, there is nothing disorderly about that. It may be disquieting for the hon. Lady, but that is not the same as the Minister's behaviour being disorderly. I hope the hon. Lady will accept that for now—and I see that the Minister is beaming with contentment, although it has to be said that there is nothing new there.

## Free Childcare

12.42 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) (*Urgent Question*) To ask the Secretary of State for Education to make a statement on the process for applying for free childcare hours from September 2017.

**The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Robert Goodwill):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the urgent question. It gives me an opportunity to highlight the Government's determination to invest a record amount in childcare, supporting early education and helping parents financially. That amount will total £6 billion annually by 2020.

My Department is committed to ensuring that three and four-year-olds have access to free early education. All parents, regardless of income and employment status, are entitled to 15 hours of free early education for their three and four-year-olds, and for parents who are working we are providing access to an additional 15 hours of free childcare from September 2017. Parents who want to take up 30 hours of free childcare can apply through the digital childcare service. They can access the application via the Childcare Choices website, which provides information on all the Government's childcare offers. The application process takes about 20 minutes. I have recently had a walk-through of the service myself; it is straightforward, and the format will be very familiar to parents who have used other Government digital services.

The childcare service is a complex IT system, which checks parents' eligibility in real time by interfacing with other Government IT systems. The vast majority of parents will receive an instant eligibility response, but there will be a delay for some parents whose eligibility is not immediately clear—for example, for some self-employed people. The service has also experienced technical issues which have meant that it has been unavailable to parents on a small number of occasions. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which has developed the service, has been working hard to resolve those issues, and as a result the customer experience has improved.

The application has been open to the parents of under-fours since 21 April, and today my Treasury colleagues will make a written ministerial statement informing the House that the service has been further rolled out to the parents of under-fives, the so-called summer babies. Parents whose application is successful will receive a 30 hours eligibility code to take to their provider in order to claim their childcare place. As of today, more than 145,000 codes have been generated from successful applications. That is an increase of almost 5,000 codes since Friday 14 July and an increase of almost 25,000 since Friday 7 July. Increasing numbers of parents are successfully applying. It is great news that so many families will benefit from 30 hours in September because, as we have seen from our early implementer and early roll-out areas, the support can make a positive difference to the lives of hard-working families.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Before we proceed to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) and to subsequent questioners, I must make it clear that

I granted the urgent question because of the narrow and specific focus on the issue of the accessibility, or otherwise, of the Government's website. This is not an occasion for a general debate about childcare policy. If Members want just—this is not unknown in politics—to score political points and to ask rhetorical questions, that is not what this exchange is about. It will run for 20 minutes and it will focus on the particular issue that the hon. Lady identified in her application.

**Layla Moran:** I thank the Minister for his response, but as some may be reading in their end-of-year reports due this week, "Good effort; just not good enough." The process for applying for free childcare is confusing both for parents and nurseries. As one parent said to me:

"getting the code was the most complicated process that I have ever endured. I would imagine that many parents would give up!"

They explained that

"you get passed from pillar to post between different areas of the website, each asking you for a different password, sent to you by SMS or email. Is this really necessary?"

As Members will attest, setting up two-factor authentication on our phones was difficult enough, and we have a well-resourced IT department. Who is helping the parents at home who are juggling this with jobs and caring for their young children? As a result, parents have not been able to open accounts to pay their nursery, playgroup or pre-school. Even some of the providers, particularly in the voluntary sector, cannot register.

The Government's roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare is welcome, but only if it is of high quality and if parents can access it readily. Therefore, I ask the Minister: why is the Department for Education website still sending parents a holding response when they finally submit an online application? How long is the Department taking to confirm eligibility? What proportion of children eligible for the free childcare have been able to access it? Moreover, with the end of the school term rapidly approaching, how can nurseries plan for the upcoming year if parents cannot provide them with their voucher details? What support can the Government provide to nurseries to plan and budget effectively for an as-yet-unknown number of children who will be joining them on 1 September? Finally, what will the Government do to review the matter and the accessibility of the online registration process so that this does not happen again next year?

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you.

**Mr Goodwill:** The hon. Lady asks some reasonable questions. I reassure her that, at the moment, 2,850 parents are registering per weekday and we are on track to reach, we think, about 200,000 by the end of the month. I encourage parents to get on with it. We do not want everyone to leave it until 11.30 pm on 31 August. As I said, the vast majority of cases are processed fairly simply, but because we need to check that the person meets the eligibility criteria on income, sometimes there are complications. I have mentioned self-employed people and people who change jobs, so occasionally it is more complex. I reassure the hon. Lady on the point about people who cannot use the online system. We have an offline process for any parents who experience persistent technical difficulties. I encourage anyone who has those problems to take up the matter.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his new appointment. What resources are being given to those from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure that they have access to the 30 hours of free childcare?

**Mr Goodwill:** Obviously, disadvantaged children are eligible for free childcare at the age of two and that continues for 15 hours through to the age of four. That additional funding and that additional 15 hours are for people in work. Some of those people may be on low incomes. A person who is working 16 hours at the national minimum wage qualifies. I have already mentioned that there is an offline system for people who may have problems and who cannot use the online system because of sight or other difficulties. However, the evidence so far is that the applications are coming in. They are now being presented to their providers and they will come back to us via the local authorities. May I make the point that some local authorities have been a bit tardy in passing the codes back to us? If anyone goes back over the recess, do ask them whether they are getting on with it, because that is another area where we need to see some improvement.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. What a shame it is that, when we could be weeks away from a great breakthrough for providers, parents and most importantly children, we are instead discussing a policy that is riddled with holes—and, my word, are there questions to answer!

Just yesterday the Minister's colleagues in the Treasury admitted in response to one of my written questions:

“It is not possible to provide a definitive number of applications not completed due to technical issues”.

Will the Minister give us his estimate of just how many parents suffered these “technical issues”? What steps are being put in place to fix the system, and what guarantees can he make to parents that, as the August deadline approaches, the system will work for them?

How many calls has the hotline received? Of the 30,000 people who applied and were rejected, what were the reasons for those rejections and can the Minister guarantee that those rejections were correct and not due to system errors? What about the parents on zero-hours contracts who are simply unable to guarantee that they will work over the minimum weekly hours: how many of them will be refused the childcare they were promised?

Finally, as the Minister will be aware, there are huge problems with this offer and there are many other questions to answer. As the Minister likes to refer my written questions to those at the national provider, Childcare Works, with implementation weeks away will he accept my request to meet them as soon as possible?

**Mr Goodwill:** In welcoming the hon. Lady to her place, I have to say she is very much not a glass half full person. This is a great childcare offer. Yesterday morning, I was in the city of York, one of the pilot areas, meeting providers and parents who were benefiting, and I heard from people who said, “This is a great offer. It means no longer do I have to pass my husband in the hallway as I go out to my evening job and he comes in from his daytime job.” We heard of eight people in York who are now accessing employment because of the childcare being available. So it is a great offer and I am very proud

that it has been delivered. We have ironed out the glitches in the software, and people are registering; as I have said, we are on track for 200,000.

The hon. Lady asked how many people we expect to register, and the short answer is that we do not know, because it is a voluntary system to which people will opt in. Also, of course, there will be three tranches. It will not all happen with a big bang in September; there will be another tranche of parents who qualify in January and another tranche after Easter. It is great news for working families—something this Government are delivering on.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Given the amount of my time that was taken, the amount of time that my constituent had to give up, and indeed the amount of time given by the technical support people in the Minister's Department, all as a consequence of the fact that my constituent had an apostrophe in her name, can the Minister speculate why on earth we were not told that there was a manual workaround?

**Mr Goodwill:** I have made that clear today. There have been a number of outages, several of which were to fix some of the glitches to which my right hon. Friend draws attention. The most recent one was due to a power supply issue between 6 pm and 10.20 pm last night, 17 July. That has now been fixed and the system is up and running again.

**Mr Speaker:** Very reassuring.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this urgent question, and given that this is largely a devolved matter, I will be brief.

Ensuring affordable, flexible and secure childcare is one of the best ways to narrow the gender pay gap, by helping parents back to work when it suits them, and also to prepare children best for school. In Scotland, the Scottish Government are trialling childcare funding following the child by investing £1 million to make sure that, when we expand free childcare to 1,140 hours, parents have the choice to decide what is best for them and for their children. We are also going further than the UK Government by helping the most vulnerable two-year-olds in Scotland, to ensure that all children can have the best start in life. That is quite a contrast to the issues being faced by parents south of the border. If disadvantaged parents are not able to apply for childcare by the deadline due to the Minister's website problems, how will they will be supported thereafter?

**Mr Goodwill:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the party election broadcast on behalf of the Scottish National party. The website is up and running and, as I have said, 2,850 parents per day are registering and getting their confirmation codes; we encourage people to do so as soon as possible, rather than leave it to the last minute. Indeed, I am very pleased that we are now on track. Some 143,000 valid 30 hour contract codes have been generated and we are on track to reach our target of 200,000 by the end of next month.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): As a mother with three children, I have been through a raft of different child support schemes. There were none initially, which is why I welcome the fact that this support is in

place; we must not forget that. Obviously, it is essential that parents have confidence that they can apply. Will the Minister reassure those who are struggling—not just parents but nurseries; I understand the difficulties—that we will help them? I have met people from many nurseries in my constituency. We are relying on them to deliver this service, so can we have assurances that it will work?

**Mr Goodwill:** That is why we ran the scheme through 12 development areas. Indeed, 15,000 children are already enjoying it, including those in the families I met in York yesterday. It really is a good offer. Of course there is flexibility in the system: one can use a childminder, a pre-school playgroup, or a formalised nursery setting and mix and match the hours. So it is a great opportunity. Indeed, the hours can be spread over the holidays; currently, 30 hours a week for 38 weeks are available, but that can be spread over the year for those who wish to cover the holidays as well.

**Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op):** The Minister says that 120,000 codes have now been issued and that he expects that to rise to 200,000 by the end of the month, but given that the Government's own estimate of the number of eligible families is in excess of 390,000, by my maths that means that only just over a quarter of those eligible have now got their codes. Given that we had warning after warning from providers that the scheme would be unaffordable to them and that they worried about there being sufficient places, how are they supposed to plan for September when only just over a quarter of families have registered for this scheme to date?

**Mr Goodwill:** I am afraid that the hon. Lady is making a fundamental error. The total number will come in three tranches: one in September, one in January and one after Easter, as children reach the eligible age. This will be an ongoing system, and therefore—*[Interruption.]* The children starting in September need to apply by the end of August. There is no rush for parents whose children turn three in time for starting in January. We are on track to deliver 200,000 by 1 September. Subsequent tranches of children will come in after Christmas and Easter.

A number of concerns have been raised about providers being able to deliver for the funding we have provided, and we have put additional funding in. I am pleased to say that in the city of York, where I was yesterday, despite the fact that some of the private sector providers expressed disquiet, 100% of providers are delivering on the scheme. Indeed, in contrast to the numbers projected, we have 117% delivery.

**Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con):** Dorset was one of the pilot areas for 30 hours of free childcare. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the performance of those pilots, specifically in relation to the online system?

**Mr Goodwill:** Those in the pilots did not participate in the online system we have in place now; there was an all manually based system. I can assure the House, however, that 4,000 parents were involved in testing the service and valuable lessons have been learned from Dorset regarding the operation of the service and provision of free places.

**Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab):** In light of these additional difficulties in bringing in what is a very welcome policy, what additional support will the Government give to nurseries that are preparing to deliver the scheme? We need to make sure that the resources are there for delivery.

**Mr Goodwill:** As I have said, we increased the funding to allow for it to be delivered; an average funding of £4.94 for each hour is now being provided. That was in direct response to the concerns of some providers about the level of funding, but I have to say that even the providers who said that the funding was not sufficient have now managed to deliver at this price. Indeed, the nursery I visited yesterday said it had surplus places before the pilot scheme was introduced, but is now full, which is great news for it in terms of its overall funding.

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** Small, community-led pre-schools, such as the one in Hedge End in my constituency, are not necessarily groups, and they are worried about the process for them and for local parents. Will my hon. Friend tell us what the Government have done to ensure that all early-years providers are able to deliver the 30 hours for those families and to retain the positivity around this programme?

**Mr Goodwill:** Parents have a choice about where to deploy their 30 hours of care. It can be with a childminder or in a nursery school, but it can also be with one of the many excellent voluntary sector providers, including pre-school playgroups. My wife used to run a pre-school playgroup, so I have been briefed on this issue. It is vital that people have a choice about where to send their children that suits their lifestyle, their work and the logistics of getting their children to that setting.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** The Minister will know that I was Chair of the then Children, Schools and Families Select Committee when the Labour Government set us on this path, and I am sure that most Labour Members will welcome this good news. I have a vested interest in this subject, having 10 grandchildren and, I hope, more to come. However, many people in my constituency are struggling with access and are not very computer literate. Will he consider enabling the National Day Nurseries Association, which is based in my constituency, and the other marvellous children's charities to help by being the interlocutors between the Government and our constituents?

**Mr Goodwill:** In the short time that I have had this portfolio, I have met a number of organisations and I particularly look forward to meeting the hon. Gentleman's own locally based organisations. That is very much on my bucket list. We certainly wish to engage as widely as possible with representatives of providers and of the families who are benefiting from this programme. Also, I have to say that we could not deliver this £6 billion a year of funding without the successful economy that this Conservative Government are delivering.

**Robert Courts (Witney) (Con):** As the parent of a one-year-old, I am very grateful for this scheme as I find my way through the challenges of parenthood. I am sure that many others will feel the same. Will the Minister

[Robert Courts]

please tell the House what testing was carried out prior to the launch of the system, and how many parents were involved?

**Mr Goodwill:** As I have said, there were two aspects to the testing. We had pilot areas in which we tested the delivery, working with the providers, and that was very successful, particularly in the city of York and North Yorkshire, where I was yesterday. In relation to the system, we had 4,000 parents involved. Indeed, I had a run-through to demonstrate how the system works. However, there are sometimes complications when people change jobs or when self-employed people's accounts have not been submitted. In such cases, the telephone service can be used as a back-up.

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): It is clearly important to resolve the problems as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) asked a number of factual questions, along with some others, which the Minister has not been able to answer directly today. Will he write to all those who have participated in the urgent question by the end of business on Thursday, so that we may have a full understanding of the picture?

**Mr Goodwill:** I will certainly be happy to give updates. As I have said, we have now passed 143,000 valid applications—not 120,000, as the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) suggested earlier—and I would be more than happy to give the right hon. Gentleman ongoing updates on that.

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the Minister and to colleagues. In a moment, I will call the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make his application.

## Unaccompanied Child Refugees

*Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)*

1.3 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I seek leave to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the acceptance of unaccompanied asylum seeking children into the UK.

Baroness Williams revealed in a recent response to a question in the other place that under the Dubs scheme only 200 unaccompanied asylum seeking children had so far been transferred to the United Kingdom from mainland Europe. The Government stated before the general election that before closing the scheme they would take 480 children, which in itself was the cause of outrage to many of us who had championed the Save the Children campaign to give sanctuary to 3,000 children in the UK. The Government's choice to take a figure as low as 480 was mean-spirited, blatantly politically motivated and not worthy of this House or this country—and yet the number of desperate children we have actually received is less than half that measly target.

The Government cannot use a lack of capacity or of resources as an excuse. Recent freedom of information requests have shown that local councils have voluntarily offered to accept 1,572 more children than they were supporting. Be it Syrian children, survivors of the Nazi death camps, Ugandan refugees or those fleeing genocide in the Balkans, this country's values of openness and tolerance dictate that we have a moral duty and responsibility to be a land of sanctuary. Our history shows that we are stronger and more successful because of our willingness to take in desperate refugees, who go on to become proud Britons. So why do the Government seem committed to turning their back on the world?

Our actions in this House directly affect the lives of the many hundreds of children who have a legal right to come to the United Kingdom but who are currently scattered across Europe, scared and alone. I and many others feel strongly that this issue must be debated before the House rises for the summer recess. In the summer, migrants make more trips to Europe in unsuitable boats, and I fear that all over again we are likely to see more news of people drowning while trying desperately to reach safety. Put bluntly, by the time October comes around there will be many more children alone, orphaned and living a hand-to-mouth existence in continental Europe.

We must examine our consciences. The Government made an unambitious commitment that had to be dragged out of them. They then cancelled that agreement before managing to meet even half of its terms. I ask the House to take this opportunity to address this outrage and to help these desperate children.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the acceptance of unaccompanied child refugees into the UK. I have listened carefully to his application, and on this occasion I am not persuaded that the matter is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Ordinarily, I am exhorted to say nothing more than that, but I will

say to the hon. Gentleman that I am not insensitive to the strong concern that he and others have on this matter. There is a limitation on time—we do not have unlimited time between now and the recess—but if he wants to seek other opportunities to air his concerns on this matter tomorrow, on Thursday or indeed both—who knows?—he may be successful in his quest.

In a moment, I will call the shadow Education Secretary, the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The hon. Lady has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

## Tuition Fees

*Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)*

1.7 pm

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I seek leave to propose that the House debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration—namely, the Government's proposed increase in tuition fees with regard to the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016, statutory instrument No. 1205, and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016, statutory instrument No. 1206.

On 30 March, the then Leader of the House—now the Justice Secretary—stood at the Dispatch Box and promised a debate and a vote on the Government's plans to increase tuition fees. The debate was scheduled for 19 April, but on 18 April the Prime Minister announced her plan to go to the country in an early general election. That meant that the debate was cancelled. Oddly, the Government have been determined not to grant the House a vote on the matter since the election.

Since then, the shadow Leader of the House raised the issue at Business questions on 22 June and on 6 and 13 July. She finally received a letter from the Leader of the House stating that the Government currently have no plans to schedule these debates in Government time. What a contrast that was with the words of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union who said last week that

“if a statutory instrument is placed in front of the House of Commons, then the Commons decides if it debates or votes on it.”

A statutory instrument is indeed before the House, but we are not being allowed to decide whether to debate or vote on it. How can he expect the Opposition to trust the Government with the sweeping powers that he wants under the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill?

Only two weeks ago, the First Secretary of State called for a national debate on tuition fees and student debt, but that national debate will apparently not include this House. Universities and thousands of students across the country are now uncertain about the rate of tuition fees that can be charged. With neither Government nor Opposition time to debate the matter, we have no choice but to use Standing Order No. 24—so 109 days since it was first promised by Ministers I ask leave for an emergency debate on their plans to raise tuition fees.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Lady asks leaves to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the Government's proposed increase in tuition fees with regard to the Higher Education (Basic Amount) (England) Regulations 2016 and the Higher Education (Higher Amount) (England) Regulations 2016. I have listened carefully to the application, and I am satisfied that the matter raised by the hon. Lady is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the hon. Lady the leave of the House?

*Application agreed to.*

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Lady has obtained the leave of the House. I can therefore advise colleagues that the debate will be held tomorrow, 19 July, as the first item of public business. It will last for up to three hours and arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the hon. Lady's application.

## Points of Order

1.11 pm

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The BBC is our public sector broadcaster and is paid for by all of us through the licence fee. It will announce tomorrow the details of presenters' salaries over the threshold of £150,000. The campaign to get that transparency has gone on for around 10 years, and some of us have been heavily involved in it. The BBC initially avoided the matter and then dragged its feet before eventually agreeing to publish the information, which the general public, as its paymasters, have a right to see. However, the BBC is publishing said information the day before parliamentary scrutiny ends for the summer recess—tomorrow. Have you been informed by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport of her intention to come to the House to outline the unacceptable nature of the timing of the announcement?

**Mr Speaker:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, both for his point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise it. The short answer on the last, key point in his remarks is that, no, I have received no indication from any Minister of an intention to make a statement. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and appreciate that it may be shared by many Members. That said, it is not a point of order for the Chair. The decisions made on the timing of announcements or disclosures by the BBC do not fall within the aegis of the Speaker. It is also fair to say that, strictly speaking, those judgments do not to any significant extent fall within the responsibility of Ministers. Ministers can have views on such matters, which is perfectly proper, but they are not matters for ministerial decision.

The hon. Gentleman has succeeded in putting his concern on the record, and I feel sure that it will have been heard not only by the occupants of the Treasury Bench but by the broadcasters themselves. He is an assiduous denizen of this House, and I feel sure that he will be in his place tomorrow and, indeed, in all likelihood on Thursday. I dare say that he will want to get back to Northern Ireland at some point, but I am sure he will be in his place on Thursday and springing from it with a view to giving the House the benefit of his views in the

summer Adjournment debate. That might be a suitable opportunity for him to expatiate further on this important matter.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance and advice. As you are aware, it is regular and customary for the Government to give a written response to Select Committee reports within two months of publication. The Foreign Affairs Committee published reports in March, in the previous Parliament, on Russia and Turkey. Given the topicality of the anniversary of the attempted coup in Turkey, I was hoping to read a Government response to the report on Turkey. I know we have had a general election and that the period of two months was not continuous, but the period between March and Parliament resuming is more than two months. I would therefore be grateful if you advised me on what I can do to ensure that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides the long-overdue responses to those Select Committee reports.

**Mr Speaker:** I am very sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, whose interest in and knowledge of such matters are well known and respected throughout the House, but the short answer is that the best way to guarantee a timely—or at least less untimely—response to the Select Committee reports will be to reconstitute the Foreign Affairs Committee as soon as possible. He is absolutely right that there has been a long delay. Ministers can take the view that they are responding to a report from a Committee and that the Foreign Affairs Committee currently does not exist and needs to be reconstituted.

I think the hon. Gentleman might have been present when I volunteered some thoughts with some asperity on the merit of getting on with the reconstitution of Select Committees. Although the Chairs have been elected, I am saddened that members have not been elected across the House—it is a pity if some have not got round to doing that. Frankly, however, there is not much that I can do other than say that I am always looking out for the hon. Gentleman. If he bobs up and down with a view to raising the matter, I will try to accommodate him. [*Interruption.*] It is always a delight to hear the views of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), to which I have been accustomed for the past 30 years. It is always better when they are offered from him on his feet, rather than from his seat, but I heard him chuntering from a sedentary position.

## Drugs Policy

1.17 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered drugs policy.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to open this debate on drugs policy because, as many Members will know, the Government have just published an ambitious new drug strategy, which sets out a range of new actions to prevent the harms caused by drug misuse. The Government's previous drug strategy, launched in 2010, balanced action against three strands: reducing the demand for drugs; restricting the supply of drugs; and supporting individuals to recover from drug and alcohol dependence. Since the 2010 strategy was published, local communities have been placed at the heart of public health, giving local government the freedom, responsibility and funding to develop its own ways of improving public health in local populations, including action to reduce drug and alcohol use and to support those recovering from dependence.

We have already taken concerted action to tackle new threats, such as the supply of so-called legal highs, through the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, and there are positive signs that the Government's approach is working. Compared with a decade ago, drug misuse among adults and young people in England and Wales has reduced from 10.5% in 2005 to 8.4% in 2015-16.

**Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** Drug and alcohol abuse is a difficult issue to address. What consultations has the Minister had with the various groups and communities that are rightly concerned about the mental health problems related to such abuse? Has she had any discussions?

**Sarah Newton:** We have consulted widely with a range of experts and academics, and we are well served by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, but we have also consulted communities, users and people with frontline experience of addressing these issues. I totally agree that we have to consider the complexity of the challenges facing individuals who are drawn into substance misuse, and we must ensure that we have tailor-made recovery solutions, which will often include support on underlying vulnerabilities or mental health issues. The strategy, as I will outline in some detail, seeks to take a multifaceted, joined-up approach so that people right at the heart of it can make a sustained recovery, which is what we all want to see.

**Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD):** The Minister says there are signs that the policy is working, but does she ever pause for thought when she sees the significant increase in the number of people dying from drug misuse in the past three years? That picture is not mirrored in other European countries that take a more enlightened approach.

**Sarah Newton:** There is no complacency in my approach, or in the Government's approach. In setting out the context of the new strategy, it is worth reflecting on some of our past successes—we have a good evidence base upon which to build for the future. Like the right

hon. Gentleman, I am concerned by that increase in the number of deaths, often of people with long-term substance misuse problems. If he stays for the debate, I hope he will hear about our approach to prevent those deaths, which is a key part of our new strategy. I will welcome further interventions at that point. A speech from the right hon. Gentleman, who served so well as a Health Minister in the coalition and who played such an important role in some of the Department's successes, would be carefully listened to and taken into consideration in our work in the years ahead.

**Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** The rate of drug mortality started to rise in 2013, when the ring fence was removed and local authorities became responsible for drug and alcohol treatment. Does the Minister regret her Government's decision to remove that ring fence?

**Sarah Newton:** I will address how more people with long-term substance misuse problems are dying, but I remind the hon. Lady that the public health grant remains ring-fenced. It is for local authorities, working with partners in their communities, to come up with the best ways of tackling people's serious and long-term substance misuse problems.

We have seen a phenomenal improvement in our understanding of the overlap between mental health problems and substance abuse problems. Councils not only have the public health grant and their partnerships in local communities; they also have the significant additional funding that the Government have made available for mental health services and community mental health services, as well as the homelessness prevention and troubled families funding. As I will hopefully have an opportunity to say, what is different about the strategy, in part, is the partnership working that we see as being at the heart of driving further improvements.

**Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con):** Parents will welcome the Government's focus on an updated and joined-up strategy. The mental health impacts associated with cannabis use, particularly by teenagers and young people, are one of the most upsetting issues raised in my constituency surgeries. Does she agree that this joined-up approach to local access is vital to the affected families?

**Sarah Newton:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I doubt there is a single Member who has not had either a family member or a constituent come to speak to them about their huge concern about the harrowing effect on young family members who get involved in drugs. There is a growing evidence base and deep concern about the impact of cannabis on the development of young minds. A lot of concern is being raised about how psychosis can be brought on by even modest exposure to cannabis. It is essential that we consider mental health and substance misuse together. I assure her that that is at the heart of what we will be doing.

Although we have all far too frequently come across these heart-breaking cases of young people who have faced the terrible consequences of taking drugs, including losing their life, it is worth noting that, overall, fewer young people are taking drugs. Reliable data show that drug use among 11 to 15-year-olds peaked in 2013, and

[Sarah Newton]

there has since been a continual decline. Again, we are not at all complacent, and we will be doing more work to educate young people about those harms.

Not only are fewer people taking drugs in the first place, but those who enter treatment services are having a good experience. The average waiting time to access treatment remains three days, and within two days for under-18s. Some 80% of young people who enter treatment leave successfully, so we have good foundations on which to work.

**Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): The Minister is making good points about the seriousness of this issue. Does she agree that, although total drug use figures may be coming down, we all see a small number of high-profile incidents in our communities—often murders—involving drugs and drug dealing? That unsettles our communities. Does she have any hints on what we can all do to try to improve the situation? On the business of curing people, has she had a chance to look at the programmes introduced in Gloucestershire by the Nelson Trust, which takes a tough-love approach that seems to be working well?

**Sarah Newton:** I have not visited the Nelson Trust in my hon. Friend's constituency, but perhaps in a subsequent intervention he will invite me to come along. It is important that we continue to build the evidence base on what works. We have an open mind on innovation and on new ways of helping people give up their addiction.

My hon. Friend raises a good point on the overlap between crime and substance misuse, and of course there is a strong correlation. The modern crime prevention strategy identifies substance misuse—both alcohol and drug misuse—as a key driver of crime, so law enforcement has a critical role to play in our drug strategy's joined-up solution.

We want to ensure that law enforcement has all the tools it needs. The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has had a positive impact, and hundreds of retailers across the United Kingdom have closed down or are no longer selling psychoactive substances. The police have arrested suppliers, and action by the National Crime Agency has resulted in the removal of psychoactive substances from sale by UK-based websites. The first offenders have been jailed, and we are seeing the police use their new powers, with more people going through the criminal justice system.

**Richard Graham:** I would be delighted if the Minister cared to visit Gloucester to see the county council's Families First troubled families programme, to look at the Nelson Trust's drug rehabilitation programme and to meet the Hollie Gazzard Trust, which is doing a lot to educate people in schools about the dangers—Hollie Gazzard herself was murdered.

**Sarah Newton:** My hon. Friend illustrates well that in a local community what is needed is a joining up of services, whereby everything from prevention in schools right the way through to the criminal justice system and recovery services is working well. Of course I will be delighted to visit his constituency to see how those different services are joining up so well in Gloucestershire.

**Mims Davies:** Police and law enforcement issues have also been raised in my constituency. Will the Minister be prepared to consider legislation to deal with situations where prolonged cannabis use is having an impact on neighbours, with long-term users having an impact on the daily lives of children and babies next door?

**Sarah Newton:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. What I would be prepared to do is write to her setting out the range of powers that already exist. I know from my constituency that the police are not always aware of all the civil powers they have, in addition to the criminal powers, to tackle some of the antisocial behaviour associated with persistent drug use. I understand and recognise the challenge she is portraying. The troubled families programme is designed in part to help those families where a drug user has substance misuse problems and, in so doing, help the children living in those households.

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): We have already had more mentions in the first 10 minutes of the police than we have police officers in Bassetlaw. Will the Minister confirm that we remain the only country in the world, other than the United States, where the Government lead for drugs is in criminal justice, as opposed to health? If the approach is evidence-based, why is that the case?

**Sarah Newton:** I am sure there are many more police officers in Bassetlaw than there are Members in this Chamber this afternoon. I am proud that our drugs strategy is world-leading, and is recognised to be so, because we take this cross-government approach. This is not a simple issue. Tackling substance abuse and preventing people from taking drugs is not a simple thing to do, which is why we take this whole-government, joined-up approach. Our colleagues from the Department of Health are firmly involved in our activity, as is almost every Department.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sarah Newton:** If colleagues do not mind, I am going to make a bit more progress as I think I will then be able to answer some of the questions.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sarah Newton:** Okay, I will take a few more interventions.

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Greater Manchester police would argue that since the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 supply has shifted to the streets, and the product was more consistent in the headshops, whereas now it is constantly changing. Does the Minister agree that that shift is part of the reason for the epidemic of Spice use in Manchester, which is causing huge problems?

**Sarah Newton:** I welcome the hon. Gentleman's comment. We were all really concerned when we saw those images of people on this kind of new zombie Spice in Manchester, but I was pleased that the 2016 Act proved itself in the case of Spice, because as soon as we saw those dangers emerging we were able to take action to ban it through that Act. As we did the testing to understand the

chemical components and how serious they were, we were then able to shift them into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which gave them a proper classification. Just this Friday I was pleased to see that in Manchester the whole community got together with other cities—there were people there from Nottingham and Wrexham. Law enforcement, the mayor, civil society and local authorities all came together to do exactly what we are proposing in the drugs strategy, which is to take a multi-agency approach, so that the issues that brought about those awful scenes we saw, where vulnerable homeless people in Manchester were so wickedly targeted with that type of Spice by drug dealers, are now being properly managed. This allows homeless people to get the support they need so that they do not fall prey to that activity. The more stringent measures and sentencing available under the Misuse of Drugs Act mean that the police in Manchester have the full range of tools they need to take action there.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): The Netherlands has had a pragmatic, intelligent policy of drug decriminalisation for 50 years. It now has a serious prison problem, because there are not enough prisoners to fill its prisons. Is that not a problem we would like to have here?

**Sarah Newton:** I accept that some Members and some people in our country think that we should decriminalise drugs. I do not agree, because we are evidence-based policy makers and all the evidence shows the awful harms caused by the drugs that we ban and restrict. Our primary job is to keep people safe, and the way to do that is to prevent them from taking drugs in the first place.

**Norman Lamb:** I note the point about this being “evidence-based”, but the evidence clearly shows that the most dangerous drug in terms of harm is alcohol. So will the Minister explain the different approaches the Government take to alcohol, the most dangerous drug, and to cannabis?

**Sarah Newton:** I would not agree that alcohol is the most dangerous drug, as we can see if we look at the substances we are restricting. There are people who take alcohol to such a harmful degree that it is devastating for them, and for their family members and the wider community. I fully accept, as the Government do in the modern crime prevention strategy, that the misuse of alcohol has dramatically harmful effects and contributes to crime, but alcohol taken in moderation is not a harmful drug. The Department of Health constantly keeps this under review and is doing research all the time to understand the health impact of alcohol, and it revisits what it considers to be safe drinking guidance. Public Health England has only recently updated the guidance, which suggests that people should be consuming less alcohol.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Last week, I visited Path 2 Recovery, which does the drug recovery work in my constituency. It expressed concern about the effectiveness of the drug rehabilitation requirements, feeling that they did not have enough teeth, took up a lot of staff time and were not very effective. I note that page 23 of the strategy says that the

Government are evaluating the framework pilots. Will the Minister say something about her thinking on the current effectiveness of drug rehabilitation requirements, and whether we can do anything differently and better?

**Sarah Newton:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. He takes a deep and sustained interest in this policy area. We are very much hoping that when we have the recovery champion up and running, they will take a key role in looking at best practice and developing our evidence base as to what works. We have set out clearly in the strategy that we see sustained abstinence over a 12-month period, getting back into work and playing a full part in society as key outcomes of recovery. That will address some of my hon. Friend's concerns about how in the past too many drug recovery programmes have really just been a revolving door, where people came in and were there for too short a time, and although they may have got clean, what they needed was support on housing, jobs or education so that they could sustain their recovery. Those programmes were not incentivised to enable that. So we are looking at outcome frameworks over a longer period which make sure people have the best possible chance of recovery, with mental health services and recovery services involved in this.

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): I wish to refer back to the point about alcohol abuse, with which I agree. Alcohol is consumed throughout this House; we have 15 bars and restaurants in this place, all selling us alcohol. Some 90% of recreational drug users are not a problem—they consume their drugs and get on with their life—and only about 10% are a problem, so I cannot see why the Minister wants to take alcohol as one problem and drugs as another.

**Sarah Newton:** Our published drugs strategy definitely recognises the relationship between those who take drugs and those who drink alcohol, and understanding that relationship will be a key part of our recovery programmes. In our modern crime prevention strategy, we have a whole series of actions around alcohol. Public Health England and the NHS do a lot of work in that area as well. We are very understanding of the hon. Gentleman's point, and it will form part of our joined-up integrated approach. Is there a further question I can take before making some progress?

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): An enormous part of the harm that is done by drugs is when people, particularly young people, do not know what it is that they are taking. If we are considering a harm prevention strategy, should we not be trying to ensure that we can protect people and help them to know what they are taking? Does that not include making drugs available legally so that we can test them and properly protect people?

**Sarah Newton:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We need to be really clear here: we do not ban substances without an evidence base that shows that they are harmful to people's health. The reason why we put in those protections—whether it is through the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, or the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971—is that the evidence base clearly shows that these substances are harmful. There is no safe way that people

[Sarah Newton]

can take these products. It would be terrible to confuse young people by saying that they can, somehow, safely take a legal high. I know how difficult it is to have these conversations with young people; I have three children in their 20s. I understand the world in which they live and the temptations with which they are faced, but that is why it is so important that we have very clear messages and effective education tools for teachers, which we are investing in now. We will be legislating to make personal, social, health and economic education statutory in schools so that every young person understands the risks of taking alcohol and drugs, which will make them more resilient and more able to resist the temptations. I have said to my own children, “If you can’t go into Boots or any other reputable pharmacist and buy something, then it will not be good for you.” It is really important that we have very simple and clear messages for young people.

**Thangam Debonnaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for generously giving way so many times, but I must challenge her. She said a moment ago that there is such a thing as a safe level of consumption of alcohol, but that is not what the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines say. The NICE guidelines are clear and accurate: there is no safe level of consumption of alcohol. We allow it to be consumed legally and we provide information, treatment and recovery, but we do not criminalise people who are consuming alcohol. Why will she not consider the graph that I can show her—[*Interruption.*] No, I am not supposed to do that. Evidence is available that shows just how much more harmful alcohol is than any other drug.

**Sarah Newton:** This debate today is about the drugs strategy. I have been very generous in answering questions. We understand that there is a relationship between drugs and alcohol, but I will not be drawn into a wider debate about the current legal framework around alcohol, because we are here today to talk about our drugs policy. [*Interruption.*] May I just finish my point? Look, our policy is based on independent evidence, and is informed by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. The vast majority of academic and medical research backs up our position.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sarah Newton:** No, I will not give way as I wish to make some progress. I will answer some more questions later.

Let me remind everyone that we are not at all complacent about this. We definitely recognise the scale of the threat that drugs continue to pose to our society. They do destroy lives and have very serious impacts on families and communities. The cost to society is about £10 billion a year, half of which is related to theft and criminal activity around drug usage.

I wish to go back to this very serious point about drug-related deaths and how they have increased by 10% in the past year. Again, using the best available evidence, we understand that there is a cohort of people—and of older people—who have been taking heroin and crack cocaine for some time, which has had a very

significant impact not only on their mental health, but their physical health. That is a driving factor in our strategy. Using the evidence base, we are able to segment better the treatment and the recovery programmes. We will be doing that with the firm hope that, by tailor-making the support that they need, we will see fewer people die and more people—even if they have been taking drugs for some time—being able to get off drugs and have the independent and fulfilled life that we want everyone to enjoy.

We are also very concerned about the way that synthetic cannabinoids—commonly known as Spice—have been so ruthlessly targeted at the homeless population. We are working on that, alongside our homelessness reduction programmes, with mental health services. In particular, we are looking at young people who might be vulnerable to these types of substances. We want to ensure that everybody has access to the best possible recovery programme.

The strategy builds on the three strands of the previous strategy—reducing demand, restricting supply and building recovery—by embracing a smarter, partnership-based approach, both locally and nationally, and recognising the links between different Government Departments and different Government ambitions. Clearly, we want to reduce crime, improve people’s life chances, promote better health, tackle homelessness and protect the most vulnerable people in our society. The strategy sets out key actions covering the wide range of partners critical to tackling drug misuse successfully, including those in education, health, safeguarding, criminal justice, housing and employment.

The strategy also introduces a new fourth strand on global action to bring out the critical importance of international co-operation. We want to reduce the demand for drugs by acting early to prevent people, especially young people, from taking drugs in the first place and then preventing escalation to more harmful use. This starts with universal action to give all young people the resilience and confidence they need to make positive choices about their health and well-being, including resisting drugs. For example, we will be legislating to make PSHE statutory in schools and expanding the Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service for young people. That will be complemented with more targeted action to prevent drug misuse among vulnerable groups, including young people who are not in education, employment or training, looked-after children, offenders and the homeless. There will also be a targeted approach for emerging and evolving threats such as performance-enhancing drugs, so-called chemsex drugs and, sadly, the misuse of prescription drugs.

Tough enforcement is also a fundamental part of our drug strategy and we will continue to bear down on those who seek to benefit from the misery caused to others. We will take a smarter approach to restricting the supply of drugs, adapting our approach to reflect changes in criminal activity. For example, we have taken action to close down the mobile phone lines being used for drug dealing and other dreadful exploitation such as the trafficking of young people to sell drugs. Those mobile phone lines will be closed down. We will also use innovative data and technology to disrupt supply over the darknet. Our Serious Organised Crime Agency and the National Crime Agency have a very important role to play.

**Diana Johnson:** Let me take the Minister back to investment and the idea that if this matter was treated as a health issue, there would be more investment in drug treatment services. Is it not the case that in France, where this is treated as a health issue, the investment is less than it is here where we have treated it as a criminal justice issue and a health issue combined?

**Sarah Newton:** I just do not accept the premise of what the hon. Lady is saying. We do not take it in the way that she describes. We see this very much as a partnership or a joined-up whole Government approach. Of course health and recovery is at the centre of our strategy. It is not a fair interpretation to say that this is led by justice. It is about a joined-up whole system approach. Recovery remains a vital part of the Government's approach.

**John Mann:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sarah Newton:** I will make a bit more progress. We are absolutely determined to improve support for those dependent on drugs by raising the quality of treatment, and to improve outcomes by ensuring that people get the right interventions for their needs. That means ensuring that they can access the full range of services to help them rebuild their life, which may include mental health, housing, employment and training services, and a lot of support for a stable family life, free from crime. I am pleased that we will appoint a national recovery champion, who will drive progress by visiting different parts of the country to identify good practice and ensure local collaboration. We will also encourage partnership working and transparency by developing a new set of outcome measures to give local areas further support through Public Health England.

For the first time, we are setting out global action. We are already taking a global lead on our psychoactive substance work, encouraging data exchange to give us a richer picture of international trends, and bringing in global bans on the most harmful new psychoactive substances. We will continue our work through the United Nations. We have a balanced, evidence-based approach to drugs. Collaborating with partners around the world will help to give us a better intelligence base and enable us to take better action.

I hope that Members will see that this is a truly cross-Government strategy that requires the commitment and coming together of many Departments. The Home Secretary will establish a new drugs strategy board, of which I will be a member. It will include people from all the key Government Departments, Public Health England, and national police leads. Then we can all plan together to implement the strategy and hold each other to account. I am confident that the strategy is grounded in the best available evidence. We consulted extensively with key partners working in the drugs field, and I am sure that the strategy will make a lasting difference, but we know that there is no easy way to tackle drugs and the harms that they cause, and we need to do much more. Our strategy is flexible enough to enable us to respond to emerging threats.

Finally, by working together across government, locally and nationally, we can genuinely deliver the safer, healthier Britain, free from the harm of drugs, that we all want.

1.52 pm

**Ms Diane Abbott** (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Everyone in this Chamber knows that drug abuse casts a long shadow over our society. Whether it is the many thousands of crimes committed by drug users seeking to fund their habit—fully 45% of acquisitive crime is committed by regular heroin or crack cocaine users—the chaos caused in families and communities by drug use, or the lives ruined or cut short by it, the scale of the problem is truly shocking. We have the highest recorded level of mortality from drugs misuse since records began. There are record numbers of deaths from morphine or heroin, and from cocaine abuse. Under this Government, the UK has become the drugs overdose capital of Europe.

According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, one in three of Europe's overdose deaths—they are mainly related to opioids—occurs in the UK. That is roughly 10 families a day bereaved as a result of illegal drugs—more than are bereaved in traffic accidents. We have an overwhelming economic, moral and public health case for examining this country's drugs policy.

Labour Members welcome the publication this month of the 2017 drugs strategy, even though it comes two years after the Government's self-imposed deadline. However, having waited nearly two years for it, we have to confess to being a little disappointed. Let us remember what has happened along the way. Drug rehabilitation centres have been closed; budgets to tackle drug abuse have been cut; key services such as the NHS are under increasing pressure; and there have been cuts to police officers and Border Force guards by the thousand. In the light of these constrained resources, it is not clear how much impact this strategy, in which there is much to welcome in principle, will have.

Official drug strategies always include reducing demand, increasing awareness and education, restricting supply, tackling organised crime and improving treatment and recovery, so those elements, although important, are not new. The Government's recognition of the importance of evidence-based treatment, recovery and harm reduction is welcome, but what stakeholders, and families and communities up and down the country who are suffering from drug abuse, want to know is whether the strategy is not just old methods in a shinier package. We frequently use the term "war on drugs"; I ask the Minister how exactly we expect to win a war with reduced forces and resources on the frontline.

Responsibility for drug and alcohol treatment was transferred from the NHS to local authorities in 2013, which was undoubtedly a good idea in principle; local authorities are much better placed than central Government to facilitate co-operation between drug and alcohol services, local police, those involved in social and youth work, education and housing and other stakeholders, but sadly local authorities gained those new responsibilities at a time of bone-crunching pressure on their budgets, and this transfer of responsibility meant an end to ring-fenced budgets for drug treatment.

**Diana Johnson:** I agree exactly with my right hon. Friend, but does she think that when the Government transferred that responsibility to local authorities, they missed a trick by not making it clear that police and crime commissioners and representatives from the criminal

[Diana Johnson]

justice system should sit on health and wellbeing boards, so that they could provide input on drug and alcohol treatment services?

**Ms Abbott:** My hon. Friend is exactly right, because the purpose of transferring responsibility to local authorities was that they should bring together all the stakeholders, including police and crime commissioners and the local police.

**John Mann:** Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning the vast number of Labour local authorities that, in 2013, took their drug service out of the NHS and gave it to private providers? That includes mine in Nottinghamshire. Should we not have a Labour party position that would stop them doing this?

**Ms Abbott:** It is unfortunate that many authorities, including many Labour authorities, privatised these services. Privatising them necessarily makes it harder to achieve the co-ordination and co-operation that was the whole point of having these services sit in the local authorities.

Local councils face unprecedented cuts to their funding—anything from 25% to 40% of their entire budget. Is it any wonder that drug-related deaths are increasing when local authorities do not have the funds necessary for comprehensive treatment programmes?

**Norman Lamb:** The right hon. Lady has talked about the war on drugs, and how it has been undermined by a lack of resources, but does she favour simply increasing the resources in that war, or a more enlightened approach that involves decriminalisation and, potentially, the regulation of cannabis markets so that we take the criminals out of the market altogether?

**Ms Abbott:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We cannot have a meaningful strategy on drug abuse without looking at the question of resources, but I would be the first to say that it is more complex than simply providing more money.

To give an overview of what local authorities are facing, Barnsley cut its drug and alcohol service by more than a third between 2015-16 and 2016-17. Some services will be unavailable and key drugs practitioners will be made redundant. Staffordshire County Council was forced to make cuts of 45% to its drug and alcohol treatment budget over the past two years, due to its local commissioning group pulling the expected £15 million of NHS funding. Middlesbrough Council, which sadly has one of the highest rates of death from heroin overdoses in the country, cut its budget by £1 million last year.

When the Home Office announced those policies, it correctly said that for every £1 spent on public health, £2.50 is saved. However, instead of helping local authorities to follow that logic, the Government have obliged them to pursue short-term cuts. Some local authorities have tried, and some have been particularly innovative in seeking efficiencies in their public health budgets, but the reality is that too many are looking at significant reductions in services, and some are even privatising services. When it comes to public health, the Government

talk a good talk but do not follow through with the resources. I note with dismay that the strategy includes no mention of providing more resources to local authorities, which after all are on the frontline of any strategy against drug use.

**Ruth George:** Bearing in mind the figures that my right hon. Friend has set out—for every £1 spent on public health, £2.50 is saved for the public purse—does she agree that the overall cuts of £85 million to local authorities' public health budgets are a false economy that are not serving our communities, or even the Exchequer?

**Ms Abbott:** I think that the public health cuts were disastrous. The Treasury, in an extraordinary example of short-term thinking, clawed back the funds that had been promised. The King's Fund has shown that local authorities in England are being forced to spend more than 5% less on public health initiatives this year than in 2014, and tackling drug misuse in adults will face a 5.5% cut of more than £22 million. Until the Government put their money where their mouth is on the drugs strategy, they will have to accept that some stakeholders remain sceptical.

There was an interesting discussion about alcohol earlier in the debate. Ministers seem to struggle with the notion that alcohol is actually a drug, but the truth is that in absolute terms alcohol causes more harm than any illegal drug. It is shocking that the strategy managed only two paragraphs on alcohol, which is a major killer in Britain today. Professor Ian Gilmore, chair of Alcohol Health Alliance UK, has said that

“we also need a dedicated strategy on alcohol which recognises the breadth of harm done by alcohol. In the UK alcohol is responsible for over 26,000 deaths per year, over 1 million hospital admissions per year, and... alcohol cost the UK economy between £27—£52 billion in 2016.”

In 2015, there were 8,000 casualties caused by drink-driving alone. Professor Ian Gilmore continued:

“The time has come for the Government to take an evidence-based approach to controlling the supply of and reducing the demand for a legal drug which is sold on virtually every street corner, sometimes at pocket money prices.”

**Paul Flynn:** Portugal de-penalised drug use in 2001 and, as a result, halved the number of heroin users in the country, and the number of deaths has fallen from 80 a year to 16 a year. In the 30 years in which my right hon. Friend and I have been in the House, can she think of any initiative by any Government that has reduced drug harm so spectacularly?

**Ms Abbott:** My hon. Friend is a passionate proponent of decriminalisation, and I think that he makes his own case.

The strategy claims that the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has been hugely successful in stopping the proliferation of legal highs. It is true that in the first six months since the Act came into force nearly 500 people were arrested. However, as various drug charities suspected, despite those measures demand for the substances continues to increase. So-called legal highs have simply been pushed into the black market or on to the internet, which I suspect is why the Government have in the same breath claimed that they will focus on eliminating the vast range of problems that these substances cause. That exposes

something that the Opposition made clear during the passage of the Act: legislation is effective only if there is a wider strategy in place.

The strategy has now been produced, but meanwhile legal highs are more dangerous than ever, affecting the poorest and most vulnerable in society. It remains the case that too many people, particularly women, go to prison without a drug habit and leave with a drug habit. I believe that Ministers, working with the Ministry of Justice, could do a great deal more to make our prisons drug-free zones. It is an elementary issue, but one that the Government continue to fail to address.

I am sure that most Members were as alarmed as I was last year by CCTV footage of a drone making deliveries to a prison. That is the favoured manner of getting contraband, in the form of mobile phones, weapons and drugs, into our prisons. There are no easy answers, but if there are not enough guards to guard the prisoners, I find it hard to believe that they could devote much time to searching one another or taking down drug-mule drones. My hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Justice has repeatedly said that the decimation of prison officer numbers under the Conservatives is a key reason for the Government's inability to stem the growing influx of drugs into prisons. What specific extra staffing resources will be given to prisons to enable officers and prison authorities to meet the objectives of the new drugs strategy?

The Minister referred to global issues and to the international war on drugs, but she will be aware that it is largely regarded as failing. We would like to hear how Ministers plan to make the international war on drugs more successful than it has been. There are some aspects of the strategy that we welcome. For example, it is excellent that greater efforts will be made to provide young people with effective, evidence-based drug prevention education. As a parent, I think that most parents are unable to keep up with the kinds of drugs that young people are discovering nowadays. As I said earlier, it is very important that prisoners are given more help to get into recovery and that their progress is monitored closely. We need far clearer and more explicit guidelines on the value of opioid maintenance treatment which, if properly implemented, allows many people with opioid dependence to live their life and, crucially, prevents overdoses.

Another important aspect of the strategy is its recognition that people can slip through the cracks of dual diagnosis of mental health problems and problem substance use. I am glad that the strategy, at least in principle, wants those people to be better catered for, rather than shunted between services that are reluctant to take on complex and demanding cases.

There is a tendency to regard drug use and abuse as a personal failure. We in the Opposition would rather regard it as a societal failure. We say that any drug strategy has to look at the broader picture, including what is happening in society and the resources available. Although we welcome the drug strategy in principle, we question whether the resources or the will is there to make its worthy aims real and manifest.

2.9 pm

**Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): I suspect that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and I will have sympathy with my hon. Friend the Minister, given the bounds within which she has had to present

this strategy to the House. She presented the strategy with candour; my only concern is whether she really believes in it. As I will discuss, the evidence from around the world is that the approach within the strategy is profoundly mistaken and simply not working.

I rather suspect that the speech made by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) will have disappointed those behind her the most: here was an opportunity really to engage in thinking on this issue and to persuade us to consider the actual evidence from around the world. I fear that the right hon. Lady opted for the "safety first" routine: she will have avoided disagreeable headlines about the Opposition's drug policy in the *Daily Mail*. As I shall come on to say, we need a space in which we can properly consider the issue. The kernel of my argument is that we need a royal commission to assess our drugs policy, to get it to the right place.

President Nixon declared a war on drugs in 1971. Nearly half a century later, I defy anyone to disagree that it has been a global public policy catastrophe. We desperately need a new approach and a completely different strategy. Although I welcome the emphasis that the Government strategy puts on improving treatment and recovery for users, it also rehearses the same failed arguments for prohibition and criminalisation that have patently failed. The measure of that failure is spelt out in the strategy itself: it tells us that in England and Wales the number of deaths from drug misuse registered in 2015 increased by 10.3% to 2,479. That follows an increase of 14.9% in the previous year and 19.6% the year before that. Deaths involving heroin—about half the total—more than doubled from 2012 to 2015, as the right hon. Lady mentioned. The strategy also informs us that, each year in the United Kingdom, drugs cost society £10.7 billion in policing, healthcare and crime, with drug-fuelled theft alone costing £6 billion a year.

I am delighted that the Government have published these figures. When I was the criminal justice Minister, between 2010 and 2012, the Ministry of Justice would not provide the numbers to me, directly or otherwise. In the end, I got Bob Ainsworth, a former drugs policy Minister, to table a written parliamentary question to me as a way of eliciting the numbers from the Government. I am fine about their being on the public record now: we can see the cost of our failure of public policy in this area.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is noted for his candour on this subject and the House respects him for it. Until 1968 we ran what was widely known throughout the world as the British system: GPs prescribed diamorphine hydrochloride and cocaine hydrochloride. We had nothing like the number of deaths today because of the purity of the product. Now the cause of death is impurity and differentiated supplies.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it has been almost impossible to have a rational, sensible and sane debate on this subject? The 1968 legislation was a panicked reaction, fuelled by the most reactionary forces. As a humble individual on these Benches, I ask the hon. Gentleman to accept my wholehearted support for his excellent idea that a royal commission should consider this issue. Frankly, there is not a country in the world that does not have a drug problem, and there is certainly no victory in the so-called war on drugs.

**Crispin Blunt:** I wholly agree. If the evidence of failure is clear in the United Kingdom, the problem is dramatically worse in other countries of the world. However, even in the UK, as page 16 of the strategy makes clear, drugs are

“a significant threat to our national security.”

There is a way of dealing with the problem.

Ever since prohibition or criminalisation of illicit drug use was enshrined in the 1961 UN convention on narcotic drugs, we have been fighting a losing battle to stem the global drugs trade. As is increasingly recognised—especially in Latin America, where many leaders are crying out for their societies to be rescued from the malign fall-out from a multi-billion dollar criminal industry—eradication, interdiction and criminalisation of consumption have failed. We have left the manufacture and supply in the hands of organised criminals and treated their victims—many of whom are vulnerable members of our society and many of whom have mental illnesses—as criminals, and they are unable or unwilling to seek medical help due to the illegality, exclusion and stigma.

I hope that hon. Members will reflect on this simple statistic: between 2006 and 2013, 111,000 people died in the Mexican drug war—as a result not of drug consumption, but of the wars over the control of this vast industry. Building on the work of the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, convened by former Presidents of Brazil, Colombia and Mexico, the Global Commission on Drug Policy has opened a public discussion about the association between the drug trade, violence and corruption.

**Norman Lamb:** I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said. He has talked about the number of people who have lost their lives through violence in Latin America. Does he agree that the policy engenders violence in our own communities—particularly poor communities—in this country? The only way in which the supply to a particular community can be maintained is through the use of extreme violence. Does that not add to the case for much needed reform?

**Crispin Blunt:** Unsurprisingly, I agree entirely with the right hon. Gentleman.

**Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con):** I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I declare an interest: I used to prosecute national-level drug barons. We are talking about gun-toting criminals, who think nothing of shooting each other and the people who carry their drugs for them. What on earth does my hon. Friend think their reaction will be to the idea of drugs being regulated? Does he really think that these awful people are suddenly going to become law-abiding citizens?

**Crispin Blunt:** I shall come to my hon. Friend's point directly. We have set up the business model that those people use. The value of that business model is why people go to the lengths they do to kill so many in trying to maintain control.

I come back to commending the work of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which has advocated a balanced, comprehensive and evidence-based debate on drugs, focusing on humane and effective solutions to

reduce the harm caused by drugs to individuals and societies. Last year, it succeeded in getting the issue back on the international agenda at the United Nations General Assembly special session. Tragically, however, the regressive voices upholding prohibition and criminalisation stopped the endorsement of a new approach. All the while, however, more and more countries are starting new policies, while we lag behind.

Decriminalisation of personal possession is proving to have significant effects in reducing harm where it has been tried. In Portugal, where the possession of small amounts of drugs has been de-penalised since 2001, there is now a clear political consensus behind the policy. The data show that decriminalisation has not led to increased drug usage rates—in fact, in numerous categories, Portuguese usage rates are now among the lowest in the EU, particularly in comparison with states with stringent criminalisation regimes. Drug-related pathologies, such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to misuse, have decreased dramatically as the Government are able to offer treatment programmes without having to drag users into the criminal justice system, where it becomes even harder to manage addiction and abuse. The focus is public health; penalties are used only if considered necessary and productive.

**Victoria Atkins:** My hon. Friend is being generous in allowing me to intervene. I refer again to my experience in the criminal courts. We tried that experiment in this country, when David Blunkett downgraded the classification of cannabis. The impact of that on the ground in magistrates courts up and down the country was terrible. Young people were coming to court with very severe mental health problems because of their use of cannabis. We tried the experiment and it failed.

**Crispin Blunt:** It has not failed. If we adjust one part of the system and move from a categorisation of B to C, as we did with cannabis, then that sends a message about usage and the rest. However, if the supply of cannabis is in the hands of people who are not going to tell people what is in it, or educate them as to the effect it is going to have on their mind, it is hardly surprising that we see a massive increase in schizophrenia caused by the use of these drugs, because people do not know what they are buying and we are not in a position to educate them properly about the consequences of their use. That is why there is a public health issue about getting a regulated supply into place whereby we could educate people at the point of purchase. I will come on to talk about the relationship between the dealer and his interest in how he deals with his client base in a regulated and licensed system.

**Paul Flynn:** Having been in the House at the time of David Blunkett's change in the category of cannabis, and very much involved with it, I remember that everyone predicted an increase in cannabis use when the classification was changed. That did not happen. In fact, there was a reduction in the use of cannabis when the penalties were less. Contrary to all the expectations, and the great argument we hear in this place, it is not the drugs that are killing people—it is prohibition that is killing people.

**Crispin Blunt:** While I am obviously minded to agree with the hon. Gentleman, the arguments that my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle

(Victoria Atkins) and the Government are putting forward in trying to send a message should be considered somewhere so that we can go through the evidence. That is very difficult to do in a charged environment where the tabloid press will be seeking to send a message if we are perceived to be weak in this area of public policy. Yet hundreds of thousands of people across the world are dying because this policy is in the wrong place globally. I rather hope that a royal commission here in the United Kingdom could assist us in getting to a place where, based on evidence, we can begin to lead the international debate.

As well as the decriminalisation of personal possession, we ought to consider the merits of a legal, regulated market taken out of the control of organised crime. A recent report by the drugs policy think-tank Volteface makes the case for a legal, regulated cannabis market in the UK to improve support, guidance and access to treatment for people experiencing problematic cannabis use. It found that the current illegal and unregulated market means that cannabis users are hidden from health practitioners, leaving them “fumbling around in the dark trying to find them”.

Among people showing signs of cannabis dependence, only 14.6% have ever received treatment, help or support specifically because of their drug use, and 5.5% had received it in the previous six months. The report says a regulated market would provide

“opportunities for more public guidance, packaging controls, products which vary in potency, research into cannabis culture and consumption to improve interventions, and reduced stigma to enable access to services.”

I am sorry to say that the drug dealers reading the strategy and watching this debate will simply laugh at us. We are doing nothing to undermine their basic business model. By ensuring that supply is criminal, we have created a highly lucrative, criminal black market for the distribution and sale of drugs, worth an estimated £4.6 billion per year in the United Kingdom—and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and Europol estimate that the global market is worth \$435 billion a year. That is an astonishing amount of money, and it is hardly surprising that people arm themselves, and fight and kill, to try to maintain their share of that market.

Drugs are believed to account for some 20% of all crime proceeds, with about 50% of all organised crime groups believed to be involved in drugs, and about half of transnational organised crime proceeds derive from the drugs trade. Profit margins are enormous, with 100-fold increases in price from production to retail. Exploited customers, trapped in addiction—indeed, having been encouraged and incentivised there by the criminal dealer—turn to crime to pay the inflated prices. Those using heroin, cocaine or crack cocaine are estimated to commit between a third and a half of all acquisitive crime. Drug dealers vie with one another to gain market exclusivity in their domains, leading to further appalling gang violence.

Yet that is only part of the story, as the uncomfortable truth is that respect for our laws is diminished when large swathes of the population can see no difference between their recreational drugs of choice and their recreational use of alcohol and tobacco. Alcohol prohibition was an acknowledged public policy disaster when it was tried in the United States in the 1920s. If the state or its licensed agents became a benign, regulated monopoly supplier instead, that would smash the drug dealer's

business model. Proceeds from sales or taxation of sales would pay for treatment and public health education. We would protect people because they would know what they were buying.

Instead of more of the same, we should be brave enough to be at the forefront of international thinking. Legalisation, licensing and regulation may be radical ideas for the United Kingdom, but forms of decriminalisation are already being widely put into practice in Europe and in North America and Latin America. The merits of other countries' approaches, and the extensive work of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, warrant proper consideration in British public debate and policy making. A royal commission would be able to do that. It would be the most appropriate way to consider fully and carefully the complex issues involved and all the policy options, exploring best practice abroad and responding to increasing calls here and internationally for a truly new strategy.

2.26 pm

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in today's general debate on drugs policy—a very important issue that affects every community, class and creed in the country. The scourge of drugs misuse and its associated criminal and antisocial behaviours has been a blight on too many of our cities, towns and villages for far too long.

Only last week, I conducted a home visit to a distraught family who were coming to terms with the tragic loss of a young man from drug misuse—a thoroughly decent family who had tried to get help for their loved one, but sadly were not successful in time. I will not go into the specific details, but a grieving mother and sister explained about the physical and behavioural changes they observed, and about their loved one stealing from other family members and the general antisocial behaviour that ensued. This story is not uncommon across any of our communities.

That set of circumstances brought home to me why we need aggressively to tackle the forces of organised crime, who are making millions from human misery—effective enforcement against the dealers is a key factor in the war against drugs—while sympathetically addressing the health and safety of users, and with greater emphasis on prevention and harm reduction rather than punitive punishments. Once criminalised, these victims can often face further life challenges and stigmatisation, all of which can result in users finding it harder to recover and to move on from drug problems and addiction, in some cases even trapping them in a self-destructive cycle.

As right hon. and hon. Members will be aware, health and justice, which are key areas in any joined-up drugs policy, are devolved to Scotland. The regulation of all proscribed drugs remains a reserved issue, and the policy is set by the UK Government. There is a strong argument that drugs policy should also be devolved to Scotland. The Minister herself referred to a joined-up, whole-policy approach, and that would be easier to achieve in a Scottish context if we had all the levers of policy. However, the Scottish Government continue to work with the Home Office to implement a series of actions against drug misuse in Scotland.

It is estimated that drug misuse costs society in Scotland £3.5 billion a year. That is very similar to the impact of alcohol misuse, which is estimated to cost £3.6 billion a year. Combined, this amounts to about £1,800 for every adult. In 2008, the SNP Government

[*Martyn Day*]

published the current national drugs strategy for Scotland, “The Road to Recovery”, which set out a new strategic direction for tackling drug misuse based on treatment services promoting recovery. The strategy continues to receive cross-party support in the Scottish Parliament. Evidence has shown that drug taking in the general population is falling, with misuse among young people at its lowest in a decade. However, drug deaths are currently at their highest. The approach taken recognises the importance of supporting families, and the number of family support organisations across Scotland is growing. In addition, several national organisations have been established or commissioned to support delivery of the strategy. They include the Scottish Recovery Consortium, which was established to drive and promote recovery for individuals, family members and communities affected by drugs, as well as Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs and the recently launched Partnership for Action on Drugs in Scotland.

The Scottish Government also work with Scotland’s 38 alcohol and drug partnerships, which bring together local partners, including health boards, local authorities, police and voluntary agencies. They are responsible for developing local strategies for tackling problem alcohol and drug use, and promoting recovery, based on an assessment of local needs. A good example is the current Glasgow city health and social care partnership proposals for a pilot safer drug consumption and heroin assisted treatment facility in the city centre. The latest iteration of its business case was presented to the HSCP on 21 June 2017. The facility is designed to service the needs of an estimated 400 to 500 individuals who inject publicly in the city centre and experience high levels of harm. In particular, it is anticipated that the facility will significantly reduce the risk of further outbreaks of blood-borne viruses.

In 2015 there were 157 drug-related deaths in the Glasgow City Council area—up from 114 the previous year—and 132 of them involved an opiate or opioid. The recent rise in deaths is concerning and not unique to Glasgow. I am grateful to the Transform Drug Policy Foundation for its briefing, which informed me that around a third of Europe’s drug misuse deaths occur in the UK. We all need to do something to address this challenge. The British Medical Association and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs have indicated their support for pursuing safer drug consumption proposals to promote harm reduction. Although that remains a matter for authorities in Glasgow to take forward, the Scottish Government will subsequently consider any formal proposal that is brought to their attention for consideration.

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is reserved legislation, so any proposal is dependent on authorities in Glasgow making a formal request to the Lord Advocate to vary prosecution guidance. It would make sense to devolve all drugs policy to Scotland, to allow the Scottish Parliament to legislate on it and other issues.

**John Mann:** The Scottish Government have followed entirely the Tory Government’s approach on recovery-based treatment, as opposed to NHS treatment. Why would devolving power make a ha’pence of difference, when all the SNP has done is to adopt Tory policies and their consequential failures?

**Martyn Day:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but I am saying that it would be another tool in our armoury that might allow future drugs policy to go in a different direction. We can only work within the current constraints. At its conference last year, the Scottish National party backed the decriminalisation of cannabis for medicinal use, but that is another issue currently reserved to Westminster, so we cannot go down that line.

A few years ago, a survey conducted by Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs found that peer support was an important part of the recovery process. It also found that despite the pressures most families wait at least two years before seeking help—a delay that can prove fatal, as evidenced by the constituents I mentioned earlier. Their loved one had been using for about six months, by their own reckoning, prior to his death.

In my area we have a wide range of support services. In Linlithgow, the 1st Step Café is run by people who are in recovery, and who now help others living with the effects of addiction. Across West Lothian, the social work addictions team—known as SWAT—supports those affected by drugs or alcohol to plan for recovery, and promotes goal-focused work to make positive changes. In the Falkirk and Forth valley area, Addictions Support and Counselling assists with community rehabilitation and recovery.

Undoubtedly for the users, their families and local communities, recovery is the key, but it cannot work on its own. It has to be coupled with education about the dangers and about harm reduction, and with public health measures—improving access to treatment and reducing waiting times. In short, the issue is no longer simply one of law enforcement, although tackling the supply of drugs and drug-related anti-social behaviour will, I suspect, remain a permanent feature of our societies for some considerable time.

2.34 pm

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** I very much welcome the strategy, with its emphasis on effectively treating and, even more importantly, preventing substance misuse problems. I welcome the acknowledgement that national and local government have a clear responsibility to improve public health with regard to addictions. Indeed, because such problems often affect the most vulnerable in society, this is a matter of social justice. I welcome the strategy’s recognition of that, and of the clear and very sad links between substance misuse and a range of other issues: underperformance at school and later exclusion from the job market, domestic abuse, mental ill health, sexual exploitation, homelessness and imprisonment.

I welcome the recognition of the need for a joined-up, partnership approach to address those issues. I implore local government to ensure that, as some local authorities do, individuals receive support from one lead caseworker rather than from a confusing mix of social workers and agencies. I heard of one family who had to cope—yes, cope is the right word—with 26 different local agencies trying to help them.

I particularly welcome the strategy’s focus on helping the most vulnerable young people, such as those in care, those on the streets, those in the criminal justice system or at risk of entering it, those in troubled families and young girls at risk of entering prostitution. We know

how pimps use drugs to enslave young girls, particularly those who have been trafficked. I welcome the strategy's prioritisation of helping those young people, many of whom have never had a first chance in life. The strategy's approach is designed to give them the chance they need to live a life of self-worth, free of the devastating impact of substance misuse.

I particularly welcome the Minister's statement that we must look at mental health and substance misuse together, and the recognition of the key role that parents and families can play in the treatment and prevention of substance misuse. Family breakdown—or, if not breakdown, chaotic or dysfunctional family relationships—must surely be one of the key reasons, if not the key reason, for young people seeking comfort in drugs. I welcome the inclusion in the strategy of the need to support families in their own right, with the suggestion:

“Evidence-based psychological interventions which involve family members should be available locally and local areas should ensure that the support needs of families and carers affected by drug misuse are appropriately met.”

That echoes a comment piece that I wrote for this week's *The House* magazine about young people's mental health problems, in which I said that we need to do much more to strengthen family relationships and offer holistic family support, engaging parents, carers or wider family members. If we are to do that, there needs to be substantial growth in the number of people in local authority services trained to provide relationship and family support, and to provide appropriate counselling and help for young people in such difficulties. I am glad, too, that the strategy recognises that the reality of harm experienced by substance abusers' families is significant, and that families need help as well.

I am chair of the all-party group on alcohol harm. I recognise that the strategy contains recommendations for joined-up action on alcohol and drugs, and that areas of the strategy apply to both. As we have heard this afternoon, however, we need to do more. Statistics illustrate the extent of the harm caused by alcohol. In 2015 there were 2,479 deaths from drug misuse. In the same year, there were 23,000 alcohol-related deaths. Drug deaths equate to only 10% of the number of deaths caused by alcohol. We must rise to the challenge of providing sufficient resources and setting out a clear Government alcohol strategy. The current strategy is more than five years old, and much has changed in that time—yet, sadly, much has stayed the same.

I would particularly like the Government to address the impact of alcoholic parents or carers on children. An estimated 2.5 million children in this country live with problematic drinkers. In a debate on alcohol harm that I secured on 2 February, Members gave deeply moving accounts of living as children with alcoholic parents and carers. Those of us in the Chamber very much welcomed the response of the then Under-Secretary of State for Health, the former Member for Oxford West and Abingdon, who said that she would look into the matter. I ask the Minister to take back to her successor, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), a request for further progress, because the very important and specific issue of children living with problematic drinkers has not been sufficiently addressed.

Evidence shows that spending money on treatment is effective, with every £1 invested generating £2.50 of savings for society. Yet only 6% of dependent drinkers

in this country actually access treatment. It is vital that we recognise the need to review the alcohol strategy. The current level of alcohol harm illustrates the need to do so urgently. If Members will bear with me, I want to go into this in a little more detail. The harm caused by alcohol consumption extends not just to the families of the individuals involved but to wider society. It often harms innocent bystanders, such as those injured in road traffic accidents or patients needing treatment for serious illnesses who have to wait because precious NHS resources are being used to tackle the issue. It affects us all as taxpayers through the tax bills we pay, and it affects the emergency services.

Just a few months ago, our all-party group produced a report, “The Frontline Battle”, on the impact of the misuse of alcohol on those who serve us in the emergency services. Some of the stories about emergency services staff being assaulted are heartrending. I therefore welcome the private Member's Bill, which I understand will be presented by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) tomorrow, to address assaults on emergency services staff. However, we cannot address that without also looking at the fact that so many of those attacks are caused by alcohol abuse.

There has never been a greater need for robust Government action to tackle the massive problem resulting from alcohol consumption. That has been evidenced by the Public Health England report, which has already been mentioned, that was published in December 2016 at the specific request of the former Prime Minister David Cameron. It paints a bleak picture: 10 million people are currently drinking at levels that are increasing their risk of health harm. Devastatingly, it finds that for those aged 15 to 49 in England—those of working age—alcohol is now the leading risk factor for ill health, early mortality and disability. There are now over 1 million hospital admissions relating to alcohol each year, half of which involve those in the lowest three socioeconomic deciles. Alcohol-related mortality has increased, particularly for liver disease, which has increased by 400% since 1970. We need a strategy because 167,000 years of working life were lost to alcohol in 2015. Alcohol is more likely to kill people during their working lives than many other causes of death—in other words, it causes premature deaths. Alcohol accounts for 10% of the UK's burden of disease and death, and in the past three decades there has been a threefold rise in alcohol-related deaths.

**Norman Lamb:** I very much share the hon. Lady's concerns about the danger of alcohol and the damage it causes to society. Does she support the case for a minimum unit price for alcohol? It could act as a deterrent, particularly to prevent young and disadvantaged people from ending up with all the consequences that flow from excess alcohol use.

**Fiona Bruce:** I agree. In fact, the introduction of minimum unit pricing was the very first recommendation in the 2012 strategy. The most recent review states that it “is a highly targeted measure which ensures tax increases are passed on to the consumer and improves the health of the heaviest drinkers. These people are experiencing the greatest amount of harm.”

Increasing the price of alcohol would save lives, but would not penalise moderate drinkers, so I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Public Health

[Fiona Bruce]

England very clearly states in its report that affordability is the lead factor in addressing health problems resulting from alcohol harm.

If I may, I will mention the issue, which again relates to cost, of white cider products, such as Frosty Jacks. They are almost exclusively drunk by the vulnerable, the young, the homeless and dependent drinkers—just the kind of people who, as I have said, need help. Just £3.50 buys a large bottle of white cider that is the equivalent of 22 shots of vodka. Time and again, homeless hostels tell us that that is what the people there drink and what, because of its high strength, causes their deaths. One of the most heartrending meetings I have attended in the House was when a mother came to talk to our all-party group about her teenage daughter. This happy, carefree young girl had gone out one night, but when she got back she told her mum that she did not feel very well. Her mum said, “Well, have a drink of water. I’ll put you to bed, and we’ll see how you are in the morning.” When her mum went into her room in the morning, she was dead. She had drunk three bottles of white cider, which means that she had drunk well over 60 shots of vodka in one evening. That is the devastation this drink can cause.

Ciders of 7.5% alcohol by volume attract the lowest duty per unit of any product, at 5p, compared with 18p per unit for beer of equivalent strength. There simply is no reason not to increase the duty on white cider and so save some of these young lives. Some 66% of the public support such a policy. It is a matter of social justice, so I ask the Minister to go back to the Treasury. I know that the former Member for Battersea looked at the issue in the last Parliament, and I ask the Minister to go back to her successor and ask for progress to save these young lives before any more families suffer as the one I have described did.

Another key intervention for an alcohol strategy is to improve the training of GPs and other people working in clinical centres, so that they can give very brief additional advice on how to prevent alcohol harm. For example, just during the few moments when someone is having their blood pressure tested, they can have a short conversation about how much alcohol they are drinking and suggest that a couple of days off a week to rest their liver would not be a bad idea. We need to pursue such improvements to prevent the kind of damage suffered by so many people in the country through excessive alcohol drinking. No one that I am aware of in our group is saying that people should not drink alcohol; this is about drinking alcohol responsibly.

I want to close by borrowing the words of our former Prime Minister in his foreword to the 2012 alcohol strategy:

“We can’t go on like this.”

He was right, but insufficient action has been taken since. Things have not improved—rather the opposite—so I call on the Government to save lives and reduce harm for us all by revising the alcohol strategy. We cannot have a successful long-term approach to substance misuse without looking at both alcohol and drugs.

2.48 pm

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to make my maiden speech within such an

important debate. I commend the previous speakers, hon. Members, for the eloquence with which they have delivered their strong message on the drugs debate.

I first wish to pay tribute to my predecessor, Fiona Mactaggart, for her two decades of determined and dedicated service for our constituency. She, along with her predecessors, are very fondly remembered by the people of Slough for their honourable service. I will try to emulate them by becoming a hard-working MP for my constituents, because that is what Slough deserves.

Slough is a major cultural and creative hub, with one of the highest numbers of corporate and start-up companies and headquarters anywhere in the country. Slough trading estate, for instance, is the largest singly owned industrial estate, providing more than 17,000 jobs. Having run my own small start-up construction business, I appreciate how hard businesses need to work to succeed and become the engine of our economy. Home to some of the top-performing state schools in the country and with superb infrastructure links, I think hon. Members will agree with me that Slough has a very bright future. I am from the silicon valley of England.

We have a vibrant and diverse community, with Kashmiris living harmoniously side by side with Punjabis and those with Irish, Polish and African-Caribbean ancestry. Indeed, it is the world in microcosm.

However, juxtaposed with this idyllic scenario of low unemployment is the fact that we have some of the highest levels of homelessness, child obesity and malnutrition in the country. There is a lack of affordable and social housing, and that is why I need to work closely with Slough’s Labour-run council to help deliver for our residents. But we need to achieve that economic progress for all, while caring for our environment.

Slough is a town of firsts. It elected the UK’s first ever black lady mayor and now, more than three decades later, it has elected the first ever turbaned Sikh to the British Parliament—indeed, I believe, the first ever to be elected to any European Parliament. A glass ceiling has truly been broken. I sincerely hope that many more like me will follow in the years and decades to come.

The enormity of what has been collectively achieved has not escaped me. The hand of history—the huge excitement, anticipation and sheer expectations—weigh heavily on my shoulders. Among the literally thousands of good-will messages from around the globe, one individual very succinctly put it:

“I feel really happy, because finally there is someone that looks like me, sitting in Parliament.”

However, I was most overwhelmed during a recent trip up north, when an elderly gentleman walked up to me with tears streaming down his eyes and said, “I’m proud, son, because I didn’t think that I would see this in my lifetime.”

It is about a sense of belonging—when you get bullied at school for looking different, when you stand out from the crowd. It is a case of being respected and embraced by your fellow countrymen and women, including within the highest echelons of the establishment. What could demonstrate greater embrace than being elected to serve and sit on these green Benches in this august House in the mother of all Parliaments?

In addition to human rights abuses elsewhere in the world, forget being embraced, even acceptability is still a huge problem, for example in our neighbouring France.

I find it extremely disappointing and incredibly ironic that more than 80,000 turbaned Sikh soldiers died—yes, died; not injured—laid down their lives to liberate the very country where their descendants cannot even have their ID photos taken without having to remove their turbans, and cannot even send their children to most state schools without removing their turbans. This same warped interpretation of secularism precludes Muslims from wearing their hijabs and niqabs, Jews from wearing their skull caps and Christians from wearing their crosses. Acceptability is still a problem in advanced nations, such as our close ally the United States, where several Sikhs have been shot dead because of mistaken identity—mistaken for being terrorists.

The only way to fight such ignorance, to overcome the politics of hate and division, including the Islamophobia that is so prevalent in certain sections of our society and media, is to call it out and condemn it, and to espouse the politics of integration. These are not just hollow words; I believe strongly in community cohesion and integration. When I served as mayor in 2011, integration was my mayoral theme. The message that I consistently took out to our schools, our various faith groups and the wider community was that we should all be proud of our own distinct identity, whatever that may be, but that we should also be proud of our shared heritage, and for those of us who were born and brought up in Britain, are British nationals, we should also be proud to be British. I thought it was particularly pertinent that I should deliver that message, because I belong to a “minority” community.

None the less, being distinct or standing out from the crowd has its own distinct advantages. I, for one, Mr Speaker, am very much hoping that these brightly coloured turbans will act as a magnet as you repeatedly point towards the Member for Slough to make his invaluable contributions to proceedings in this House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

Whilst I am proud to be a Sikh, I will be serving in the true Sikh spirit of “sarbat da bhalla”—working for the betterment of all, regardless of background, or colour or creed. As I stand here today, I do feel immensely proud to be British; to be part of the most diverse Parliament ever, wherein more women MPs, more ethnic minorities, more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and more people with disabilities have been elected than ever before. While further work of course needs to be done by the political parties, the British public can rightly be proud of this, their achievement.

While faith, family and community have been central to my life, there is one more thing that has been pivotal in my life and will no doubt continue to guide me in the coming years—Labour values: of equality and social justice; of delivering high-quality public services; of being part of a society where we are truly in it together, looking out for and sharing with others; of solidarity, as expressed by unions of hard-working people; of co-operative and internationalist values; of free quality education, including higher education, for all; and of free quality health and social care for all, free at the point of need, the zenith of which was the formation of the NHS.

My grandfather, a retired teacher and committed socialist, explained to me at a very young age what Labour did for him and his family: “They treated us as equals and just because we have a few bob in our pockets, it does not mean that we’ll now abandon them.”

While others were busy making speeches on “rivers of blood” and trading with an apartheid Government, Labour was speaking up for people like him and standing in solidarity with black South Africans. It is very easy to pay platitudes to Nelson Mandela, a personal hero of mine, when the whole world regards him as a hero, but to stand in solidarity with him and his people when the chips are truly down takes immense courage. That is what Labour does best.

To conclude, having been born locally, when my father worked at the Langley Ford factory and my mother worked for a local petrol pump company on Farnham Road, little could they have imagined that their son—the son of immigrants—would go on to serve as the town’s MP. Indeed, little could I have imagined that my constituency office would be just a stone’s throw away from where I spent my early years on Lorne Close in Chalvey. From such humble beginnings, it is with great humility that I take on this august office. After the faith they have placed in me, I really hope to make the people of Slough proud of their MP, as I seek to serve my constituency and my country.

2.59 pm

**Victoria Atkins** (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi)—or, should I say, for the silicon valley of Europe?—on his excellent maiden speech. It was thoughtful and thought-provoking, and I am sure that I am joined by colleagues on both sides of the House in looking forward to his contributions in the future.

I must first declare an interest, because my husband works for a company that has a Home Office licence to grow non-psychoactive versions of cannabis to treat epileptic conditions in children. It is groundbreaking work, but I thought I should declare it, given that I will be talking about the psychoactive version of cannabis in due course—a very different substance.

I welcome the new strategy and the joined-up approach by Government to tackling the problem of drugs in our local communities and on a national and international scale. Although my hon. Friend the Minister and others were good enough to take interventions from me about my experience in the criminal courts, I share with them the hope that we can find more international solutions to tackling the problem of drugs. It is not just a problem in the United Kingdom: sadly, it is a problem that pretty much every country faces. We will have to improve our relations internationally if we are to have any chance to tackle the growers and dealers on an international scale.

As I have mentioned, before my election I worked as a criminal barrister. In my early days, that meant that I often used to defend young people afflicted with drug addictions in youth courts and magistrates courts. As I rose up the ranks, I began to prosecute high-level drug cases—the sorts of cases that are stories in the newspapers, with international drug barons who supply the first tier of the market in this country, which then disseminates the drugs regionally and eventually down to the street. It goes without saying that the tonnes of cocaine, heroin and cannabis that featured in the cases on which I worked were of a very different purity from the substances that would be bought on the street. Like any efficient—I hesitate to use that word—business model, criminals diversify. They pad out the product as much as they can to try to increase their profits.

[Victoria Atkins]

One of the most fascinating witnesses I have ever called in a criminal trial was the Metropolitan police's expert witness on the business of drugs. The idea that the drugs industry is run by anything other than consummate professionals—ruthless and evil, but none the less professionals—cannot be gainsaid. Like legitimate companies, these people have branding, and send out testers to their best purchasers. They are utterly ruthless in the way they sell their product, and that is why I do not share the optimism of others about tackling the problem through regulation—I will say more on that later.

The high-level criminal gangs that operate in these markets do not only import drugs. Having a method of importing drugs means having a way of importing guns and ammunition and, sadly, smuggling people in. Those drug gangs have a host of criminal behaviours to try to spot flaws in law enforcement across the European Union. They find the holes and they exploit them to make huge profits.

Other hon. Members have talked about alcohol, which creates its own harms, and I understand that. However, I urge a note of caution when comparing class A drugs to alcohol. When a drinks company legally makes an alcoholic drink, it is an efficient process with factories, licensing and so on. The reality of the drugs market—and one I fear cannot be changed—is that by definition the drugs that cause the most harm, heroin and cocaine, cannot be grown in this country, which means that they must be grown overseas in nations that tend to be poorer, such as Mexico, Colombia and Iraq.

Those drugs then have to get into this country. That happens in a variety of ways, but the most distressing for me—and it is one we should perhaps educate our young people more about—is the use of swallowers. There are various drug routes from Colombia and Mexico, and they usually pass through the Caribbean. Young people, and sometimes children, are persuaded or forced to swallow condoms full of cocaine or heroin. They are sent by air to major airports in Europe and then bounced into the United Kingdom. One has to hope beyond hope that those young people are caught by customs officials at Gatwick, Heathrow, Luton or wherever they end up, because that is their best chance. If they are caught by customs, they are taken to a customs facility with special—I am phrasing this carefully, because I am conscious this is a public sitting—lavatory facilities to enable the condoms of cocaine to leave the human body. They are watched as that happens by customs officials because, for evidential reasons, we need to know which evidence came which person. Obviously, they are in great pain as the condoms leave their bodies, because the human body is not made to pass such objects.

The lucky swallowers are caught by customs and dealt with officially—protected, I have to say—by customs officials. The worst-case scenario for the swallowers is to pass customs, meet the dealers and be taken to their headquarters. In unsanitary and unpleasant conditions, they are forced to try to pass the condoms. If they do not pass them, the dealers have a decision to make. They have as much as £50,000 of profit in a swallower's stomach—how are they to get it out? It is not pretty. They are ruthless and violent, so they use a knife to get the profit out of that person's stomach. That fact is not

often reported, which surprises me because if we could communicate to people who use cocaine that that is how it ends up in that wrap in their club or wherever they buy it, they might pause for a moment.

I know that some hon. Members will say that is why we need to regulate and take the criminals out of that market. I can understand that view, but my experience from the courts means that I do not see how we will persuade people who are ruthless enough to gut another human being like a fish to follow a law-abiding existence. Forgive me for being a beacon of pessimism, but I just do not see how we can do it.

**Ronnie Cowan:** What is the alternative? Do we allow them to continue to behave in that way, or stand up against them?

**Victoria Atkins:** That is a perfectly proper question. The only solution I have come up with—and I am a person, not a think-tank or a Home Office official—is to continue and increase our pressure on criminal gangs. We are getting better at it, but we need to work internationally with other countries. We could do more in some of the countries I have mentioned to try to remove the financial attraction of giving a field over to opium poppies.

I take that approach rather than the “let's regulate it” approach—apart from my cynicism that the dealers will withdraw from criminal activity—because of the nature of addiction. When I used to mitigate for young people in the criminal courts, I would try to explain the addiction in the following way. I think that it takes three forms. There is the physical addiction, in which the body craves the next fix. There is also the mental addiction: “How can I cope? How can I get through the day, the week, without my next fix, my few fixes?” But there is also the social addiction.

If you are in such a dark place that you are addicted to a class A substance, you will probably not be hanging out with people who are not also addicted. We know that people gather to share instruments, substances and so on. That is a social addiction, and it must be challenged. I hope that that will happen, and I am very encouraged by what I have seen in the drugs strategy. At present, when a prisoner is released from a certain prison in south London—I will not name it—the dealers line up on the avenue outside the prison saying, “Oh, hello, old friend, you are back, would you like a fix on me?” If we can break that social addiction, it will help such people to break the addiction overall.

I welcome the idea of a national recovery champion, and all the other ideas in the drugs strategy, because we are finally looking properly at the ill effects of addiction as well as the law enforcement side. However, I still strongly believe that we must focus on the criminal aspect. It is possible that, in the event of regulation or decriminalisation, some addicts would be able to make the journey to the local chemist, or wherever it might be, to pick up their doses, but I fear that the social addiction and the pressure of the dealer would still play a part. The dealer would say to the addict, “Oh, well, you may be getting your fix from the chemist or wherever, but you really want to buy your fix from me, don't you?”

Given the mental and the social addiction and the threats that dealers are quite prepared to use, I fear that there will be a black market, and there is evidence to

suggest that that would happen. We know that, sadly, when heroin users are prescribed methadone, they are not always able to withstand the enticements of their dealers. That may be partly because they want to carry on using heroin, but I worry that the regulation/decriminalisation strategy will allow the dealers to carry on dealing on the streets.

**Jeff Smith:** There is a black market in tobacco and there is a black market in alcohol, but most people do not obtain their tobacco and their alcohol from the black market. Is it not the case that there would be less temptation, and that over time there would be a reduction in the number of people using dealers?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, because the subject of counterfeit cigarettes was next on my list. Again, I speak from personal experience. I prosecuted a criminal gang who, at the time, controlled the counterfeit cigarette market in the north of England. When the customs knocked out that gang—they did fantastically well: they got the guy at the very top as well as the distributors at the bottom—that knocked out the counterfeit cigarette market in the north of England for six months. After that, however, another gang came in and filled the vacuum. I do not have to hand the figures on usage of counterfeit cigarettes, but it is a fact that many people seek them out, not least because cigarettes are generally priced very highly—and rightly so, because we want people to stop smoking. Although I do not have the figures now, I remember reading them when I was dealing with that case. It is compelling to see many people use counterfeit cigarettes.

We know that there is also a growing market in counterfeit alcohol. In the last six months, corner shops have been warned that they need to be aware of very good reproductions of certain brands of vodka. The vodka that people may be buying in good faith from their local shop is, in fact, far more alcoholic than they would expect. I hope that, if nothing else, I am explaining my worries about how complex the position is, and demonstrating that we cannot just rely on the idea of regulation and decriminalisation.

**Paul Flynn:** Is the hon. Lady not impressed by the simple fact that, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), in 1971 fewer than 1,000 people in this country were addicted to heroin and cocaine, and there were virtually no deaths because those people were receiving their heroin from the health service? After 46 years of the harshest prohibition in Europe, we now have 320,000 addicts. Is it not true that prohibition creates the drug trade, creates the gangsters, and creates the deaths?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He has a long history of campaigning on this subject, which I respect. However, I am afraid that I must disagree with him. A very great deal has changed since 1971. Criminal gangs come to the United Kingdom from all over the world because the UK is much more densely populated than other countries, and they come here to sell drugs. I am sure that some Members sometimes want to turn the clock back to 1971, but I do not think we can do that. We now have to deal with the international movement of criminals and so on as it happens.

The hon. Gentleman has referred to other countries that have decriminalised drugs, and the impact that that has had on addiction rates. I know that in various American states that have decriminalised cannabis—which, obviously, is a different substance from heroin—there is evidence of a growing backlash against that decriminalisation. People may like the idea in principle, but when it comes to practicalities such as where the shop that sells the cannabis will be located in their towns—will it be the post office?—and whether advertising will be allowed near a school, they feel uncomfortable.

We need look no further than my own county. The city of Lincoln celebrated the Government's introduction of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 because it was fed up to the back teeth with having headshops all over the city. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman and I will never see eye to eye on this, but I do not think we can turn the clock back to 1971.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) cited Portugal and the number of drug deaths there. I assume that he took his figures from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, which I think contains the latest statistics. It turns out that Romania has the lowest rate of deaths through drug use, followed by Portugal, and that Bulgaria and Turkey have the third and fourth lowest rates. I do not know, but I suspect that Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey do not have liberal policies on such matters as drug use decriminalisation. I urge Members to exercise a bit of caution when looking at those statistics, because decriminalisation may not be the whole answer.

We know that the potency of the psychoactive substance in cannabis has increased from an average of about 1% in the 1960s to about 11% in 2011. What on earth does that mean? According to my research, it is equivalent to an increase from one low-alcohol beer a day to a dozen shots of vodka a day. That is quite a jump in potency. Sadly, as we know, skunk can be even stronger, with up to 30% of tetrahydrocannabinol potency. As I mentioned earlier, we see the real impact in the criminal courts: we see young offenders with mental health issues who have also used skunk on a regular basis. Those are the people I want to protect. If we can persuade fewer young people to smoke dope or take drugs, that has a benefit for them and their families, and it has a huge benefit for the local community. We all know of the role that drugs play in onward crimes, committed to fund the next drugs purchase.

I am conscious that I have taken a long time and we have a very exciting maiden speech on its way. Although the international debate on how to deal with drugs continues, it is essential that the Government set out a strategy for what we do at home. I am really impressed by this drug strategy. I welcome in particular the introduction of a national recovery champion. It is a good idea to have someone looking over good and not so good practice. We may not agree on decriminalisation, but I am sure we all agree that healthcare must form part of the drug strategy. We have to be able to look after addicts to help them to get rid of their addiction. None the less, I am still a firm believer that law enforcement plays a vital role here and internationally in stopping the drug barons profiting from this terrible industry. I will support the Government in their efforts to stop it.

3.21 pm

**Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on a really excellent speech? It was a privilege to be here for the first maiden speech by a brightly coloured turbaned Sikh. I am looking forward to a number of maiden speeches today. In my own maiden speech two years ago, I said among other things that I looked forward to arguing for reform of our drug laws. There has been very little chance to do so since then, so I welcome the debate today. However, unfortunately, the Government's new drug strategy is a massive missed opportunity.

We do not get a new strategy very often. There is always the hope that it might contain some radical thinking. This strategy, sadly, offers little that is new. It is more of the same approach that is not working, that has seen an increase in drug-related deaths in the UK and that sees the UK responsible for nearly a third of Europe's drug deaths.

My friend Cara's son is five tomorrow. It will be his third birthday without his father Jake, who died of a heroin overdose. Cara wants to legalise drugs to end the stigma around drug use and to end the unnecessary criminalisation of drug users that made it so hard for her family to deal with Jake's addiction, and makes it more difficult for people to seek help with drug problems.

The day after tomorrow, Thursday, will be the fourth anniversary of the death of 15-year-old Martha Cockburn, who died after taking ecstasy that turned out to be 91% pure; as a result, she died of an accidental overdose. Martha's mum, Anne-Marie, who I think is in the Public Gallery, now campaigns for the legalisation and regulation of ecstasy, among other drugs. Martha died because there was no controlling measures on the substance that killed her and no way for Martha to check the safety of the substance she was using. Martha was failed by our approach to drug policy.

Many people who have been touched by the loss of loved ones want a more measured debate and a more rational approach to drug policy. Fifty people a week are dying of drug-related deaths in the UK—50 Marthas and Jakes. Our first duty in this place has to be to try to keep people safe and we are failing. The biggest missed opportunity in this strategy is the fact that we have not even considered decriminalisation or legalisation of some drugs as a solution to the problem. We have heard a number of times about Portugal, which decriminalised the use of drugs in 2001. Its drug-induced death rate is five times lower than the EU average. It had 16 overdose deaths last year and there has been a massive reduction in HIV infections.

In an article last week on the publication of the strategy, the Home Secretary said:

"We owe it to future generations to work together for a society free of drugs."

Talk of a society free of drugs is a dangerous fantasy. Humans have taken drugs for thousands of years and are not going to stop because the Home Secretary produces a new strategy. It is a dangerous fantasy because it diverts attention and resources from the real challenge, which is how we make drug taking safer, how we educate users, how we reduce the consumption of dangerous drugs, how we take control of the drug trade from the criminals who want to exploit vulnerable

users, and how we stop criminalising thousands of people unnecessarily. Many people are being criminalised because they have a medical or psychological problem. We need to recognise the link between early childhood trauma, including abuse, and addiction in later life. It is a closer link than that between obesity and diabetes. Drug addiction is often a psychological or biological problem, and criminalising people who have those problems is not the answer. In other cases, we are criminalising people unnecessarily for using a relatively harm-free intoxicant.

The best example is cannabis. It is surely wrong that we criminalise people for using a substance less dangerous than tobacco or alcohol—a substance that the overwhelming majority of people find pleasant, relatively harm-free and even a rewarding experience to take. We have all-party parliamentary groups that extol the virtues of beer, wine and whisky, but when we talk about a substance that is less harmful than alcohol, we are not allowed to say that it can be a positive experience.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, but I regret to say that he is wrong in one particular regard. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has made it crystal clear that cannabis is an extremely dangerous drug that can be a gateway to mental health difficulties. Does he not agree that, if we were to decriminalise it, it would send a dangerous message to young people that cannabis is somehow safe? Nothing could be further from the truth.

**Jeff Smith:** No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, because I do not think that is the evidence and I do not think that is the message. There is a host of evidence through the years that cannabis is far less dangerous than alcohol.

**Norman Lamb:** Is not the problem that when one is buying in the criminal market one has no idea what one is buying? One could be buying a very heavy strain, whereas if we regulate we have control over the potency of the substance that we are trying to control.

**Jeff Smith:** That is absolutely right. We talked earlier about the use of skunk, which has very high THC content. If one were to regulate the cannabis market, one could balance the THC and CBD elements of the product and make it safer for people.

**Stephen Pound:** My hon. Friend is making an informed statement. Does he agree that cannabis sativa and cannabis indica are totally different from the skunk that we have discussed? The experience in the western United States is that one can have a perfectly civilised purchasing system for cannabis sativa and cannabis indica. May I possibly appeal to the more avaricious elements on the Government Benches, as that is a vast revenue stream of taxation, which surely should delight even their dark hearts?

**Jeff Smith:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. He knows it, and I suspect that very many Members in this House know it—far more than are represented here today. I think plenty on the Government side know it, too, and perhaps even the Home Secretary knows it but, because of the toxic climate of the debate around drug policy, we are not able to say so.

If we legalised and regulated cannabis, we would take it out of the hands of the dealers, and reduce the opportunities for them to tempt users into experimenting with more dangerous drugs. We would also regulate the product, so users know with confidence what they are getting, so people who are worried about high levels of THC do not have to take whatever they can get on the street. There is a bonus too: we would raise many millions of pounds for the Exchequer to spend, if that is what we desire, on drug education or the NHS.

Around the world, countries recognise that cannabis prohibition is failing, and many of them are regulating. Uruguay was the first to do so. Eight states in the US, representing 20% of the population, have now legalised and regulated. Next year, Canada should become the first G7 country to do it. It is time we did the same. My personal belief is that this is going to happen. It is inevitable that it is going to happen in this country; we just need to grasp the nettle and do it.

We desperately need to change the terms of the debate. We need more openness and honesty in discussion of drug policy, and we need to reduce the stigma around taking drugs so that families find it easier to discuss the problem and find help. We need to stop the pretence that everyone's experience of illegal drugs is negative.

In my previous life, I worked as a DJ and an event manager in the music industry, so I spent a lot of time working and socialising in nightclubs, being around people who used recreational drugs. Many thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, of ecstasy pills are taken every week in the UK, and we cannot pretend in our public discourse that people who are taking drugs do it because it is a terrible, miserable experience; people will not believe us, and it will destroy the credibility of the message. We need an honest and rational debate around drug policy if users, especially young people, are going to take us seriously.

Most of all, we need to focus on policies that minimise harm and risk to users, and that requires looking at different approaches to harm reduction. That is where this strategy is disappointing. The Government have ignored the chance to do that by looking at interventions that can save lives—at drug consumption rooms for heroin users, at heroin prescribing, at pill testing—and we need a much stronger emphasis on educational solutions if people are caught breaking what is currently the law.

If I get caught speeding in my car, I am sent on a course to teach me to drive more carefully. Those courses have a high success rate. If I am driving a speeding car, I have the potential to do much more harm to society than if I am caught in possession of cannabis or ecstasy for personal use, but the latter is a criminal offence, with the potential for a damaging criminal record, and the former a civil offence. There is no reason not to treat drug possession for personal use in the same way.

I want to say a few brief words about medicinal cannabis. Although it is not really covered in this strategy, we looked at it last year in the all-party group for drug policy reform. There is overwhelming evidence that cannabis is a useful treatment for a range of conditions. In some cases, people find relief in cannabis, having exhausted treatments that have failed. Some people may have seen an article in the *Daily Mail* recently that asked whether a woman should be criminalised for medicating

with cannabis. When even the *Daily Mail* accepts that there is an argument for change, that surely illustrates how far behind public opinion the House is on the issue. We should follow many countries, as well as half the states in the USA, and legalise cannabis for medicinal use.

Finally, I want to mention resourcing. As my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary said earlier, passing responsibility for drug treatment to local authorities was a good idea in practice. However, there is a huge problem for local authorities that commission addiction services because of the massive cuts to local authority budgets.

Some drugs are dangerous, and we need to get drugs under control, but I do not want those words to be misinterpreted; I do not mean that we need to ban the use of drugs. The production, retail and use of some drugs needs to be controlled, so people can use drugs safely if they choose to do so. Prohibition is not working in the UK or around the world. We need a new approach. We need to treat addiction as a health issue. We need to stop criminalising people unnecessarily. We need to begin considering proper, evidence-based strategies. We certainly need to move towards legalising cannabis, and I believe that that is only a matter of time. We also need to look seriously at the decriminalisation of other drugs.

I have spoken today not because I think I am going to secure a massive change in the Government's drug policy; indeed, I do not expect any quick progress on drug policy. I just think we need to start reframing the debate. There are a limited number of us who are prepared to speak up on this issue at present, but I hope the numbers will gradually increase, because we need a serious debate on this issue, not more of the same approach, which has failed.

3.34 pm

**Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I have been very pleased to listen to some excellent and well-informed speeches today, particularly the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). It is an absolute honour to be able to make my maiden speech and to represent the people of Stoke-on-Trent South in this place. Stoke-on-Trent is the city that I grew up in and where I have lived my whole life. Nothing could make me prouder than serving the people of Stoke-on-Trent South in Parliament.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Mr Rob Ffello. I thank him for his commitment to Stoke-on-Trent South over the past 12 years. He will be remembered as a dedicated community activist in Stoke-on-Trent and was respected here for his campaigning on a number of national concerns, particularly those relating to the road haulage industry, in which he played an active role.

Stoke-on-Trent is a unique place with a strong cultural identity. It is a city founded on its industrial heritage, with those industries now resurgent and a hotbed of innovation. The potteries were born out of industry and our culture flows from that. Stoke-on-Trent is also known well for its unique cultural dialect. I thought about giving my maiden speech in a traditional potteries dialect, but I feared that it might prove impossibly challenging for *Hansard* and for hon. and right hon. Members. However, I hope that they will indulge me for just one short line. It is time that this question was

[Jack Brereton]

asked in the House: cost kick a bow agen' a woe, y'ed it back an bost it? I know that, in answer to that question, the players of Stoke City football club—whose home is the bet365 stadium in my constituency—would have no problem t bost a bo.

Stokies are especially known for their friendliness, and many visitors to the city remark on how welcoming the local people are. What makes us most distinctive, however, is our geographical make-up, following the coming together in 1910 of six different, individual towns to form one body. Two of those towns, Fenton and Longton, are in my constituency. However, we did not gain city status until 1925, in what was a rare modern occurrence of royal intervention in which the monarch countermanded the Government. Having initially been refused city status by the Home Office, Stoke-on-Trent made a direct approach to His Majesty King George V and became a city on 4 June 1925.

Surrounding the pottery towns of Fenton and Longton, my Stoke-on-Trent South constituency includes a diverse slice of north Staffordshire. We have the only grade I listed building in Stoke-on-Trent, the Trentham Mausoleum, which is the final resting place of the Dukes of Sutherland. They were significant philanthropists in the area, particularly in Longton, Normacot and Dresden, giving land and paying for many of the important public buildings and facilities that we see today. They include the fantastic Queen's Park, the first public pleasure park in the potteries, which was opened to commemorate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. It was once a lone oasis in an otherwise smog-filled urban area, but today we are one of the greenest cities in the country, with more than 1,380 hectares of parks and open space. One of the most important natural sites, Park Hall country park, is in Weston Coyney in my constituency. It is a site of special scientific interest and the only national nature reserve in Stoke-on-Trent.

Where once stood thousands of bottle ovens in Stoke-on-Trent, only 47 now remain. They are protected, of course, and I am pleased to say that half of those iconic structures are in my constituency, with the largest number in Longton. My constituency has no shortage of first-rate architectural gems, both old and new. Many of these important historical sites have now been converted, with a number becoming enterprise centres to host thriving small businesses. They include the Sutherland Institute, St James's House, CoRE and now also Fenton Town Hall, which has been reborn as a centre for business and industry by the grandson of the original builder and benefactor, William Meath Baker. There is a tremendous spirit of resourcefulness and renewal in my constituency, and it gives me great optimism that so many of our heritage landmarks will continue to find new uses in a new age.

My constituency is well connected by road and rail, as well as being within an hour's drive of four international airports. Sadly, the Meir aerodrome is no longer in operation. It opened in 1934 as Staffordshire's first municipal airport and closed in the 1970s. It has now been redeveloped to form the Meir Park residential estate. When the aerodrome was still in use, people might have seen my constituency from above, stretching from the regenerated industrial heartlands of Longton and Fenton, right across to the surrounding suburban

communities of Trentham, Blurton, Weston Coyney and Meir—a mixture of different communities that I am so proud to represent.

Stoke-on-Trent has been a global city, designing wares and products to fit every taste and market. We have been exporting and trading products around the world for centuries, and that has never been more true and important than it is today. We have some of the most advanced steel manufacturing in the world. Just like pottery, steel manufacturing has strong roots in Stoke-on-Trent. Goodwin International, which is based in my constituency, is a world leader in mechanical engineering, producing some of the most intricate steel components, both large and small. It works in partnership with Goodwin Steel Castings in neighbouring Stoke-on-Trent Central, which has been producing machined castings since 1883—one of the 10 oldest companies listed on the stock exchange. Goodwin's products are of the highest standard and are used right around the world in energy production, bridge construction and armed forces equipment.

Today in Stoke-on-Trent our industries are becoming more diverse and more innovative than ever before. Rated nationally as the second-best place to start a new business, it is the No. 1 city for business survival and the ninth-fastest growing economy in the UK. Productivity has increased by over 25% since 2010. It is ranked fourth for employment growth and has one of the fastest-growing housing markets, and our big ceramics businesses have increased production by over 50%.

People are waking up to what Stoke-on-Trent has to offer as one of the best connected places. We have kept ahead of the digital curve with some of the best broadband connectivity, and we are rated as having the best 4G download speeds in the country, not only making Stoke-on-Trent a key hub for some of the leading brands in distribution and logistics, but putting the city at the forefront of a revolution in digital and advanced manufacturing.

Our clay-based industries in particular have become more diverse and are expanding into new sectors. Whether healthcare, tourism, high-tech materials or construction, ceramic products are becoming ever more essential in the modern world. That has been exemplified by recent investment in the Wedgwood factory and visitor centre in my constituency. The fully refurbished factory site manufactures some of the finest wares in the world, and the World of Wedgwood visitor centre is a must see for any tourist. Most recently, we have seen the opening of the brand-new Valentine Clays facility in Fenton, which is continuing the growth of the industry and supplying clay and raw materials to potters around the country.

Our growing economy and industry are supported by strong academic institutions. Staffordshire University is now rated one of the best nationally for some of its digital courses, such as gaming. We also have Keele University—I should declare an interest in that my wife and I are both Keele graduates—which is renowned nationally for its academic strength and has won numerous awards for the quality of its academia, including being ranked top nationally for student experience and student satisfaction and most recently being awarded gold in the teaching excellence framework. Importantly, the universities play an active part in the community and economy of north Staffordshire and have a critical role in the innovation and development of our local industries.

The businesses and people who have invested in Stoke-on-Trent South are rightly proud of what we have achieved. As their strong voice in Parliament, I am determined to work to create better jobs that will spread the net of opportunity wider. Critical to that will be securing the best possible deal from leaving the European Union, guaranteeing trade and ensuring ease of access to markets throughout the world. That is what people in Stoke-on-Trent South overwhelmingly voted for in the referendum and what people were saying to me on the doorstep during the general election campaign. I will be calling on the Government to advance trade agreements around the world as part of a more global Britain that supports businesses in Stoke-on-Trent South to sell their products abroad. This is about creating prosperity for every household in Stoke-on-Trent South, driving up skills and increasing local people's wages. We need to see not just more jobs in Stoke-on-Trent South but better jobs that pay higher wages and take full advantage of the talent that Stokies have.

In my time in the House I will be a strong advocate for measures that support industry and fulfil the promise of the Government's industrial strategy to rebalance the national economy. This includes the development of a place-based industrial strategy that works for the potteries. We need to see investment in our infrastructure that ensures businesses in Stoke-on-Trent can continue to thrive and local people are not blighted by sitting in daily traffic jams. It will mean improving our transport network to be fit for the future, improving rail and road connections to my constituency to help address congestion and ensuring that we see better local rail services to Longton station and improved connectivity to Stoke-on-Trent from across the country.

For our industries to grow and create the jobs we need locally, we must also ensure greater energy security, with infrastructure that matches the needs of our manufacturing sectors. As a city made up of towns, we need to ensure that our town centres are healthy and that our high streets remain relevant to the local communities they serve. I want to see Longton and Fenton town centres become stronger, with new housing and businesses moving in. Those are my priorities as Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent South.

I began by speaking of our heritage and culture in Stoke-on-Trent. I could not be more delighted that our city has been shortlisted for UK city of culture 2021. Stoke-on-Trent is the world capital of ceramics, which is an industry and art that has not only shaped my constituency but has left its stamp on our national culture. Many Stokies, like me, are proud of the products we see around the world that are back-stamped "Made in Stoke-on-Trent" and "Made in Britain." A Stokie can often be spotted apart turning over a plate or a mug to check where it was made.

The Palace of Westminster, like many of the greatest buildings across the country, is filled with products manufactured in Stoke-on-Trent. From the tableware to the Minton tile floors, each piece is an ambassador for Stoke-on-Trent. I was a little disappointed to find that the ongoing floor restoration works in Central Lobby are using tiles manufactured in Jackfield, Shropshire. However, I was reassured to discover that the powder used to produce these fantastic tiles is sourced from Stoke-on-Trent.

I can think of no city that better celebrates its culture and heritage, or whose cultural identity and ambition

are so closely bound up with its industry and commerce. I think of the multitudes who flock to the many museums and factory shops to learn about our industries and buy Stoke-on-Trent products. Gladstone Pottery Museum in my constituency gives the true experience of a Victorian pottery factory.

I think of the unparalleled collection housed at the Potteries Museum & Art Gallery, including one of only four surviving vases thrown by Josiah Wedgwood in 1769 on the first day of opening his factory, which started the industrial revolution in the potteries. Recently rescued from private sale and export, the vase will now be on display again for people to visit and enjoy.

I think of our several locally and nationally important theatres; I think of our music venues, our restaurants, our parks, canals and open spaces; I think of a city of culture and picture Stoke-on-Trent, where creativity and culture have always been critical to our economic and social progress; and, of course, I think of the famous Staffordshire oatcakes, which I encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to try from one of the many local oatcake shops when they get the chance to visit.

There is so much that is culturally unique about Stoke-on-Trent, and winning this bid would help continue the revival of Stoke-on-Trent as a vibrant and innovative core of the UK economy. It will be an absolute pleasure to back the city of culture bid as Stoke-on-Trent South's MP and to campaign for my constituents to win that recognition in 2021.

This debate is about drugs policy. The use of psychoactive substances in particular is increasing, which is ruining lives and is a significant cause of crime on our streets. That not only affects police services but puts pressure on our national health service, which has to deal with much of the human cost of drug abuse.

Far too many ordinary people in my constituency have felt the impacts of drug use and told me they do not feel safe in our communities. I will be working with Staffordshire police and Matthew Ellis, our police and crime commissioner, to ensure that we continue to see drug use decline and we act against the associated crimes. Much progress is being made by local partners and communities; putting in place a public space protection order in Longton has made a big difference. I have particularly seen the fantastic work put in by volunteers such as Street Chaplains locally in my constituency. Significant work has been done to help ensure people feel safe and welcome when visiting the town centre, and in directing people who need help to get the right support.

Often the misuse of drugs can be linked to mental health problems, and I have been pleased to see Staffordshire leading the way to ensure that people with mental health problems get better support. Local services, the police and the voluntary sector continue to work more closely in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire to help people get better support to tackle addictions and change their lifestyles. I want to play my part in ensuring that we continue to tackle these issues in our communities, so we continue to see drug-related crimes reduced and people with addictions get the right support.

3.50 pm

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): I congratulate the new hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on his excellent maiden speech. He told of the multitude

[*Ian C. Lucas*]

travelling to Stoke. The last multitude to travel to Stoke from Wrexham was for the FA cup match a few years ago. Wrexham led for a glorious five minutes, but unfortunately it did not end well. His was a wonderful speech that did end well, and I wish him the best for his future in the House.

This debate is about the Government's new drugs policy. I have considered in detail the drugs strategy that was published last week. I found it rather disappointing. I was pleased that it was produced and I am glad the Government are looking at the issue seriously, but we face a real crisis in our drugs strategy. Interestingly, we heard from the hon. Gentleman about new psychoactive substances, which are a major issue in my constituency. The shadow Home Secretary made an apposite point earlier, because it is clear that the decline in resources available for both our police service and our local authorities has had a major impact on the problem of drugs in our communities. In 2010, I saw a police service working with local authorities to provide an excellent law and order policy—one that the Labour party had built up in the 13 years from 1997 to create true community policing. It created a safety valve so that when issues arose they were identified early and we began to address them. In the past seven years, there has been a real decline in the quality of our criminal justice system and in drugs policy on the streets.

I do not have the certainties on decriminalisation of many speakers in this debate, and in many respects I envy them. Before I was a Member of Parliament, I was a solicitor and in the 1980s I worked in Birkenhead. As a defence solicitor, I represented many young heroin addicts. That convinced me profoundly of the danger of drugs and the horrific impact they can have on not only the individuals concerned, but their families. I tread very warily indeed if any sort of message is presented that it is okay to take drugs, because I have seen the very negative impact.

I understand what the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said in his very eloquent speech. I also listened carefully to the many interventions that have been made and to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), but I am struggling to know the right way ahead. I would not be resistant to a royal commission because NPS is out of control in my community. It affects not just Wrexham, but Manchester and many towns up and down the country. The legislation is not working properly.

In discussions with police officers, I have been told: that it is not possible effectively to arrest people for taking NPS because it is not clear what substance they have taken; that it is too expensive to have the substances tested; and that people are receiving penalties for possession of a class B drug that have no effective outcome and no impact on preventing reoffending. That is creating a major public order problem in our constituencies. It is currently not being addressed, and I cannot see how this document and this strategy will either solve the problem or stop it getting worse.

**Paul Flynn:** Does my hon. Friend recall the passage of the Psychoactive Substances Bill last year? It was said to be modelled on similar Bills that had been passed in Ireland and in Poland? In both countries, prohibition of psychoactive substances increased use—

in Ireland from 16% to 22%—and increased harm. Is it not true that, in this country, it is very easy to close the headshops, but that we increase the problem, increase the number of users and increase the number of deaths?

**Ian C. Lucas:** Yes, it is a continuing and increasing problem, but it was a problem before the Act was passed. This is a difficult issue with no easy solution. The Act has already had to be amended to reclassify the drug, and to make possession an offence. Initially, that was not the case, and there were problems with effective enforcement. People who had clearly taken these substances and were in a poor condition as a result could not be arrested because they had not committed an offence; they were simply in possession of the drug in question. The law has already had to be amended. I believe a review is due under the Act at the beginning of 2018, but it should be done immediately. I raised this with the Minister at questions a couple of weeks ago, and she said that the measure was working well, when clearly it is not. I was really worried by that response.

On Sunday, I was contacted by a constituent who had been terrified in the centre of the town because of the conduct of some people affected by the drug. It is an urgent issue that must be addressed now. As it stands, the drugs strategy is not addressing the matter properly. Part of the reason is that local authorities and the police do not have the capacity and understanding to deal with it. I am not sure that they are really clear about the correct approach. We need an intelligent conversation about the nature of the problem.

We also need to find out about the individuals who are taking these substances, because each one has their own story and their own life. It is clear that they have chosen to take these substances, but that choice is having a massive impact on other people and other communities because of the way that they behave. I would like to know how they pay for these items, and to understand the role of the Department for Work and Pensions, because some people are using their benefits to buy these substances. I see a lot of people in my constituency office who are having their benefits taken away from them, but who cannot walk into the surgery. A sanction seems to be applied to them, but not to people who choose to take substances in the centre of my community. The Department for Work and Pensions—the largest-spending Department—has not been mentioned so far, but it needs to be involved, so that we can find out what role it plays when individuals to whom it pays benefits take these substances.

I wanted to restrict my observations to new psychoactive substances, but before I stop I should like to mention the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), which I found deeply moving. The first Sikh I remember as a child was Bishan Bedi, who had even better turbans than my hon. Friend, but my hon. Friend can try harder. I was touched by his reference to his parents; I do not know whether they are still with us, but they will be very proud of his achievements. In my maiden speech, I talked about a boy of 14 who was in court with 24 burglaries against his name because he was a heroin addict. I represented him in 1988.

My speech has a lot more questions than answers, but I do not think that we have made much progress on drugs policy since I came to the House in 2001. We have had an interesting debate today. We very much needed

to look at the issue again, but there is a real, immediate problem with NPS that the Government need to address urgently, and I implore them to take it more seriously.

4.1 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech during this important debate.

Since arriving in Parliament, I have spent the past few weeks being greeted with the now familiar phrase, “Ah, so you’re the new Alan Johnson, are you?” Despite the obvious and not quite so obvious differences between us, that is something that I am very proud to be. Alan Johnson was the MP for Hull West and Hessle for over 20 years, and he built a formidable and proud reputation as a national political figure, but, most importantly for the people of Hull West and Hessle, Alan was a well-respected local MP who worked hard to represent the people who elected him to this House. Notably, Alan worked tirelessly to rectify the appalling injustice and hardships suffered by the trawlermen of Hull and their families. This righting of wrongs earned him the ever-lasting respect and admiration of the city.

Alan’s life story is a journey from absolute poverty to high office. It is a story of triumph over adversity. This is all well documented in his autobiographies. He would not want me to miss an opportunity to mention that if hon. Members are interested in reading more about his life, his three autobiographies are available in all good bookshops.

My path has been different from Alan’s, but I am incredibly proud to have also come from a strong trade unionist background. I am proud to have been a primary teacher. I have never worked for an MP and I have not come from a family of politicians. My journey has been paved by my desire to right wrongs. Every one of us has made sacrifices to be here, and so have all our families—particularly my two wonderful daughters, Olivia and Isabelle. But it is a sacrifice that must be made because politics cannot be the preserve of the rich, powerful and privileged.

Back in 2011, when I first started campaigning against the changes to education, I was told that my opinion was unimportant because I was only a part-time infant school teacher, but in the words of the Dalai Lama,

“If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito.”

I am honoured to be a patron of The Warren in Hull, which gives support to marginalised and vulnerable young people. I would love it if my legacy was to have encouraged and inspired many other people who had also been told that their opinion did not matter to get involved in politics, because everybody matters equally.

I have heard many maiden speeches in which people have talked of the beauty of their constituency, but what makes a place is not the rolling hills, the lakes or the skyscrapers. What makes a place beautiful is the people who live there, and that is why Hull West and Hessle is the best place to live, and why I am so honoured to be their Member of Parliament and represent them.

It is not a stereotype to say that people from the north are friendly and compassionate; it is quite simply a statement of fact. But never mistake friendliness and compassion for weakness. Charles I learned not to

underestimate the people of Hull when he was turned away from the city in 1642, leading to the siege of Hull, which was a major step on the road to the English civil war. Nor did anyone underestimate one of Hull’s other famous sons, William Wilberforce, in his tireless fight to end slavery; or, more recently, the “headscarf revolutionaries,” a group of women from Hull who took on the establishment in the 1960s to improve safety in the trawler industry.

This is an incredible year for Hull, because we are the city of culture. Let me take this opportunity to extend a welcome to everybody to come back to ours and experience it for themselves. As an infant teacher, I used to give my pupils an historical tour of the city, pointing out the evidence of our fishing heritage, our magnificent 13th century minster and our beautiful architecture, so if Members come up I’ll even throw in a free tour. This weekend Hull is hosting the national UK Pride event, and I am delighted to be involved. Good luck to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) in his task of trying to get Stoke-on-Trent the city of culture.

I am also incredibly proud to represent Hessle, which is the town where I live and where my girls attend school. It is most famously known for the Humber bridge, which just this week has been given grade I listed status, but I also highly recommend the Hessle feast.

Since it was as an infant teacher that I became politicised, it will come as no surprise to anyone that I want to focus the House’s attention on education and speak during this important debate on drugs. There must be a drugs education programme as part of a wider personal, social and health education to keep our children safe. But PSHE, like so many arts subjects, is being pushed out because of the high-stakes accountability in our schools. There is no point having a drugs education programme if there is no time to teach it. Some parents can compensate for the narrowing of the curriculum by paying for music, dance, art, drama or sports clubs, but many cannot. We are wasting the talents and abilities of so many of our children because of the failed way we judge schools.

That pressure that schools face is manifesting itself as pressure on our children. Now, the Prime Minister thinks that schools can solve the mental health crisis facing our children, but it has been contributed to by her Government’s system of educational assessment. We should not be making our schools into learning factories that churn out compliant, unquestioning units for work. We want our children to be creative, to question, to inquire, to explore and to think independently, especially in this era of fake news. We are discussing the reform of drugs law without asking ourselves: if we only ever teach our children to obey adults unquestioningly, how can they ever understand when they should not?

Education provided my father with his route out of poverty, and it was the route for his three brothers too. My dad left education with next to nothing in the way of qualifications, and it was through evening classes and further education that he went on to become a local primary headteacher. The under-investment in FE is denying people that second chance. Some 31% of children in Hull live in poverty, and I do not think that it is right for any child’s life story to be determined by birth. But with the cuts facing Hull College, Sure Start and all of education, how can we say that we are giving our young people today those same opportunities and second chances?

[Emma Hardy]

It is not just the FE sector that is suffering; it is all of education. While I welcome the recent announcement of extra funding, it is not enough. Inflation and other factors mean that schools still face real-terms cuts to their budgets, and those cuts are driving up class sizes, reducing the number of teaching assistants, increasing the number of unqualified teachers and reducing the curriculum options available.

One of the crucial lessons in life, which everyone across all these Benches has learnt, is that when you fall down, you have to pick yourself back up again. But I know that I can do that because I am lucky: I have two brilliant parents who are always there for me. But we are selling a lie if we do not acknowledge how much harder it is for some people. It is like telling them that it is a fair fight, when they start with both hands tied behind their backs and already on the ground.

That is why I am fighting for fairer funding for Hull City Council, which has seen its core spending power cut by 32% since 2010. It cannot invest in those services to really help people have that fair start and equal chance, when all it is doing is managing year-on-year cuts. All these drugs education programmes need proper funding too, if we want them to be successful.

This Government's political choices to cut benefits—especially to disabled people—to under-invest in education and our NHS and to deny our public sector workers a pay rise are making people in Hull West and Hessle suffer. I am here to represent everyone in Hull West and Hessle: not just those who voted for me and not just those on the electoral roll. I want to be the voice for everyone, and I will hold the Government to account for their decisions. I stand here with my colleagues on the Opposition Benches to say that there is an alternative. Austerity is a political choice—one that I will always choose to oppose.

4.10 pm

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on an immensely impressive maiden speech. I confess that I am quite a fan of her predecessor's—I have not said that until now—but I am now also clearly a fan of the hon. Lady, who, like the other two Members who have made maiden speeches today, spoke incredibly powerfully. The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) gave a powerful and moving speech, and I am just glad I was here to witness it. I thank him.

This has been a fascinating debate, in which there have been more voices for reform than I have heard before; I am particularly encouraged by what the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) said. I will come to my thoughts on reform in a moment, but I want to start by acknowledging that there are important things in the Government's drugs strategy.

I welcome the shift away from an over-emphasis on abstinence, which in many respects was damaging. I also welcome a focus on evidence-based drug treatment programmes and on addressing the underlying causes of addiction, whether poor housing or mental health issues. I acknowledge those good things. I also welcome the references to drug rehabilitation requirements as a sentencing option along with alcohol rehabilitation requirements and mental health treatment requirements.

That is a sensible innovation. I note the preparation of a protocol to ensure good access to treatment and the potential for a maximum waiting time, which all make sense.

However, although the mental health treatment requirements, introduced by the last Labour Government, were a very good policy response, they were virtually never used across the country. Organising mental health treatment services alongside the criminal justice system has proved to be beyond most parts of the country, and I do not want the same to happen with drug and alcohol orders. It is really important that the Government focus on making sure that all three of those sentencing options are available everywhere to ensure that when it comes to offences of which the underlying cause is an addiction or mental health problem, the person gets access to treatment and not just punishment. That is incredibly important.

I want to focus on two key objections. The first has been mentioned by other hon. Members: the cut in public health funding. Frankly, that makes no sense at all. If we are to ensure that the NHS as a whole is more sustainable, we have to shift resources to prevention, not cut the funding available, which is completely counter-productive. In a report published just last week, the King's Fund highlighted the fact that across the country councils have planned expenditure cuts to really important public health programmes: sexual health clinics as well as programmes reducing harm from smoking, alcohol and drugs. A total of £85 million is involved. The spend on tackling drug misuse for adults involves a planned cut of £22 million, or 5.5%. It totally undermines the Government's strategy, which, in any case, I disagree with, to be cutting funding from the treatment programmes that can help people to recover. Unless the Government seek to address that, they will fail in their objective.

My second objection is far more fundamental: it relates to the philosophy behind the Government's approach to drug use. Instinctively, I am hostile to drugs. As the father of two boys, now in their 20s, I get really anxious at the thought of my children—our children—taking drugs, or, indeed, engaging in excessive use of alcohol or smoking. Let us remember, in all the talk about harm from drugs, that smoking, which involves a legal product, kills 100,000 people in our country every year. There is no consistency in Government policy at all, and that is simply not good enough. My starting point is not to advocate a free-for-all but to find an effective approach to the use of drugs that seeks to reduce harm. Surely that is what we should all be searching for. However, the Government's approach and that of successive Governments—indeed, that of much of the western world—amounts to a monumental failure of public policy. We need a fundamentally new approach.

The Royal Society for Public Health, in its response to the Government's strategy, says that it

“falls far short of the fundamental reorientation of policy towards public health and away from criminal justice needed to tackle rising drug harm. Decriminalisation of drug possession and use is a critical enabler that would enable drug treatment services to reach as many people as possible as effectively as possible. Instead, the Government still continues to lead with unhelpful rhetoric about ‘tough law enforcement’ that contributes to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of vulnerable drug users”.

If the Government are interested in ensuring that they follow the right approach, surely they should be listening very carefully to those experts in public health.

The *British Medical Journal* editorial from November last year makes an incredibly important point, saying that “the effectiveness of prohibition laws, colloquially known as the ‘war on drugs’, must be judged on outcomes”—what is actually achieved. It continues:

“And too often the war on drugs plays out as a war on the millions of people who use drugs, and disproportionately”—

this is a really important point—

“on people who are poor or from ethnic minorities and on women.”

If the effect of the Government’s policy is as it says in the *British Medical Journal*, then surely the Government need to think again. The editorial also says:

“All wars cause human rights violations, and the war on drugs is no different. Criminally controlled drug supply markets lead to appalling violence—causing an estimated 65 000-80 000 deaths in Mexico in the past decade”.

That is an extraordinary death toll that surely we should not ignore.

I want to focus on the number of people who die through drug misuse. We heard earlier that a third of such deaths in Europe are in the UK. Ten families are bereaved every single day as a result of drug use. That could be a loved one of any of us in this Chamber. If we think that official Government policy is perhaps contributing to that—and I argue that it is—we need to think again. In 2015, the number of deaths was up by more than 10%. The previous year it had risen by more than 14%, and the year before that by nearly 20%. That is a shocking failure of official policy. Deaths from heroin doubled between 2012 and 2015.

**Mr Paul J. Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): One interesting way of reducing harm from intravenous drug use—particularly heroin, which the right hon. Gentleman just mentioned—is the use of safe and hygienic facilities for intravenous drug users in a non-stigmatised environment. Glasgow is piloting that solution in the city, and perhaps it is worth noting as an option that we should look at and consider the results of with interest.

**Norman Lamb:** I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I was going to mention that solution in a moment. Let me quote Anne-Marie Cockburn—she has been mentioned in the debate—from the Anyone’s Child project:

“I invite the Prime Minister to come and stand by my daughter’s grave, and tell me her approach to drugs is working.”

That is a parent who lost their daughter as a result of the current approach to drug policy.

The claim in the strategy that the increase in the number of deaths relates to a problem of ageing drug users simply will not wash. The same demographic is replicated across Europe, including in Portugal, but the increase in deaths is not, and we have to ask why. The number of deaths per 100,000 of population in the UK is 10 times that in Portugal. I appreciated the Minister’s statement that she would listen carefully to what I said, and I hold her in high regard as well, but when our death rate is 10 times that of Portugal, which has chosen, incidentally, an approach that commands cross-party support in the country, from left to right, surely she should stop and listen. Surely she should investigate further Portugal’s approach, which has resulted in such a reduction in the number of deaths from drug use.

In 2015, 1,573 people died of a heroin overdose in this country. That is shameful. In the past, those people might have been dismissed as victims of their own stupidity, but we can no longer accept such thinking. These are people. They are citizens of our country, and they are losing their lives. They would not have died if they had had access to the treatment rooms that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) referred to. So why are the UK Government resistant, as I understand they are, to the project proposed in Glasgow, which has the potential to save lives? Surely that should be part of the strategy, but it does not even mention drug use rooms of that sort. Why on earth not, given that all the evidence points towards significant reductions in the number of deaths? No one dies of an overdose when they take their drugs in such safe rooms. Why are we not moving towards that? It is a disgrace, frankly, that we are not.

**John Mann:** Is not the right hon. Gentleman overstating his case? I have visited quite a number of safe rooms across the world and studied the academic research into them. Is it not an overstatement to suggest that nobody dies there? The question of safe injecting is one of the aspects of death, but, as all the Dutch surveys demonstrate, the fundamental determinant of how long someone with an opiate addiction will live is whether they come off heroin and stop injecting.

**Norman Lamb:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The briefing from Transform states:

“No one has died from an overdose, anywhere in the world, ever, in a supervised drug consumption room”.

If Transform has made a mistake, I apologise.

**Caroline Lucas** (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, because he is making such a powerful case about the importance of evidence-based policy. Is it not the case that drug consumption rooms allow us to reach people who would otherwise be very hard to reach and, over time, build up trust and bring them into recovery? The purpose of drug consumption rooms is not simply to go on handing out drugs to people, day after day. It is to reach those hard-to-reach people and bring them into recovery, over time.

**Norman Lamb:** I totally agree, and I applaud the hon. Lady for the work she has done in arguing the case for reform. Trials of this type of approach have shown huge reductions in acquisitive crime resulting from illegal drug use and in the small-time dealing indulged in to pay for the habit, but the Government withdrew the funding for these trials in April 2016. How short-sighted! The strategy stresses the importance of listening to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, but it recommends the use of rooms where drugs can be taken safely, heroin prescribing and, in effect, the decriminalisation of the use of drugs, and the Government are doing none of those things. If the Government say they should listen to the council, they should please listen to what it is arguing for.

It seems to me there is a dishonesty to this debate. In the foreword to the strategy, the Home Secretary says:

“By working together, we can achieve a society that works for everyone and in which every individual is supported to live a life free from drugs”.

[Norman Lamb]

Incidentally, does that mean “free from drugs” other than the most dangerous drug, alcohol, which we of course allow to be sold and take the tax from? The objective or ambition of a world free from drugs is unachievable, as other hon. Members have pointed out, so let us just get rid of this fantasy at the heart of the so-called war on drugs, which has been a stupid and catastrophic failure. Such an international policy approach has had extraordinary consequences. It has massively enriched organised crime, to the tune of billions of pounds every year. It has also criminalised young people in particular, and it has had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities.

Illegal drug use is actually lower among black and minority ethnic groups than in the white population in this country, but black people are six times more likely to be stopped and searched for drugs than white people. Our son, who is in the music business, was driving in London in the middle of the night, on his way back from a recording at the BBC, when he was stopped in his car. He happened to have a black artist with him, who said, “This is just a fact of life in London for us. This is what happens to us.” They were all pinned up against a wall as they were searched for illegal drugs. There were no illegal drugs in the car, but this is too often what black people in our inner cities have to cope with week in, week out, and it is not acceptable. Black people in London are five times more likely to be charged for the possession of cannabis than white people. This is extraordinary discrimination.

We criminalise people with mental health problems. We know that there is massive comorbidity: if people are suffering from mental ill health—depression, anxiety or obsessive compulsive disorder—they may well end up taking drugs as an escape from the pain that they are suffering, and then we prosecute them and give them a criminal record. How cruel and stupid! There is hypocrisy in that the former Prime Minister famously took cannabis when he was at Eton and many members of this Government have probably taken drugs in their time, yet they are happy to see the careers of other citizens blighted by criminal convictions for what they did in their younger years. Surely that is intolerable.

The strategy addresses the issue of decriminalisation and refers to the evidence of harm, yet we know that the most dangerous drug for causing harm is alcohol, as I have already said, to which the Government take a completely different approach. They still use the language of having a tough approach to enforcement, yet the Home Office’s own report from a couple of years ago showed that there is no link between the toughness of a regime and the level of drug use in society. The illegal market also causes extreme violence in our communities. To control the market in a particular community, all people can do is resort to extreme violence to protect it; they cannot have resort to the courts, as other capitalists do. It has always been disadvantaged communities that suffer the most.

I recommend to anyone here who is interested in this subject the book by Johann Hari, “Chasing the Scream”, which refers to the extraordinary spikes in violence—particularly in America, where there is ever a legal clampdown on the suppliers of drugs to communities—when new suppliers come into a community and seek to gain control of the market. The only way they do that is by using extreme violence.

As I have said, in Portugal, after initial resistance, there is political unity across the spectrum. In the United States, more and more states are moving towards regulated markets for cannabis. In Canada, a Liberal Government are legislating to introduce a legal regulated market. In the UK, I commissioned an expert panel that included a serving chief constable, Michael Barton from Durham. Its recommendation was that in the interests of public health—not despite public health, which is an important point for the Minister—we should move towards a regulated market where we control potency, who grows it and who sells it. That protects those at risk of psychosis and memory impairment because potency is controlled. If people buy from a criminal, they have no idea what they are buying. The criminal has no interest in people’s welfare; they simply want to make a fast buck from them. If people buy from a regulated seller, there is a chance to avoid the sort of harm that we see so often at the moment.

I make this plea: do not claim that the case for change is irresponsible, but bring about change because it will save lives, it will reduce HIV and hepatitis C infection, it will protect people better, it will end the ludicrous enriching of criminals, it will cut violence in our poorest communities, it will end the self-defeating criminalisation of people who have done exactly the same thing as successful people in government, in business and in all sorts of walks of life, and it will raise vital tax revenues. Follow the evidence. Do not perpetuate the stigma and the fear. End this catastrophic approach to drugs policy.

4.32 pm

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): It has been a splendid afternoon. May I offer my congratulations to all those who have made maiden speeches? How refreshing it is and how grateful we all are to the Prime Minister for organising this fresh injection of new Members into the House—and so many of them are women. Goodness, there has been a great change in this place since I came in with my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who is on the Front Bench. It was thought remarkable then that there were four Members from ethnic minorities here. It was a place that was crude and macho because it was dominated by males. We have seen it civilised and become more sensible and more representative of society.

We heard the passion and sincerity of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who is depriving education but enriching us. I am sure she will go far. What a joy it is to see a member of the Sikh community here, with their great history and their marvellous contribution to this country. Are we not coming to a stage where Parliament represents the nation more fully than it ever has before? Many congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

I also congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). The Liberal Democrats have done so much to introduce sanity into the drugs debate. I will not say too much about the Minister, who has the misfortune of presenting the nonsense that civil servants have been writing, in my experience, for the past 30 years on this subject. I remember two people who have had that job with great affection. Mo Mowlam would send me letters with a little handwritten note on the bottom

saying, “See you in the Strangers tonight to tell you what I really think.” When we got together after she stood down, she intended to write a book urging the end of drug prohibition. She could not do it in office and, sadly, she died before the time came. Bob Ainsworth was another person who had the hideous job of trying to defend the failing policy that is the prohibition of drugs. As soon as he stood down, he was campaigning on the other side.

The House has been marred by culpable cowardice for the last 46 years on this subject and countless people have died or suffered as a result. I had an email last night to tell me about a drama documentary to be based on the life of Elizabeth Brice. I gave a little whoop of joy at the news. Elizabeth campaigned under the name of Clare Hodges. She was a wonderful, vibrant woman, a television producer who translated the “Noddy” tales into Latin, among her many achievements. She suffered severely from multiple sclerosis, and she came to the House and collaborated with me in a terrible crime on the Terrace. I supplied her with a cup of hot water, with which she made and drank cannabis tea. According to the rules of the House, and the policy approved by the Government—and, sadly, the Opposition too—she would have been liable to go to prison for seven years, and I would probably have been accompanying her.

We have to call on those who put up with the barbaric stupidity and cruelty of a Government policy that denies seriously ill people their medicine of choice to perform acts of civil disobedience. Elizabeth Brice spoke to the Parliament in Belgium and within months it changed its policy. Most other countries allow the use of this most ancient of medicines—it has been used for 5,000 years on every continent—for medicinal purposes. I know that Members are not supposed to do this, but I call on people to break the law, to come here and use cannabis and see what happens—to challenge the authorities to arrest them. That is the only way to get through to the Government’s mind, which is set in concrete. The law is evidence free and prejudice rich.

In another example of the fact that the Government are in denial, I tabled a simple question to ask how many prisons were free of drug use last year. The answer came back that 83 were free of drug use for one month. That was not the question. I asked again how many were free for a whole year, and the answer came back, “One”. Which one? It was Blantyre House. How many prisoners were in that prison? None—it was closed. The Government have cracked the problem—the answer to drug use in prison is to get rid of the prisoners, not the drugs!

If anything mocks the stupidity and futility of our drugs policy, it is the fact that there are more drugs in prison than outside. There is not a drug-free prison in the whole of the United Kingdom. We also fool ourselves about how the drugs get in—it is not through the visitors or drones. If we look at discipline in prisons and the poor wages paid to many staff, we can quickly work out how drugs get in. There is conspiracy and corruption there.

We need to learn the mountainous lessons of prohibition, which only happened in 1971, with Jim Callaghan following what the United Nations had done under the influence of President Nixon. The world said it would get rid of all illegal use of drugs, but they were not a problem here. There was virtually no use of marijuana/cannabis in this country. Some people had become addicted

through morphine to heroin, but there were no deaths. We had fewer than 1,000 users. Every year since then, under harsh prohibition, we have created an empire of crime and ended up with 320,000 addicts in this country. That is an enormous burden.

We cannot ignore what has happened in the rest of the world. I despair of any change in Government policy, because the Government are stuck in the foolish idea that prohibition works, as was clear when we debated what is now the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. The thinking is that psychoactive substances are a hideous problem, and anyone is very foolish to put anything in their body that has never been ingested by a human being before. The nearest to an intelligent policy came from New Zealand, which said that it would license psychoactive substances if the producers could establish that they were safe. Otherwise, it is just a jungle out there.

Last year, when we debated the Psychoactive Substances Bill, the Government fell into the old trap of saying that “something must be done”, which is the greatest error in politics. Governments cannot think of anything that is going to work, but they have to seem to do something. That was the argument then, and that is where we have ended up with this damaging Act. It was said that Poland and Ireland had virtually the same Bill. Those countries closed the headshops, and the result was not a decrease but an increase in drug use. When the drug trade is on the streets, people have a vested interest and can get more money out of it. In Ireland the use of what were then called legal highs among young people rose from 16% to 22%, and the same thing is happening here. Why on earth do the Government not recognise that prohibition does not work? In America, 13 years of alcohol prohibition did not work for the same reasons.

I have never taken an illegal drug in my life, but I consider the medical use of cannabis to be of immense benefit, and that should be our first step. I believe that the rest of the world will leave us behind; they are laughing at us now. Canada is leading the way, but there is no doubt that the system works in Portugal. The people in Portugal to whom I have spoken did not have the support of any great number of Members of their Parliament, and they did not have the support of the press, but they charged ahead, in a very courageous way, and said, “This is going to work.” That was 16 years ago, and there is every indication, given the number of deaths and the incidence of disease since then, that it has been successful in every respect.

I think that we will follow—as, indeed, we must—the example of half the states in America, and of Uruguay and other countries in South America, and legalise drugs, because that is the only way in which to reduce harm and reduce the number of deaths.

4.43 pm

**Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I am proud to address the Chamber as the newly elected representative of the people of Wolverhampton South West. Whether they voted for me or for the Conservative, Liberal Democrat or Green party representative, I will endeavour to represent them in the House to the best of my ability. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Rob Marris, who stood down when the general election was called. He was a conscientious and much-liked Member of Parliament.

[*Eleanor Smith*]

Wolverhampton, in common with other cities throughout the United Kingdom, has a drug problem. Drug use brings with it a set of associated problems: crime, antisocial behaviour, and other social problems associated with addiction such as broken homes and damaged people, all of whom are in need of support from our increasingly underfunded and overworked social services. A recent BBC report highlighted the use of so-called legal highs in the city, and in that context I welcome the latest legislation reclassifying those substances.

However, what most addicts need is help. They need rehabilitation programmes to help them to come off drugs, because substance abuse and addiction are problems that do not go away on their own. We need a properly funded system to help those people because, if more people can access drug rehabilitation services providing education and employment opportunities, addicts can more easily find a way out of addiction and abuse. The scourge of drug use is associated with an underlying lack of opportunities for young people in Wolverhampton. We should look to European models of how best to do this, rather than reach for American-style punitive solutions, which only drive the problem into our prisons, where it becomes endemic, with hardened drug users returning to our streets to become another thing our hard-pressed NHS staff and police officers have to deal with.

I will now talk about Wolverhampton itself. The Wolverhampton South West constituency was created in 1950. It is repeatedly a marginal and one of three constituencies covering the city of Wolverhampton. Within its boundary is the retail and business core of the city centre, Bank's brewery, universities, schools and Molineux stadium, home of Wolverhampton Wanderers—and please God, may I say that right. The largest employer in Wolverhampton is local government. The constituency fans out from the city centre to include the western and south-western parts of the city.

Wolverhampton South West is a microcosm of modern Britain, a jigsaw of places, names and postcodes. It is a bellwether constituency, moving from Tory to Labour, with shifts in the economic and political moods. There are huge inequalities of income. There are rich, poor, privileged and under-privileged, living only a few miles apart. There is a diversity of culture: white British, Asian British, West Indian, Africans, eastern Europeans and Kurdish, each with their own faith—Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus and Christian, which is my strong faith.

Although Wolverhampton South West has existed for only 67 years, it has a surprisingly rich political history, one which is relevant today. It is associated by some with Enoch Powell, its first MP, from 1950 until 1974. His inflammatory rivers of blood speech in 1968, warning of civil unrest if immigration went unchecked, was set there. Its second MP was Nicholas Budgen, known as one of the Maastricht rebels, who first mooted the idea of a referendum on the European single currency and who opposed all further integration in Europe.

In 1997, Labour won the seat for the first time and it continued to hold the seat until 2010, when Paul Uppal, a prominent Sikh businessman, won it back for the Conservatives. It is a testament to the people of Wolverhampton South West that their actions at the ballot box demonstrated how far they had come from the racial legacy of Enoch Powell in electing a Sikh MP,

and now they have taken another historical step forward by electing the first black woman to represent a west midlands constituency in Parliament.

In electing me, a nurse from a working-class background, a trade unionist and a first-generation immigrant, the people of Wolverhampton South West are saying that they want change. They are saying that they liked the Labour manifesto and that they have had enough of austerity. They do not want any more cuts to public services. They want properly funded education and social services protecting the old and caring for the weakest in our society. They said, “Give us a Brexit that works for all.” The young people said, “Give us something so we can improve our lives and give us hope”—and they all said, “Save our NHS.”

I hope that I will be able to play my part in the coming years in making a difference to youth unemployment and homelessness in my constituency. They are a blight on our society. Wolverhampton has one of the highest jobless rates for 16 to 24-year-olds: according to studies published in 2016, youth unemployment in Wolverhampton was 27%, among the highest in the country. I pledge to work with all those in Wolverhampton who want to help and care for those who have dropped through the increasingly threadbare safety net this country offers.

The other issue that I will be involved with I have been working on for my entire working life of 40 years in the NHS: the conditions of the low-paid workers. The one-line Government statement on the NHS in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech was short on detail with no real ideas on how to improve the NHS and rescue it from the position they have put it in. It would be bad enough if that had resulted merely from ignorance and mismanagement, but that is not the case; these are the results of the policies they have been pursuing for the last seven years. This Government should read the recent Labour party manifestos to learn what the NHS urgently needs. It is all in there: investment, planning, education and training, and much more.

I also need to make a statement about a row that has broken out concerning my comments about a Black country flag created in 2012 after a competition organised by the Black Country Living Museum. This flag has a link of chains as its primary image. I have had two concerns about the connotations of this image; its historical association with the slave trade, and whether it should be the only brand image for the Black country. An article appeared in the local press saying that I thought that the flag was racist and should be scrapped. My comments had been misrepresented. I believe in a free press, but its reporting must be done responsibly, in a fair and honest way. I have received many abusive messages, and I am on the receiving end of the kind of threatening behaviour that many of my colleagues in this House have also received and have recently discussed, and I have learned the hard way how difficult being an MP is.

But, on a much happier note, I am proud of the social culture and industrial and economic heritage of Wolverhampton and the wider Black country. I am proud of the contribution made by the Black country's industry to begin the industrial revolution, which revolutionised the lives of people all around our planet. Above all, I am proud of the tolerance, equality and social cohesion that the people in the Black country and Wolverhampton South West, and in the wider UK, enjoy.

As a Member of Parliament, I will endeavour to work to promote and elevate these great aspects of the people of Wolverhampton South West and the Black country. I stand by them and for them. Thank you for allowing me to speak today, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.52 pm

**Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): May I add my congratulations to the hon. Members for Slough (Mr Dhesi), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—which apparently is one constituency—and for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) on their maiden speeches? I am sure they are already aware that the next time they speak they will not be listened to with such reverence. *[Interruption.]* I will do my best.

On drug policy reform, there are two problems we are trying to address: first, the crime surrounding illegal drugs, and, secondly, the harm done by addiction to drugs. The first technically looks quite easy. We could look to decriminalise and legislate for drugs; overnight we would take away all the power from the criminals. The second problem is harder, but would be easier when the victims are not being stigmatised and driven into the arms of criminals.

The Government report launched last Friday failed to address those core issues. Despite the few nods in the direction of healthcare, the UK Government have fundamentally missed the point again. The Home Secretary says she wants a strategy to deliver a drug-free society, and that, in a nutshell, is why it is seriously flawed, because the drugs are not the problem. We should be asking: why do people take drugs and why do some 10% of users develop an addiction? What leads people to abuse drugs? That is the issue. If Ministers think that coming down hard on criminals will remove drugs from society and therefore end the need for them, they are delusional. We have been trying that for years, and the situation has only got worse.

The latest figures show the highest number of fatalities since comparable records began 24 years ago, with 50 a week across the UK and deaths from heroin doubling in three years, yet the Government have brushed aside the testimonies from the Anyone's Child campaign. Anyone's Child represents people who have lost relatives to drugs, and they now bravely argue for legalisation and regulation to prevent others from having to share their agony.

I welcome the talk about a renewed focus on the importance of evidence-based drug treatment services, and moves to address underlying factors such as inadequate housing, unemployment and mental health problems, but the Government's big message is still about tough law enforcement. When are they going to comprehend that drug reform is a health issue, and that the war on drugs that has been waged for the past 100 years has failed? They will never bring it to an end when their primary focus is on stamping down on dealers and users. In continuing to do that, we marginalise the very people we should be seeking to help. It is a cowardly report and an opportunity lost.

We could be learning from certain events in history, but we seem to be ignoring them. We have already mentioned the fact that the USA banned alcohol, but the people there still wanted alcohol. The US Government could have licensed alcohol manufacturers, established

a state-enforced quality control system with a recognised distribution network, and licensed premises in which to sell alcohol, all of which would have paid taxes to the Government. Instead, they introduced prohibition. That encouraged criminals to produce substances of dubious integrity that they sold at whatever price they liked in establishments that were unfit for purpose. Those activities were all fiercely protected by unrestrained violence. Crime rates soared, people died from consuming the product, addiction increased and rivals died in violent turf wars. Corruption was rampant and communities lived in fear. Does that sound familiar? Today's war on drugs mirrors those processes, except that they are now being carried out on a far larger scale because we have encouraged them to grow over a far longer period of time. Stamping down hard on the criminals who control the growth, harvesting and distribution of drugs has only increased the levels of violence, fear and corruption that they use to hold on to and grow their marketplace.

Once we have started a war that we were never going to win, ending it becomes increasingly difficult. The onus is on us to justify the time, the cost in human lives, the misery and the taxpayers' money involved, and to justify why we started the war in the first place. If we cannot do that, the only option seems to be to plough on, doggedly proclaiming that we were right all along and steadfastly refusing to listen to alternative strategies aimed at resolving the issue. That is where we are now in the war on drugs. Rather like the generals in the first world war ordering tens of thousands of conscripts over the top in a futile show of strength, we cannot see a way out that would justify the losses and sacrifices that have been made. We therefore continue to make the same mistakes over and over again. We should note that when prohibition ended in 1933, the crime rate and the addiction rate plummeted.

Transform has published a report in response to the latest offering from the UK Government in which it points out that, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime,

“taking a criminal justice-led approach to drugs creates a vast criminal market, siphons resources away from health, shifts drug dealing and trafficking around, switches users between drugs, and stigmatises and drives people who use drugs from seeking help.”

In other words, prohibition is a discredited and deadly way of making drugs stronger and more dangerous while funding organised crime.

The National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse estimates that the combined cost to society of substance abuse is £15.4 billion a year. The cost in human lives and the suffering of addicts, their friends and families can never be quantified. As the war continues, we are seeing more addicts, more cost, more pain and no sign that things will improve. The current approach is not working, and we need a fundamental change of philosophy.

A growing body of well-informed people say that it is time to decriminalise and legalise drugs. These people are not lily-livered do-gooders or hippies left over from the '60s; they are ex and current law enforcement officers. They have seen the problems up close and personal. They have spent decades locking people up, but they have come to the conclusion that their actions did not make a blind bit of difference. It is a tough call to recognise that they had it wrong, so the people from Law Enforcement Against Prohibition—LEAP—should be listened to.

[Ronnie Cowan]

A week ago, I hosted a dinner in the House of Commons with 24 people around the table from the Royal Society for Public Health, the British Medical Association, *The British Medical Journal*, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Physicians, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, the Faculty of Public Health, the University of Cambridge, Transform, the Buchanan Institute, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the House of Lords. Most of us self-administered psychoactive substances while we were there. All representatives spoke openly and honestly and the general consensus was that the current drugs policy is not working and that the war on drugs should be led by health, not criminal justice. Why is self-administering a drug illegal? Technically, the answer is because we made that particular drug illegal and put it on a list. As I said, most of us self-administered psychoactive substances, but alcohol is not on the list. We have created a problem and now we cannot fix it—unless, of course, we decriminalised and controlled the production, quality and distribution of drugs. We could then tax them and use the money to provide better treatment, rehabilitation and harm reduction services—rather like we do with alcohol, but hopefully much more effectively.

We have not always had our current attitudes towards drugs, and we have not always seen the violence and crime that surrounds drugs. A good few years ago, there was a regular annual festival of music and arts, and drug taking was a big part of the festival—it was acknowledged and accepted. The festival was frequented by many people, including a few celebrities. We probably know a few of their names: Sophocles, Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero—those kind of dudes. A hundred years ago, UK pharmacies would sell many products made from derivatives of heroin or cocaine. Cough mixtures contained opiates, and department stores sold heroin tins. In 1971, when the Misuse of Drugs Act was passed, 13,000 people had a problem with drugs. After 46 years of the war on drugs, we now have 380,000, and yet the Government still want to pursue that policy.

If we decriminalised or legalised drugs, the one issue we would be left with is the one that we should be addressing right now: why do some people become addicts? If we can solve that, we will go a long way to winning the war on drugs. So what do we know? Professor Bruce Alexander was used to performing experiments on rats and was familiar with the Skinner box, which was seen as a good place to study drug addiction. Scientists had perfected techniques to allow rats to inject small doses of a drug into themselves by pressing a lever. That required tethering the rat to the ceiling of the box and implanting a needle into their jugular veins. The drug passed through the tube and the needle into the rats' bloodstreams almost instantaneously when they pushed the lever. Under appropriate conditions, rats would press the lever often enough to consume large amounts of heroin, morphine, amphetamine, cocaine and other drugs. Then, along with his colleagues Robert Coombs, Patricia Hadaway and Barry Beyerstein, he created "Rat Park". It was heaven for rats, with areas to move freely, dig, socialise and breed. He gave those rats two water bottles, one of which was laced with morphine. None of the rats developed an addiction. The environment that the rats lived in was clearly a factor—not the only factor, but a major one.

The obvious question is whether we have tried this experiment on humans, and the answer, unfortunately, is yes. We gave it a name: the Vietnam war. Hundreds of thousands of young men were shipped thousands of miles from home and dropped into a hell hole. The US military quickly realised that a large percentage of them were smoking pot, so they clamped down. The men turned to heroin, as it was harder for the authorities to find and confiscate. At the end of the Vietnam war, with a large number of heroin addicts about to be repatriated to their home towns and cities, the authorities expected a massive problem, but it did not happen. Once back home among their family and friends, the vast majority kicked their habit within a year. Those who did not were among those living in the poorest conditions or who had other issues that had led to their addiction in the first place.

We see the same behaviour of increased addiction where indigenous people were forced off their land and into reservations and camps by white settlers in the USA, Canada and Australia, so what can we do? As we talked about earlier, some countries have recently pursued alternative policies involving the decriminalisation of drug possession. Argentina, Estonia, Australia and Portugal have all taken a health-centred approach to the issue. Portugal decriminalised drug use, and drug addiction declined when the penalties for personal possession were removed. Rather than being criminalised, people are passed on to a "dissuasion committee"—I am not fond of the term, which sounds a bit Orwellian—consisting of members of the health, social work and law professions. Those considered to be addicts or problematic users are forwarded to treatment and rehabilitation programmes. According to the Royal Society for Public Health, within 10 years of implementing those policies the number of drug addicts in Portugal has halved. If the UK achieved the same success, the Buchanan Institute estimates that the financial saving would be around £7.7 billion a year.

For the record, I do not take illegal drugs—that is my choice—but if I chose to take them within the privacy of my home, I honestly do not see what harm it would do to society at large. How would arresting me improve anything? Yet we regularly prosecute people and, it has to be said, primarily poor people.

We seem to have one approach to law enforcement for rich city slickers sniffing a line of cocaine in their penthouse suite, and quite another for a kid smoking a joint on a council estate. It is no coincidence that the areas of the UK with the highest levels of social deprivation are the areas with the highest numbers of drug-related deaths. According to the Prison Reform Trust, one in 10 people in custody today is there because of a drugs-related offence. Some of our prisons have had serious problems with synthetic drugs, or Spice, in recent years. Those with the least access to money and lawyers, those who are less socially mobile, will always be more vulnerable.

Our attitude to drug consumption has to change. Only then can we see that the issue is addiction, and addiction is a health issue, not a criminal one. We must look to decriminalise and legislate. By doing so, we will take the power away from criminals and put the money into education, rehabilitation and reducing drug harm.

5.7 pm

**Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): I declare an interest as a Suffolk county councillor.

Like many towns of its size, Ipswich would be seriously improved by society dealing more effectively with the scourge of hard drugs. Ipswich has a low level of crime for its size, but there is too much violent crime, and that crime is rising. Much of the violence in our town has been carried out by drug dealers, targeted against drug dealers, motivated by arguments over drugs, fuelled by drugs or, in the murders of the women on London Road in 2006, targeted against young people whose lives have been dominated by their need to get money to pay for drugs.

One of my most passionate ambitions is to find ways to bring the marginalised in our town back into some sort of social life, to help them end their addictions, to support them to find housing and employment, and ultimately to give them the greatest gift of all—self-respect—so that they no longer need to feel dependent but can hold their head up and say proudly that they are contributing to our town.

I am immensely proud to have been chosen by the people of Ipswich to represent them in the House and, at the same time, humbled by the responsibility that places upon me. Ipswich is an exciting, vibrant yet unpretentious town. Although there was a pre-Roman settlement on the site and it became a substantial town during the Saxon period, winning its royal charter in 1200, we do not dwell on our history.

Ipswich is what it is and where it is because it was the borough that served the rural county around it. It started as a port, exporting agricultural produce. It grew rapidly in the 19th century, building the ploughs, seed drills, reapers and other modern agricultural machinery of the time that transformed the productivity of our farms, not just in Suffolk, but throughout the UK and indeed the empire. We developed artificial fertiliser on the back of our initial base as the centre of the coprolite industry, making a good living out of a load of old squit!

In the late 19th century, Ipswich's heavy engineering grew, almost all of which is now gone. The world's first lawnmower was built in Ipswich in 1832, and Ransomes Jacobsen still builds lawnmowers in Ipswich today, but we have not hung around or tried to revive dead businesses.

In the 1960s and 1970s, roads were reconfigured and areas cleared to enable the building of large office blocks to house the insurance industry, which is still one of the major employers in our town. The BT research and development headquarters just down the road is one of the most important local employers, and the East of England Development Agency invested significant sums in the first decade of this century in providing the accommodation needed for the IT spin-off companies that have grown out of BT.

Ipswich has immense potential. To his credit, I believe my predecessor, Ben Gummer, could see that. We have higher unemployment than the rest of Suffolk but many people with skills just waiting to be called upon. We have the space to expand and adapt, even in the very heart of the town. We have a beautiful and sophisticated focus on the waterfront, and the affordable housing and commercial space for new people and businesses to move in. We are only just over an hour from the City of London by train, but very much not just simply a commuter town. Ben Gummer put a lot of effort into trying to improve the rail link with London and into the regeneration of the waterfront, and I certainly intend to continue that work.

I also want to give credit to the previous MP for Ipswich, Chris Mole, and all that he achieved for Ipswich. Chris has been a good friend of mine for more than 20 years, and I was delighted when he was elected to represent Ipswich in a by-election in 2001. Much was built or started in Ipswich during his time as MP, and I know that a lot of that was due to his championing of our town: a new accident and emergency department at the hospital; a new sixth-form college on the outskirts of the town; a completely new set of buildings for the further education college; and a commitment from the Government to build a complete flood defence system, including a tidal barrier to protect the town from sea level rise—I am glad to say that that commitment is now reaching fulfilment. When he was leader of the county council, he told me that his No. 1 ambition was to achieve a university for Suffolk, and he had already put in place the commitment from the pre-existing further education college, the county council and the borough council necessary to achieve a united bid for a new university. As MP for Ipswich, he was able to steer that to completion, and I do not believe he has ever had the full credit he deserves for that achievement. As a town with a brand new university, as the fulcrum around which our waterfront turns, Ipswich is undergoing a change every bit as radical as occurred in the 19th century when we started building machinery. We are entering a new and exciting phase of our development, where the imagination and intellectual skills of our young people will be the building blocks of our prosperity. Thank you, Chris.

Ipswich is, of course, a unique town, but many of the problems our residents face are national ones, shared with citizens across the UK. I have contributed in my own small way to helping with the governance and funding of voluntary organisations in Ipswich that work with people to help them to avoid marginalisation. I refer to organisations such as the citizens advice bureau; the Ipswich Disabled Advice Bureau; the Ipswich and Suffolk Council for Racial Equality, which is now also bidding to set up a law centre; and, recently, The Oak, an independent drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre, which is taking people on that final step between renouncing an addiction and actually gaining the personal self-confidence and self-worth needed to want not to relapse. All those organisations are struggling financially because of reductions in local authority funding.

We need to decide what sort of society we want to live in. What possible sense can it make to increase the availability of prison places at enormous cost but not to reduce re-offending rates, not to support preventive measures such as personalised job seeking for people at risk, and not to fully fund drug rehabilitation programmes, alcohol dependency programmes and hospital provision? How can we expect people to take care of what they are doing to themselves if they are unable to get a job, feed themselves properly, get the psychiatric help or counselling they need or even have somewhere safe and private to sleep the night? It is shocking to see increasing numbers of people—women as well as men, young as well as old—sleeping in shop doorways, in underpasses or in cemeteries in what is still the fifth largest economy in the world. How can we as a society say to those people with a straight face, “You must not take hard drugs?” when we are not offering them any way to escape from the half-life that they are leading?

[Sandy Martin]

We do need to clamp down on drug deals and to ensure that the supply of hard drugs is curtailed, but, ultimately, we will not build a better society, free from the scourge of hard drugs, unless we can build a society where everyone feels valued and able to contribute. Let us make sure that all our citizens can have the education that they deserve, the counselling and the psychiatric help that they need, when they need it, the employment that makes the best use of their talents, access to a full and vibrant social life, safe, adequate and affordable housing and a healthy environment. People will then have lives that they value, and that they know others value, and will not want to turn to hard drugs to escape from their lives.

5.16 pm

**John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) on a brilliant maiden speech? It was one of five exquisite, eloquent, factual and well-informed maiden speeches that we have heard today. I have visited all those towns other than Ipswich, although I do hope that, at some stage, I will visit his football club and make it five out of five. I congratulate all five new Members on those speeches.

Interestingly, the facts provided by each one so eloquently are not matched—as is ever the case in a debate on drugs—by the so-called facts provided in many contributions. It always saddens me that, when it comes to debates on drugs, people quote from other people's briefings rather than do their own empirical research. I could give very many examples of that, but I will confine myself to just one—safe injecting rooms.

I have been to safe injecting rooms in many places across the world. I have been to them in this country. Yes, they do exist in this country—not officially—and they can be effective in some situations for some people. They also have many downsides. The debate about the downsides and the upsides among the very people who run them are part of the larger debate. One of the problems is that they tend to be most effective in the heart of big cities, normally in so-called red light areas with significant amounts of street prostitution. That is where they tend to be most effective for some of the most vulnerable in society. Safe injecting in those places certainly saves lives, but what is found every time is that the majority of clientele who come in are passing tourists. That is because these places are known, they are visible and they are in the middle of big cities—of course those kind of zones are in the middle of big cities.

Sydney provides us with a good example, but there are many others places where that debate on their effectiveness has been a big problem. The ones in the Netherlands, which are not called safe injecting rooms, are not officially designated and are not public, are actually very effective. I call them retirement homes, because that is what they are. Cups of tea are available and the people there are very much of the same age profile—slightly younger—as those in retirement residences or social projects in this country. Clean needles, cups of tea, biscuits and advice are provided if required. The spaces are safe, they work and they save lives.

If we want, when it comes to injection, to save lives in this country, introducing Naloxone for paramedics would, overnight, have far bigger consequences, as has been

demonstrated; there are thousands of medical tracts on drugs. The Australians have used Naloxone in dealing with overdoses for the past 15 years; that is why they have far fewer deaths from overdoses. Its introduction in this country would be a major step forward in dealing with deaths.

I came to this subject in 2002, when 13 of my constituents died from heroin overdoses in one year. After a year of research, in which I went around the world with GPs to see what worked and what did not, I overwhelmingly came to the conclusion that what works is not politicians telling each other whether cannabis is good, bad, strong or weak, or what to do with this or that drug; it is trusting the experts—the medical experts.

All the debate today has been about illegal drugs, but probably the biggest single problem in this country, in terms of addiction and the number of people misusing drugs, is legal drugs—prescription and over-the-counter drugs; volume-wise and, I suspect, death-wise, that is a bigger problem. I could not have disagreed more with the Minister when she said that her test for her children—I am trying to quote her exactly—was whether the drug was available at Boots. No; what is available over the counter at Boots or any other chemists is a problem in the war on drugs. The over-prescription of drugs, and the illegal sale of prescription drugs in our communities, is a massive problem that, volume-wise, far outweighs the other problems.

When we talk about drugs, we are not talking about one thing. It is like talking about food; I suspect that a vegetarian would not want to be provided simply with “food” for a meal, if they visited one of us; they would probably want a certain type of food. We should trust medical expertise. In my area, after a battle, I got a system set up whereby if someone had a substance misuse problem—heroin being the biggest one—they went in through the front door of their GP's practice. It took me six months of battling to make sure that every GP's practice took part in that, and six months to ensure that it was the front door, not the back door. It took me three months to make sure that it was a GP, rather than a drug worker. Anyone can be a drug worker—there is no qualification for being one—but not anyone can be a GP; the standard, in my view, is satisfactorily high in this country.

Guess what we found? There has been a lot of talk of rehabilitation, but I will tell hon. Members the biggest rehabilitation that someone on heroin can get: it is going through the front door of their GP's practice, like everybody else in the community—like their mother, father, brother, sister, and sometimes their kids. It is going through the same door and seeing the same GP. Strangely, that is rehabilitating and normalising. It takes people back into society—and it is dirt cheap: the biggest single cost of this in my area is from the dental treatment, because those with a significant substance misuse problem do not tend to go to dentists. They go into treatment; I do not know what the treatment is, though I know some of the modalities, but the treatment is not my decision, or the decision of a politician, a councillor, the police, the criminal justice system, or a drug worker; the GP decides on the treatment. Strangely, these people wanted dental treatment; that was the highest single cost. Strangely, people who have had dental treatment have a far better chance of getting through a job interview than those who have had no

treatment for five or 10 years. A job means a bit more rehabilitation, and if the local council has its act together it can provide proper housing.

What happens when people have better teeth, the ability to go to their GP through the front door, a job and secure housing? What we found was that people stopped dying. There were 13 deaths in 2002, and over the next 11 years there were two. Vast numbers of people got back into work; they paid taxes—they were in rehabilitation. Forget the statistics that the Government give out about who is in treatment and who is not—I will talk in a moment about how the system has fiddled the figures since 2010—because a good statistic is the number of people paying taxes.

What is the saving? It is hard to quantify, but I can certainly quantify one thing. In 2002 the yearly average for the number of overdose admissions to Bassetlaw hospital was 170, each of which cost £4,000. That yearly average was immediately reduced to under 40, and it stayed like that for the next 11 years. That meant a saving of £500,000 a year for a small hospital. Some people were worried that the hospital would need security staff and cameras, to guard against all the drug addicts coming in, but there were far fewer drug addicts, far fewer overdoses and far fewer hospital admissions. That meant a direct saving. Remind me, Mr Deputy Speaker, which constituency had the biggest fall in acquisitive crime in the whole of the United Kingdom?

**Hon. Members:** Bassetlaw!

**John Mann:** Mr Deputy Speaker, you are ever wise, ever accurate and ever factual. Bassetlaw saw a 400% reduction in acquisitive crime. Why? Because it was the drug addicts committing most of the crime.

For 11 years people could go through the front door of their GP's surgery. Not everyone was happy. I have read the medical advice—not all of it, but hundreds and thousands of papers—and basically there is a two-thirds success rate for chronic relapsing illness, meaning that two thirds will be sorted, wherever the illness is, and a third never will be. There is a cohort of people who will always have problems, and they tend to go in and out of prison regardless, but there are far fewer of them because we have reduced the number by two thirds, leading to huge savings.

That does not totally solve the problem, but it allows the rest of the community to get on with their lives without being plagued. Pensioners were not having their windows smashed every five minutes by people who stole a fiver—the normal heroin theft is to break a pensioner's window and grab the first thing in sight. The fear and the cost of repairing the window is far bigger. Frankly, I think that if most pensioners knew they would just leave the fiver outside. That is what life was like.

What do the Government do? Two things. First—this is a big improvement in this new drugs strategy—they say, “Recovery, recovery, recovery. We are not going to bother maintaining anybody.” That change is vital. That is what they did in the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Australia and New Zealand—in fact, in every country I went to. They all left it to the doctors.

In 2002 only three countries did not have health authorities in charge of drugs policy: the United States—obviously—us and Iran. When I went to Iran to talk about drugs policy, I found that they had just changed it.

They had done that—this is my assessment, not what people there said—because, basically, all the drug addicts had been sent to be looked after by the religious leaders, who would put them in recovery. But it did not work, which was undermining the religious leaders. So those at the top in Iran sent people over to Australia to study the medical system there, and they came back and introduced it in Iran, which therefore now has a medicalised system—and there are big improvements. You see, doctors are rather good at treating people because they know what they are doing. Yes, they sometimes use methadone or buprenorphine treatments, and sometimes they bring in mental health therapies, but the system worked well through the NHS.

What have we done? In 2010, we threw all that out the window and gave it to the local councils, and all of them—including Labour councils—in their great stupidity privatised it. What do those Labour councillors say? “We know better than the GPs and the NHS. It's got to be joined up. It's got to be more than the NHS.” So they took it away from the NHS and, since 2013 in my constituency, people have not been able to walk through the front door of their GP practices.

Guess what has happened? I had a meeting on Saturday, in Retford. There have been hardly any burglaries in Retford in the last 100 years, but there are record numbers this year. Who is committing them? The druggies—people who are drug addicted but cannot go through the front door of their GP practice as they could before. I cannot get them in. I used to guarantee to every family: “I'll get you an appointment within a couple of days.” And I did, and it was easy. They went in and saw their GP. They engaged with their GP, and it was hugely successful.

My recommendation to the Government and to my own party—perhaps my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) will pass this on to my leader—is to put this portfolio in health. That is what the Labour party policy review that I chaired in 2009 recommended, and it had 4,000 submissions. The leader at the time and the one after him ignored it. Third time lucky. Put the portfolio in health and say that a critical part of the policy is that the NHS—primary care GPs—will manage the patients. Say that people in this country have the right to be treated by their GP. Yes, more is needed from other services—absolutely: getting people into jobs, keeping control of crime and getting people into stable housing, but the NHS is at the heart of the issue.

By the way, why on earth have the Scottish Government moved away from their successes a few years ago in places like Glasgow towards this nonsense of people coming out of the recovery system after six months? The Government said, “Six months and that's it—out you come.” That appears to have changed.

**Sarah Newton** indicated assent.

**John Mann:** If it has, that is brilliant, but we should never have gone back to that nonsense in the first place; I am sure the Minister will blame the Liberals. That is what we had in 2002: the revolving door. “Oh, you're out—you're clean.” “Who says I'm clean?” “Well it's six months. You have to be.” It was a bit like how it is in the prisons: strangely, someone has some Naltrexone and “Oops! You're clean!” That is the stats fiddled. Frankly, I could fiddle those stats. It is the system that does it. Totally meaningless.

[John Mann]

Let us have a bit of honesty. We would still have a problem. We would not get rid of it all. Dealing with Spice is not as straightforward as dealing with heroin, and the GPs do not have all the answers. But if someone with an addiction goes to a GP, the GP pulls in mental health services, and that does work. Across the world, people have found that. So let us not misquote what happened in Portugal, where I have been, because what I am talking about is the key to that system. Let us not misquote what happens in the Netherlands, where they have kicked out most of the coffee houses and they specifically demonise heroin—very sensibly at the time, in my view. The position for quite a while was, “Our problem is heroin. Do what you want, but you’re not doing heroin”, and they got on top of it. We are not in that situation, so we do not need that kind of overly crude approach. We can look at what the Swedes do and what the French do. In France, the GPs will not do it. With single-practice GPs working from their own home, it is easy—go to the local chemist and get the prescription, and do not even bother supervising it. Do not complicate it, that is my advice, and then we will get better results.

I can only give it as I see it. I have got the documents—the research is there. To new colleagues in all parts of the House, I say, “Read the assessments of what has happened, because there is a plethora of materials that demonstrate this.” We will not get rid of the problem, but we can significantly be on top of the problem. There are some improvements, but frankly not enough. Yet again, the Home Office is the wrong Department. Of course the police advisers all want to decriminalise drugs, because it gets crime down. I have heard this for 15 years: “If we decriminalised and didn’t arrest, crime would come down and the problem would be solved.” No, that is not the answer. Lots of good stuff could be done in terms of how we police and do not police. There are lessons we could learn from abroad.

The starting point is to shift the portfolio to health. We should be bold enough to say, “It doesn’t fit in with how this place works, but we’re doing it anyway. When we’re in power the portfolio will be in health.” That in itself would transform the situation in this country because then we would have to make sure that primary care is funded and would be able to stop wasting money elsewhere. Local councils: love them or loathe them, they haven’t got a clue—big error. We should tell our Labour councils, “Stop privatising and give it back to the NHS.”

5.36 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann). I agree with him on doing one’s own research and reading the papers, but also on respecting professional expertise. Although I am afraid I come to slightly different conclusions on some aspects, there is a lot of agreement between us, particularly on locating the problem in the Department of Health.

I pay particular tribute to the hon. Members who have made their maiden speeches today. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Wolverhampton South West

(Eleanor Smith) and for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) all made wonderful, inspiring and rousing speeches. They set a very high bar for themselves, as well as their colleagues, over the coming years.

I thank the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for his suggestion that there should be a royal commission on drugs that looks carefully, thoroughly and objectively at the evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) provided very moving examples of how our legal structure is currently failing people. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) also gave inspiring and helpful speeches.

Over the past six months, following the advice of my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw, I have had the great privilege of being exposed to a range of different experts, specialists, academics and interventions in my own constituency and beyond as I have been part of the process of making a BBC documentary on the use of drugs. I have been involved as an MP and as a citizen of a city with above-average rates of drug use and drug misuse, and with exceptionally forward-thinking, effective drug misuse services, including, but not only, GPs. The makers of the documentary have followed me around—veritably stalked me at times. They assessed the impact of the abuse and misuse of alcohol and other drugs—I am going to keep using that phrase—on my constituents and facilitated meetings between me and people with specialist knowledge and skills. The results will be broadcast in three parts this autumn. I have not seen it. Other documentaries may well be available, but I urge hon. Members to see what they made.

As part of that process, I have met local organisations commissioning or providing services to people with drug problems. I particularly pay tribute to the Bristol Drugs Project and DHI—Developing Health and Independence—along with commissioners in Bristol City Council. They have been extremely generous and patient with their time to educate and inform me, and also in being willing to listen to questions and ideas with which they did not necessarily agree, and vice versa—that is, ideas that I did not initially agree with but have been able to see the point of.

I have met people in support groups and programmes who are in the process of desisting from alcohol and other drug misuse. I have visited Horfield prison, which is in my constituency. I have been briefed on the nature of drug use—particularly the use of Spice—and its impact on the prison, the staff and the prisoners. I have met specialists including Sir David Nutt, the leading psychologist, pharmacologist and psychiatrist, who formerly chaired the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs, and Dr Ben Sessa, consultant child and adolescent and addiction psychiatrist at Imperial College, to discuss the research and evidence base for and against our current drugs policy.

I met a specialist drug safety tester from the Loop project, which provides free and confidential drug counselling and testing of substances—without, hon. Members may be pleased to hear, returning those substances. I was puzzled to hear that, but the testers cannot return substances to the people who have asked to have them tested, because that would be classed as drug dealing. I do not think that that is helpful, but it does at least provide people with information about the quality of what they might be about to take.

I was told by the Loop project that, as a result of its work, not only are people better informed about what they might be taking—whether or not it has been cut with impurities, including concrete—but if they discover that a substance is unsafe to take, they hand in quantities of drugs voluntarily. It is a way of cleaning up the supply of very unsafe drugs, as well as giving people the information they need to make a well-informed choice about whether, when and how to consume drugs. I discussed with Loop the purpose and function of drug consumption rooms. I take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw has said, because he has far more experience in this matter than I have, but I am interested to know more about the various pilots and the research that he mentioned.

I met homelessness organisations and homeless people who have compounding problems on top of drug and alcohol problems. I discussed with my campaign volunteers, staff and local residents their concerns about drug misuse, which are many and varied. I did various drug impact walks through my own constituency, looking around me, talking to people and identifying the problems that have both a visible and an invisible impact on local people.

I have analysed my own experience, as a long-term resident of the area, of how the use and misuse of drugs has affected the local area over the years, and how and why it has changed. I have, as a consequence, made many reports to the local drugs litter cleaning services. That is one of the consequences of the current regime that we would do well to address, and we should at least consider the use of drug consumption rooms because it would reduce nuisance to other people. I have also had to respond to extremely unpleasant side effects of alcohol and drug misuse on my own doorstep, both at home and in the entrance to my constituency office.

I have done a great deal of reading of the research on the impact of our current legal system and support services on the use and misuse of alcohol and other drugs. I thank everybody who has given me their time and attention during this process, which has been hugely educational, influenced my thinking and informed my beliefs. I particularly thank the BBC team, Bart, Ae, Poppy and Hugo, for making me part of such an interesting process.

To inform my response to the drug strategy, I contacted many of the people I have mentioned, and I analysed the findings of various papers by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and other evidence against the scope and detail of the strategy. As a result of that review, although I applaud aspects of the strategy—I will mention them shortly—I have the following criticisms. The strategy does not include an explicit aim of reducing or, ideally, eliminating premature deaths caused by drug use. I would really like to see that front and centre. The strategy virtually, although not completely, ignores the most harmful drug. I say respectfully to the Minister that alcohol is a drug, and one that is entirely legal; I will come back to that shortly. The Government's welcome acceptance of evidence-based treatments for drug misuse and mental health problems is a step forward, but it is undermined, as colleagues have said, by the lack of a funding strategy to support it. The strategy fails to take on key recommendations from the report published last year by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs on preventing opiate-related deaths.

Finally, I must add my voice to those of others who have said that the strategy represents a wasted opportunity, when the Government could have reviewed the entire legislative framework surrounding alcohol and other drugs and made it consistent, evidence-based and focused on harm reduction for all drug use. I echo the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Reigate that a commission should do what I believe the Government could have done over the last two years.

The strategy opens with the ambition “for fewer people to use drugs in the first place”, and for those who do, to “help them to stop and to live a life free from dependence.”

However, that ignores the fact that many people take drugs recreationally, free from dependence and free from the harm caused to other people that results from some drug use. They are at risk of causing some harm to themselves, and such harms tend to arise from the criminal justice framework that we wrap around them. We should have the ambitions to reduce harm and prevent deaths—I support the aim to reduce harm, and I want to increase recovery from dependence—but I also want to take us as a country towards a fully evidence-based, open-minded approach to both.

Most of the means of preventing death in the “Reducing Opioid-Related Deaths in the UK” report by the ACMD last year, which I mentioned earlier, have been ignored in the strategy. For instance, drug testing—I mean not testing of people to see if they have taken drugs, but of drugs to see what they have in them—as well as the provision of drug consumption rooms and a wider examination of forms of treatment have all been ignored either partially or wholly. The strategy ducks the fact that much of the use of alcohol and other drugs takes place with comparatively little or no harm identified by the user, and frequently with great pleasure, which therefore undermines some of the messages given in the strategy. If users do not themselves experience their drug taking in a way described by the strategy, they are likely to dismiss all of the good stuff in it. Harms arise from the unregulated nature of the market. The organisation Loop has shown me one of the huge life-saving benefits of being able to test drugs such as ecstasy in clubs and festivals. I want the full protection of regulation, education, testing and a licensing regime to be given to all my constituents, not just those whose drug of choice is the legally available one of alcohol.

I must say that there are some aspects of the strategy that I very much welcome, such as the emphasis on prevention and the use of compulsory personal, social and health and economic education, which is now part of the curriculum, to increase the awareness and understanding of young people. By the way, I say to the Government, “You're welcome”. It took us a while to convince the Government that this needed to happen, but Opposition Members are always pleased when the Government realise we have got something right. I am also very pleased that the drug strategy recognises the limitations of some educational approaches, such as the format of lectures by the police or reformed addicts. Such approaches tend not to have a good evidence base, and I am glad the Government have recognised that.

I also want to say that the two drugs that have arguably caused me the greatest personal harm are two legal drugs—alcohol and tobacco. I am sure everybody

[Thangam Debbonaire]

in the House knows about the link between tobacco consumption and lung cancer and many may also know about the link between alcohol consumption and liver cancer, but it was not until I was diagnosed with breast cancer that I learned about the causal links between alcohol consumption and other cancers. While I was being treated, I was contacted by a publican about the new NICE guidelines on alcohol consumption. He claimed that they were biased and in favour of teetotalism, and he was very angry about what he said was an unnecessary and unwelcome bias, given that the guidelines say that there is no “safe” level of alcohol consumption. I therefore read the guidelines and all the research review papers informing the guidelines—I was on sick leave, so I had time to do so—and I came to the carefully considered conclusion that the guidelines were both accurate and helpful.

It was helpful to me to know that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption, and reading the research papers helped to convince me that the abstemiousness, as far as I could possibly manage it, that I had fallen into during chemotherapy was something I wished to keep to for the sake of my own health after the treatment ended. This was all news to me: I did not know until I had breast cancer that alcohol was so closely linked to it. Since then, I have realised how many other people are not aware of the wide, many and varied risks associated with alcohol, which is a completely legal drug. Alcohol is available on these very premises, and no doubt somebody somewhere is in the process of consuming that legal drug right now. At the risk of sounding like Nana from “The Royle Family”, I have—with the exception of a very small glass of bubbly at weddings and perhaps a sweet sherry at Christmas—stuck to my non-consumption of alcohol, and I have to say that I feel all the better for it. That is a good example of how providing accurate information about a drug can inform someone’s decision making.

Alcohol is at the top end of the most harmful substances both to the user and to others—it is more harmful than heroin, in fact—but if I fall off the alcohol-free wagon by going into a shop or a pub and buying some alcohol, I at least know that it will not have been cut with something much more poisonous. I know that I am not risking my job by breaking the law and I know that I will be picked up afterwards if dropping off the wagon causes me problems. I believe that the regulatory, information and licensing systems for alcohol provide a great template for reforming the law on other drugs. I am not knocking anybody else’s right to choose to drink alcohol; I just want parity for my constituents who use other drugs.

I want to say quickly that I am not sure where the money will come from for everything, because money was conspicuously absent from the strategy. Other Members have drawn attention to that and perhaps others who are still to come will do too. That is a big omission. Whether it is in interventions purely in the health service, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw referred to, or in drug treatment programmes, specialist programmes or mental health services, the cuts by this Government in local government, the health service and elsewhere have been felt across the board. There is no good way to carry out any of the very good proposals in the strategy

without adequate funding. Mental health services and drug and alcohol services all need to be properly funded. As I am sure the Government are aware, there is a 2.5 return on investment. I hope that the Minister will address that point in her closing remarks.

Something that is very personal to me is the prevention of drug-related deaths, particularly those from heroin. People in my life have lost theirs to drug addiction, including addiction to heroin and alcohol. That is why I want to be clear that when I talk about reforming our laws, I am not saying that these drugs are good to take; I am just saying that if we are clear that alcohol is not good for us and yet it is legal, well-regulated and licensed, we at least ought to look at why we are failing people with a heroin addiction, people who use drugs recreationally and do not have an addiction problem, and the people around drug users. The hearts that are broken through heroin-related deaths go much wider than the people who use the drug.

The number of opioid-related deaths has gone up year on year since 2010. I thoroughly applaud the Minister for saying that she wants an evidence-based approach, but she appears to have ignored the conclusions and findings of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs that came out just last year. It reminded us that there were 2,479 drug-related deaths in 2015 alone, so keeping drugs illegal is clearly not preventing death.

Among the report’s findings was this:

“That the UK has high-quality systems for the recording of opioid-related deaths,”—  
which is good—

“but that more could be done to improve national information, especially on toxicology and prescribing, as well as on the contribution of opioid use to levels of mortality from other causes.”

Data collection is partially addressed by the Minister in the strategy, but I would like further information, if possible.

The report also states that

“a probable cause of the recent increases in drug-related deaths...is the existence of a prematurely ageing cohort of people who have been using heroin since the 1980s and 1990s.”

It states that other contributory causes of those recent increases are

“multiple health risks...among an ageing cohort of heroin or opioid users, deepening of socio-economic deprivation since the financial crisis of 2008, and changes to drug treatment and commissioning practices.”

The paper goes on to make some very sensible suggestions, which I urge the Minister to remind herself of. I will remind her of some of them now. It states:

“There are a number of evidence-based approaches that can be used to reduce the risk of death among people who use opioids. The strongest evidence supports the provision of opioid substitution treatment (OST) of optimal quality, dosage and duration.”

I know that the Minister is aware of that. However, the report goes on to say:

“Other substance misuse treatment options could be further developed in order to reduce the risk of death including broader provision of naloxone,”—

for hon. Members who do not know, that is a substance that can be used to halt and then reverse the effects of overdoses, thus saving lives—

“heroin-assisted treatment for those for whom other forms of OST are not effective, medically-supervised drug consumption clinics, treatment for alcohol problems, and assertive outreach to engage heroin users who are not in treatment into OST (especially for those who are homeless and/or have mental health problems).”

We are all harmed by a failure to address those issues. We are harmed when we are troubled by the homeless person on the street who is clearly suffering; by the relative or friend of a friend who goes without the treatment that they need; or by someone who dies needlessly of an overdose when it could have been prevented by safe use in a drug consumption clinic, accompanied by counselling to try to engage that person in drug cessation. I want us to notice that we are all harmed by that, not just those who are using drugs.

The strategy recognises the record high levels of deaths and drug misuse and it makes some recommendations, such as that all local areas should have appropriate naloxone provision in place, but the Bristol Drugs Project, which has such a distribution system, tells me that it is unable to get to everyone who is at risk of heroin overdose. I would like it to have the funding it needs to reach more people and prevent more deaths. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs also recommended the drug consumption clinics that I have mentioned, and discussions with people in the sector and with other specialists lead me to believe that investing in drug consumption spaces, where drug users can have their drugs tested, receive counselling and, above all, consume drugs safely and with no associated harms to the rest of us, would be money well invested or at least worth exploring further. We would gain in the reduced cost to emergency services, local council cleaning services and the prevention of drug-related deaths.

I turn to the obvious contradictions in our laws on alcohol and other drugs. On criminalisation, the ACMD has mixed views, but the Government are unequivocal—they are opposed to reforming the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The strategy states:

“We have no intention of decriminalising drugs. Drugs are illegal because scientific and medical analysis has shown they are harmful to human health”—

I do not disagree. It continues:

“Drug misuse is also associated with much wider societal harms including family breakdown, poverty, crime and anti-social behaviour.”

Those I would qualify. As others have said, and I reiterate, that argument simply does not hold water. The research review carried out by Professor David Nutt for *The Lancet* shows that alcohol is by far the most dangerous drug in the UK for harms to others and harms to the user. It is far more harmful to other people than any other drug, including heroin, crack, methamphetamine, cocaine, cannabis and tobacco, but it is regulated, with licensing conditions and ways to protect users if it is their drug of choice.

The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) mentioned the awful people who deal in drugs and use violence. I agree: I want to protect my constituents from falling prey to that violence and abuse. She also mentions the harms that vulnerable people suffer when they are forced to traffic drugs. I agree, and I want to avoid those harms, but I respectfully disagree with her—it is the criminal nature of the drugs trade that causes those harms. That is my interpretation of the evidence, and I urge hon. Members to consider the suggestion by the hon. Member for Reigate of a royal commission to examine that further.

If we are to take an approach of making a substance illegal because scientific and medical analysis has shown it is harmful to human health, we need to make alcohol and tobacco illegal. Are the Government proposing that?

No, they are not, and I do not want them to. I would simply invite them to consider that their entire rationale for maintaining the legal status quo is undermined by that. It would be far more effective to tackle the harms done to others and to the user to review the entire criminal law associated with alcohol and other drugs, and to consider reforming it to make it truly evidence based.

Before I conclude, I want to add some comments and caveats on the wider social rationale. Some people think—and some hon. Members have implied it today—that drug harms are the responsibility of the individual and, if people choose to use drugs, they should be left to take the consequences without the taxpayer having to pick up the tab. I know that the Minister does not agree with that approach and I am glad about that. To those people, I say that we are all picking up the tab anyway—in the huge costs of policing drug use, accidental overdose and so on. We are also picking up the tab when people in our own lives are harmed by drugs. It is no use saying that it is always someone else’s child, parent or sibling. Many sober people who have never taken any drugs are affected by a relative or friend’s drug use, whether cash is stolen from them to pay for drug use or in having to deal with the impact of overdoses or the health consequences of substances added to drugs.

The social and economic cost of drug supply in England and Wales is estimated to be £10.7 billion a year, just over half of which—£6 billion—is attributed to drug-related acquisitive crime. Would that we could reform that—and I think the Minister should take this opportunity to consider that there are ways of reforming it.

I want all Members to take a moment to be quite imaginative. I want them to imagine the nature of the shops that currently exist for people to buy drugs if they wish to. Those drug shops are already all around us, but they are dangerous, they are illegal, they are unregulated, they are untaxed and they are unlicensed, unless your drug of choice is alcohol.

Why do we not decide to do something different with that £10.7 billion a year? Why do we not decide that we will treat drug misuse as a health and social problem rather than a criminal problem, and direct the funds towards treatment and recovery for those who need it? Why do we not also recognise that the harms done by legal drugs are in excess of those done by illegal drugs, and decide to reduce or even end the harms caused by the illegal nature of some of those drugs? I want Members to focus their minds on the harms done by the drugs rather than by a legal situation which could be reformed.

Why do we not acknowledge that some people are consuming both harmful illegal drugs and legal drugs right now, but at least those consuming legal drugs will be doing so in the knowledge that the strength and purity of the substance that they are consuming is regulated, so they can make informed choices? Why do we not become really brave, and decide that if we are going to treat alcohol and tobacco in a certain way—and yes, rightly provide education and information to help people to make those informed choices, and treatment for those whose consumption has started to harm them or others—we should provide parity of protection, information and education in relation to other drugs?

Let me very clear about this. There is no safe level of consumption of any drug, be it legal or otherwise. The only way to be completely safe from the harms of

[Thangam Debbonaire]

consumption of any drug, including alcohol, is not to consume it at all. Having access to good-quality information gives people the opportunity to make evidence-informed decisions for themselves about whether and how to consume alcohol or other drugs. Relying on the law to inform decision-making is not working. It skews the decision entirely in favour of the most dangerous drug. I am sure that many people have no idea of the links between alcohol consumption and cancer, for example.

I am not suggesting that we should jump straight to full legalisation of all drugs. I am simply raising the importance of considering whether and how to revise the legal framework for all drugs. If we are to have an evidence-based system of response to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, it must focus on harm reduction. It must treat the harms as social and health harms when they are social and health harms, and as criminal only when it is necessary to treat them as such.

We urgently need the royal commission referred to by the hon. Member for Reigate, and we need to be able to have a well-informed, honest and open debate about the regulation of alcohol and other drugs in order to reduce avoidable harm, increase informed decision-making, and end the deaths caused by alcohol and all other drugs.

6.2 pm

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): One of the joys of being called so late in the debate is being able to hear the arguments on both sides. I have found it genuinely informative, and I thank everyone for their contributions, especially those who made maiden speeches today. As a newbie myself, I can only tell them that it does get easier.

We have a very special person in the room with us today—so special, indeed, that she and her campaign have been mentioned at several points during the debate. She is a constituent of mine called Anne-Marie Cockburn, and she is the mother of a child whose name may also be familiar to Members, because she too has been mentioned today. The story is so poignant, and so relevant to everything that we are talking about, that I hope the House will indulge me and allow me to tell it more fully so that everyone can understand why so many Members included it in their speeches, albeit in passing. It is the story of Martha Fernback.

Martha died four years ago this week, on 20 July 2013, from an accidental drug overdose. She was 15. That fateful day, she was out with her friends on a Saturday morning to go to a kayaking club; she was too young for the other sort. She took—because it was so readily available—half a gram of Ecstasy powder, and almost immediately started to react. At first, her friends did not know what to do. They were worried that they would get into trouble, so they hesitated in ringing the ambulance when it was clear that Martha was struggling. But they did. Then Anne-Marie got the call that every parent dreads. An unrecognised number came up on her mobile phone screen; she was called to go to the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford. Just two hours after first taking the drug, Martha, her beautiful baby girl, died.

What is most extraordinary about this story is that the drug was 91% pure—way above the national average at the time. Martha thought that she was being safe.

She tried to protect herself. After her death, Anne-Marie looked at her online history. Martha knew that she wanted to experiment and she knew that there were risks, so she did her research. She had some of the information, which said beware of impurities, but that was not the whole story, as the information was not out there about safe dosage. Besides, she had no idea what she was taking. In a sense, the drug was almost too pure. So she accidentally took too much.

Anne-Marie was a wonderful mother. Martha was her only child—her world. They were close. In fact, Martha confided to her mum that she wanted to experiment—as a teacher, I can tell Members that that is very rare—and Anne-Marie did exactly what we all tell parents to do. She told Martha to “Just say no”. With hindsight, Anne-Marie is clear, and she argues, as part of the Anyone’s Child campaign, that, had Martha taken something legally regulated, with labelled dosage and clear safety information, she could have made a fully informed choice—not a partially informed choice—and, who knows, may even have decided not to do it.

Martha wanted to get high. She did not want to die. Perhaps if she had had all the information, she could have done for herself what her mother could not, and still be with us today.

The story is heart-breaking—I am sure that is why so many Members have referred to it today—but it makes an important point. Ecstasy is already banned, yet such stories still happen. The blanket ban approach is just doing more of the same. It fixes nothing of the core issue and is the wrong approach. Rather than banning and punishing, we should be regulating and educating. Taking drugs should be a public health issue, not a criminal offence, and I am so happy to hear so many Members make that point in the House today. Stories such as Martha’s happen because we refuse to accept that teenagers will always want to take risks. We talk about sending a clear message. How do we best get a teenager to do something? It is by telling them not to do it. I am a teacher and I have educated more than a thousand teenagers. Believe me, if I could wrap every one of them in a protective blanket and shield them from the harm of this world, I would, but if they will not do as you say—and they frequently do not—at least let them be safe in what they do.

Martha’s story is terrifying. It is natural to want to clamp down and stop it happening to anyone at all ever. I have immense sympathy for those who believe that that is the right approach. To hear the Home Secretary say that she wants a drug-free world is laudable, but I am afraid that I believe it is naive and it fundamentally fails to understand how teenagers really think and behave.

One of the reasons the Liberal Democrats argue for decriminalising drugs for personal use is that we want to encourage a proper debate and to encourage users to seek help. Our priority should not be to punish people caught with drugs—perhaps Martha’s friends would have called the ambulance earlier had they not felt that that was a problem. Our priority should be to increase access to treatment for anyone who is suffering from drug dependency.

It is time for us to recognise that our old approaches have not worked and to stop repeating the same mistakes of the so-called “war on drugs” time and again. We need a more constructive and evidence-based approach:

one that focuses on education and, when it is needed, on rehabilitation and treatment; and one that will finally take meaningful steps to reduce the harms that drugs have done to too many families across the country.

I urge the Government: let us be brave and open up this debate. We need to wake up and face the facts. Prohibition does not work; all it does is make a natural instinct taboo. It puts up barriers between children and their parents, and it drives the problems underground, and into the hands of drug dealers and gangs who, frankly, could not care less about children like Martha—their customers.

I urge the Government to think again. This is the wrong approach. It did not help Martha then and it will not help others like her now, or in the future.

6.10 pm

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): This has been a powerful and moving debate, and I am proud to be a part of it. I congratulate all my fellow new Members who have made their maiden speeches today. We are fresh-faced people from the outside coming into this place, bringing our experience as part of our communities, and, I am afraid, that experience will always include drugs.

My initial interest in drugs policy came about from my work over 18 years for the shop workers' union USDAW. That was not because shop workers are selling drugs, but because they are suffering from them. Our drugs policy is failing, and it is not just drug users and their families who suffer from our failure.

Behind the statistic of £6 billion of losses from crime and antisocial behaviour due to drugs, there are thousands of innocent people working on the frontline who suffer far worse than economic loss. I welcome the fact that we now have a drugs strategy, and the commitment to better drugs education in our schools. I say that as a parent of four children.

I live in the beautiful rural constituency of High Peak: small market towns and villages, lovely houses, picturesque countryside. But even in beautiful High Peak, we have a problem with drugs. We see it when we are out in the evening, in our parks, on street corners, or even in the mornings when our children are on their way to school. I was even approached when out canvassing last month.

It is such a widespread problem that we do not have the police to deal with it, even before the huge cuts to our police numbers, let alone the necessary number of courts or prison places. That way of proceeding is not only impractical, however; it is also expensive and ineffective, and creates criminals out of people who need help, not harm.

The associated antisocial behaviour from drug and alcohol abuse in our towns and cities is affecting the quality of life of all our residents, shoppers and retailers. No one agency is able to tackle this problem alone, so they feel they have nowhere to turn. Derbyshire police and crime commissioner is leading multi-agency working of enforcement agencies, local authorities, businesses and voluntary organisations, so they are working in partnership. There have been positive outcomes already, and all sectors will benefit from the work they do. Drug services have joined up with those delivering alcohol, mental health and homelessness services, and have welcomed the intervention by the PCC, who has helped

to set up specialist drugs workers in a local charity, with financial contributions from partner agencies, and soon from local businesses as well.

So many of us are affected, and that means that there is support from all quarters—from communities, parents, young people, shop workers, emergency service workers and businesses—for effectively tackling our drugs problems. Like other Members, I urge the Minister to be bold, and not to be tied to the policies of the past or to think that there is not support for funding drug policies. When there is £2.50 of benefit for every pound of spending on tackling our drug problem, people see the need, as well as the sense and the benefits, of an effective policy. The cuts to drug treatment budgets of up to 50% in some areas are a false economy. Drug policy needs ring-fenced funding and we need policies that work. This is too urgent and widespread a problem for us to tiptoe around it any longer.

I urge the Government to be bold in accepting the well-researched scientific evidence from their own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Its evidence shows that many drug users need to be persuaded to accept treatment. Most drug users do not see their using as a problem, and do not see the need for treatment. I am afraid that treatment is not everything, however. Independent research from the University of Manchester shows that those who leave treatment drug-free are just as likely to die of an overdose as those who do not. Risk of fatal overdose is at its highest in the four weeks after leaving opiate substitute treatment—almost four times the risk while in treatment. Treatment does not work for everyone, and it is sometimes more damaging than no treatment. Although there are tragedies, many people manage to get by while using drugs, and they often get by quite well, especially if they are supported. I therefore very much welcome the Government's support through housing policy in the drug strategy.

There was not much that I supported in the last Conservative manifesto, and I was not alone in that. However, I do support the proposal for national insurance holidays to support small and medium-sized businesses in taking on people in hard-to-reach groups, especially those who are users or ex-users of drugs. People who are in employment are twice as likely to manage their drug use as those who are not. I applaud this forward-thinking policy, which has the support of the Federation of Small Businesses, and I will support the Government in bringing it forward.

Drug taking is a serious problem in every corner of our land, from the picturesque rural villages of High Peak to our city centres, and we need to work together to maximise our effectiveness and the funding available. I hope that there will be a representative of the Treasury on the new drugs council that the Minister mentioned, and that the council can persuade the Treasury of the cost-effectiveness of ring-fenced funding. We can afford to adopt a decent, far-thinking, science-based policy for harm reduction from drugs. We cannot afford not to.

6.17 pm

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I would like to thank hon. and right hon. Members for this incredibly wide-ranging, well-informed and thoughtful debate on this important issue. The Government's strategy was so packed with Home Office jargon and an avoidance of any real commitment that the debate has been helpful in determining what exactly they intend to do. I will come

[*Louise Haigh*]

back to that point shortly, but first I want to congratulate those hon. Members who have spoken out so bravely today on an issue that is often toxic and difficult to debate honestly. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made that point eloquently, and that is why his idea for a royal commission has been seized on so fervently by Members on both sides of the House. That would allow us the space to develop a truly evidence-based policy and to take the heat out of the debate and shed some light on it instead.

I particularly want to congratulate the five Members who have made their maiden speeches today. It has been an honour and a privilege to sit and listen to them. I cringe when I compare my maiden speech two years ago with those of the warriors for their constituencies who have spoken today. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) made a particularly inspiring maiden speech as the first turbaned Sikh to represent any constituency in this Parliament. He will be a beacon of hope not only for those who look like him but for all the others who do not see faces that represent them in Parliament at this time. He talked about the glass ceiling that has been shattered by his election, and I look forward to many more glass ceilings being shattered in the months and years to come.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—who is not yet back in her place—made an inspiring, witty and entertaining speech. I am confident that she will have no less an impact on her city than did any of her predecessors. As a former primary school teacher, she spoke with a passionate voice about the education system, which is so important and welcome in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) gave a compassionate speech about the victims of the drug policies of successive Governments and spoke bravely about her experience as an MP. It is so important that others join her in calling out the kind of abuse that she talked about today. I welcome the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) from the Government Benches. He gave us an enjoyable history and, indeed, language lesson, but I am afraid to say that I had absolutely no idea what he was saying when he spoke in his local potteries dialect. Finally, the mark of my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) has clearly already been felt in his constituency, and I am confident that it will continue to be felt. He made a thoughtful and thorough contribution, which I am sure will be the first of many.

There were too many speeches for me to summarise them all, but I want to touch on the contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Both of them spoke about the case of Martha Fernback and the bravery of her parents—I believe that they are with us today—who came forward after the tragic death of their daughter. They referred to the importance of education about safe dosage and purity levels, issues which we come back to time and time again, and to the case for legal regulations and clear safety information, which would enable full informed choices that could save lives.

I hope that today's important debate is the start of a wider debate around drugs policy because, as has been said, very little progress has been made under successive

Governments over the past few years. Unfortunately, however, the drug strategy that was announced last week does not advance us any further. We should not forget that the Government's 2010 drug strategy was essentially ripped up in 2013 when they ended the ring-fencing of drug rehabilitation and treatment services and passed the responsibility to local authorities, which were already facing deep cuts. I regret to say that the strategy does not appear to even recognise, let alone respond to, a climate that has utterly changed since the previous publication.

Despite the strategy being so long overdue, the Government undertook no formal consultation in its development. Where are the voices of drug users, law enforcement officers and treatment professionals? Their voices must be heard, and each and every one of them will tell us that the status quo is not working. It is not working for the desperately vulnerable cohort of heroin and opioid users with increasingly complex health needs who are falling between the gaps of reduced drug rehabilitation services and a social care service in crisis. It is not working for the homeless community, where 95% of the population are said to be drug users and who are given scant support. It is not working for the victims of drug-related crime. It is certainly not working for our public services, particularly our police and emergency services, which are being left to pick up the pieces as services of last resort as the substance use that demands their attention soars.

Since the publication of the last strategy, drug-related deaths have risen and the number of drug users has not fallen. In addition, drug-related crime has placed increased pressure on all public services, including the NHS and the police. The figures for drug-related deaths should shame us all. In 2013, there were 2,955 drug-related deaths. In 2015, there were 3,674 deaths—a new record. That is a record of failure from this Government and their immediate predecessor. Worse still, the recommendations of the Government's own advisory council are being ignored. The report by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs stated that factors such as

“socio-economic changes (including cuts to health and social care, welfare benefits and local authority services) and changes in treatment services and commissioning practices may also have contributed to these increases.”

It suggested that deaths could be reduced by protecting “investment in evidence-based drug treatment to promote recovery”, investing in the

“provision of medically supervised drug consumption clinics in localities with a high concentration of injecting drug use”

and through the roll-out of heroin-assisted treatment for addicts. Finally, it raised concerns that

“drug treatment and prevention services in England are planned to be among those public health services that receive the most substantial funding cuts as a consequence of the government's decision to cut the public health grant”.

Those warnings and recommendations were completely and utterly ignored in this week's drugs strategy, which offers no new investment and few new ideas. It is a grim feature of this Government that the experts are ignored when they raise the alarm.

Where do we stand on the Government's current drugs strategy? Is it evidence-based, bringing in the widest possible array of expert opinion in formulating policy? Is it logical, identifying the necessary steps to

achieve the optimal possible outcome? Is it achievable, and have the resources been provided that can make a significant difference? I am afraid it is none of those things.

It is not clear that there has been any meaningful wide-ranging consultation process, or that experts across the field have been heeded. It is not clear, either, that policy has been formulated based on evidence, given the deteriorating drug-related mortality rate and the UK's uniquely poor performance in that regard. Crucially, have any new resources been provided, or is there any intention to develop new ideas that would make a significant difference to outcomes? It appears not.

To take just one example, the Government's drugs strategy document blithely states that

"local authority public health teams should take an integrated approach to reducing a range of alcohol related harm, through a combination of universal population level interventions and interventions targeting at risk groups."

Alcohol is the biggest single killer when it comes to drugs. Alcohol abuse ruins lives, leads to crime, especially violent crime, and is a prevalent factor in domestic abuse. Its treatment is a huge drain on the NHS, but any local councillor or mayor, from whatever party, will be amazed at the Government's sheer brass neck in demanding that they do more to tackle alcohol and drug abuse when their budgets have been cut to the bone. This is not localism; it is the devolution of austerity and the shifting of responsibility and blame.

**Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Lancashire constabulary, due to cuts, has taken the mental health worker out of its police response unit.

**Sarah Newton:** That is out of order.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. I reassure the Minister that that is not the case. It is for the Chair to decide. Thanks for your help, but you are wrong.

**Graham Jones:** Lancashire constabulary, because of budget cuts, has had to remove the mental health workers who were embedded in its police response unit. Is that not an example of the Government asking for something to be done while undermining local authorities, which are unable to deliver these services?

**Louise Haigh:** The vast majority of the drugs strategy is simply about shifting blame on to authorities and agencies that have seen their budgets fall and squeezed over the last seven years.

Although we welcome the creation of the national recovery champion, what good is a national recovery champion while the Government are cutting local authority budgets, ending the ring fence on public health, slashing police resources, cutting back on school funding and reducing the resources available to prevention campaigns, while mental health waiting lists are through the roof? Help is increasingly inaccessible.

It is not even clear that Ministers have a clear picture of the drugs problem overall. Complacently, they point to survey evidence that suggests drug misuse is not increasing, yet both drug-related hospital admissions and deaths are on the increase. Has the Minister considered that the survey evidence may not be fully accurate,

especially given that it is confined to 16 to 59-year-olds but drug deaths among 50 to 69-year-olds have risen sharply? Drug deaths in the latter group have doubled in the last eight years in England and Wales, according to the Office for National Statistics. We respectfully suggest that the age categories in the survey should be broadened. Will the Minister today commit to the continuation of the British crime survey, which measures these statistics, so that these data continue to be collected?

There are several other important evidence gaps in the drugs strategy. The Government clearly do not have a firm grip on what is happening to the supply of drugs, on how much and what types of drugs are being imported, on how much and what types of drugs are being produced domestically or on the distribution chains. That important data mapping might be easier if the Government had not cut 1,000 Border Force guards and more than 20,000 police officers over the past seven years. Nevertheless, this remains an important task in the fight against illicit drugs and organised crime. The National Crime Agency should be tasked with providing the data on supply—of course, it also needs to be given the resources to do so.

Here we come to the nub of the entire problem with the Government's drugs strategy. They have provided no new resources to meet the rising problems related to drugs and drug addiction. As a result, all that is left are warm words about the need for treatment and rehabilitation, and, in some instances, outright contradiction. One such example is the Government pledging to develop Jobcentre Plus offices in communities to support people with drug dependencies, but at the exact same time the Department for Work and Pensions is cutting hundreds of jobcentres across the country. Unfortunately, this adds up to a recipe for failure. It means that addicts will not receive the treatment they need; that we are likely to remain the overdose capital of Europe; that we will have a continuing problem of drug-related crime and drug-related hospital admissions; and that greater numbers of people will drift through the criminal justice system who should not be treated as criminals at all. Without the space for innovative ideas, debate and practices to thrive, we will continue to exacerbate all these issues, and we all will have failed.

6.30 pm

**Sarah Newton:** Before I respond to the substantial questions and items in today's debate, I wish to pay tribute to the excellent maiden speeches we have heard. I shall start with the excellent speech from the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) about Slough's bright future as the silicon valley of the UK. I am sure he also has a very bright future in this House, and not just because of the bright colours of his turbans. This is a very proud day for our democracy as a glass ceiling has been shattered. He spoke so powerfully about belonging, and everyone, from all parts of the House, wants to welcome him so that he feels that he truly belongs in this mother of all Parliaments.

It was also a great pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), whose great maiden speech described the history and the potential of Stoke, and the role it is playing in global Britain. I am sure he will represent Stoke-on-Trent as a powerful advocate for innovation and all those growing businesses there that he so well described. I am also sure we are all going to be lifting up mugs, plates and any other items we buy to look for the

[Sarah Newton]

words “Made in Stoke-on-Trent” on them. I share with him a strong link to his constituency, because the china clay that is mined in Cornwall is taken to the potteries and has helped to create those iconic brands such as Wedgwood that he mentions. I am very much looking forward to working with him in the weeks, months and years ahead.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who spoke so powerfully about the importance of making a sacrifice so that we can make the powerful difference we want to see in our country and the sacrifice that our families make to enable us to do that. I am sure her daughters will be so proud of her. Having heard her speech today, I am sure nobody will ever underestimate her or Hull again.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Eleanor Smith) also spoke powerfully about the scourge of drug use, and the need to look at the root cause of why people take drugs and then to support them on the road to recovery. She is obviously very proud of her constituency, its history, its people and its culture. My sister is a nurse, and I know what powerful advocates nurses are for their patients. I am sure she will be a great advocate for all her constituents.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), who spoke of his passion to help marginalised people in Ipswich choose a life free of drugs, and I look forward to working with him in that vital task. It is good to hear that he wants to build on the work of Ben Gummer, his predecessor, in improving the local economy and the opportunities there, particularly the rail links, and I wish him well during his time in Parliament.

I will try to cover in as much detail as I can in the remaining time the issues, questions and challenges that have been posed about the strategy. I welcome the fact that the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) welcomed the strategy and recognised some of the achievements of the 2010 strategy. In doing that, she rightly wanted to know what more we are doing in prisons and rightly pointed out the real problem we have with drug use in prisons. I want to reassure her about the actions that are going on now to support prison officers in tackling this dreadful problem. We are enhancing the drug-testing regime, supporting governors by recruiting new officers to our prison estate, looking at how prisons can co-commission drug services with the NHS locally, ensuring that the parameters of prisons are more secure and maintained and improving the searching capability of dedicated teams. It is really important that I have this chance to point out that we are taking a comprehensive series of actions to prevent prisons from being a place where people can readily access drugs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) made a really important contribution to this debate. The fact that we have allowed this debate in Government time—we have had a really good debate with a wide-ranging discussion—demonstrates our commitment to getting this policy area right. We have published a lot of data, which my hon. Friend mentioned. We have worked with a wide range of stakeholders to inform our evidence-based strategy, and we will continue to do so.

My hon. Friend and others have asked whether we will be evaluating the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. We are already doing so. We have published the framework for that evaluation so people can contribute, and we will be publishing the findings in 2018. We are determined to be an open, evidence-based policy team. We do look very closely at the work of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, as it is the key Government adviser. It is simply not true to say that we have not taken on board all the recommendations that it has made. It has made a really important contribution to this strategy, and will continue to do so going forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate also talked very movingly—as did a number of hon. Friends—about the stigma around this issue. He was absolutely right. I have met many parents of families myself. I went along to a very moving service in Westminster Abbey only a month or so ago organised by Adfam. I encourage everyone who has a family member struggling with substance misuse to seek that help, to go to their GP, and to pick up the phone to the helplines that are available because they will receive support on how to manage their issues and their substance abuse problems.

**Fiona Bruce** *rose*—

**Sarah Newton:** I will give way briefly, but I do want to cover the points.

**Fiona Bruce:** Does the Minister agree that effective treatment means helping those who are suffering addiction to come off the substance to which they are addicted? It is not just about managing their situation, which might mean being dependent on a different substance.

**Sarah Newton:** We have a broad range of strategies, and I will come on to talk about harm reduction, because, clearly, it has a role to play. The ultimate goal is to enable people to have a drug-free life in which they have a job and are playing a full part in society, but there is a role for harm reduction.

**Norman Lamb** *rose*—

**Sarah Newton:** I am sorry, but I have very little time. If I can make some progress, I will give way.

Many Members talked about how concerned they were that the police and the criminal justice system were criminalising a whole generation of young people. I can absolutely assure Members that, having spent a lot of time with police officers, that is simply not the case. The police are very, very sensitive to the need not to do that. We have a wide range of options available to police officers and the courts, so that young people in the criminal justice system can be referred straight to health solutions, diversion services and treatment. It is only as a last resort, often with persistent offending, that the criminal justice solution is sought.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) talked about the need for class A drugs, such as heroin, to be used in treatment and recovery programmes. I can assure him that that is absolutely what happens. That was the recommendation that ACMD made and the drugs are available. However, that is quite different from just making a space available for people to take drugs. Having heard the evidence of the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), it is really important that if people are to be taking heroin it must be part of

a treatment programme with recovery as the end point. I have been to the facilities and seen for myself how people are given clean needles and support and advice, but it is medically led by a doctor. That was a point that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) made, and it was reflected in the advice that we took from the ACMD.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) talked powerfully about the issue being a matter of social justice, and she is absolutely right. The strategy addresses the problems that she articulated so well of children living in homes with parents who have substance abuse problems, whether we are talking about alcohol or drugs. It is important that we take a joined-up approach to make sure that those families are really supported. She also mentioned the important issue of cheap alcohol and white cider. I very much supported the action that the Treasury is taking in consulting on increasing taxation; that consultation is under way, and I am sure that we will hear the results in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) spoke powerfully, drawing on her experience of the serious organised criminals who bring the most harmful drugs into our country. She is absolutely right to highlight the human trafficking and appalling abuse of children that happens in bringing the drugs into our country. The same gangs exploit vulnerable people in our country in order to traffic these drugs around the country. She is right to draw on her experience, and on the view shared by many in the criminal justice system that we need to work globally, through the United Nations and our partners, and share data to prevent these drugs from arriving on our shores.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) spoke about the difficulties of families. I really hope that Martha's mum, who is here, sees how seriously we take the loss of any child. As a mother of three children, I just cannot imagine the horror of getting that phone call to say that I had lost one of my children. I want to reassure her; I hope that she sees, from the nature of this debate, how seriously the Government and everyone in the House take the issue. We want to work against the stigma that families face, so that they can speak out and get the help that they need. I hope that she is somewhat reassured by the strategy's emphasis on the good advice and information that should be readily available to young people, so that they understand the risks of all drugs, including alcohol, tobacco, and other substances that they might be tempted to take. A lot of progress has been made in the four years since Martha's tragic death.

The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) made a point that he also raised at Home Office questions last week. Winging its way to him is a detailed written response to that question. I recognise the picture that he describes in his community. It is something that I faced in Truro last year. What I saw there is that, as he has discovered, not everybody—not all police officers or people in local authorities—has all the information about the powers that they have to work as a team to tackle these issues. In my letter to him, I describe what I think he can do, and the advocacy and agency that he can bring to bear in getting all the partners together in Wrexham to work on the issue.

I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on the funding for the testing that police officers need to do of substances that they find on people in order to get convictions.

That testing regime is well supported by and funded by the Home Office, but as I say, I will write to him in a lot more detail.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) spoke passionately about the work of Elizabeth Brice and her campaign for the medicinal use of cannabis. I want to assure him and all Members in the House that there is access to medicinal cannabis. It can be used for a wide range of ailments and can be very beneficial. Sativex, for example, is licensed for use. It has been raised with me before that our regime for enabling pharmaceutical companies or medical researchers to use licensed drugs is letting people down, so I have asked the Department of Health and the ACMD to look at this. We have not seen any evidence that the current regime is a barrier to people using banned drugs in medical research, but if the hon. Gentleman has that evidence and wants to send it to me, of course we will review that.

The term “war on drugs” was used repeatedly in the debate, most passionately by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, who spoke with customary eloquence, but also by the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). I just want to say that I have never used that term, and it appears nowhere in the strategy. It is simply not the Government's policy to have a “war on drugs,” so I hope that we can sort that out once and for all. We have a far-reaching, cross-Government policy focused on the health harms of drugs, the underlying social reasons why people take drugs, and trying to prevent them, right through to the criminal justice system. We are taking a balanced, full-Government, integrated approach. I can assure hon. Members that we always look at evidence from around the world, so the evidence from Portugal has been considered.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw quite rightly said that if we are absolutely serious about reducing the number of deaths from heroin, especially among those who have been taking it for some time—and we certainly are; no Minister wants the number of deaths to increase on their watch—we must have an evidence-based approach. I honestly think that the strategy will tackle that. We do recognise that naloxone can play a vital role in saving lives, as he said, and that there is a good evidence base for that. The strategy that was published commits us to the wider use of that in saving lives.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw also described the excellent work that was done in Bassetlaw up until 2013. That is just the sort of local response that we want to see, with all the agencies working together. The drug champion will of course have a vital role, travelling across the country, finding best practice and sharing it with those communities that perhaps do not have as good an understanding of how to tackle the issue. The strategy board, which will be chaired by the Home Secretary, will include representation from NHS England, Public Health England and the police—a whole range of expertise. They will work together to develop measurable outcome frameworks, which of course we will share over time as they are developed, and we can hold each other to account for their delivery.

The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) claimed that the Government are ignoring the recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs with regard to deaths from heroin. That is simply not the case. We have taken all of its recommendations into consideration in forming the

[Sarah Newton]

strategy. We have a good, constructive, ongoing relationship—I meet the chairman regularly. I am sure that the work of the board, led by the Home Secretary, will be informed by the ACMD's really excellent work.

The Home Office and Public Health England jointly set up some heroin and crack cocaine action areas. The piloting we did in Middlesbrough gave some good ideas about how to move in the right direction, and that is referenced in the strategy. Despite the claims made by some colleagues on the Opposition Benches, there has been a lot of innovation in recent years, and we very much want to build on that. We need only look at the excellent clinical advice that has been developed by Public Health England to help clinicians have a much more nuanced and effective approach to understanding the different types of people who suffer from drug misuse and the different types of drugs they use, and therefore to have a more tailored approach to helping them on the road to recovery.

**Norman Lamb:** I am grateful to the Minister, who has responded to all the challenges in a tolerant and civilised way. The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) proposed that we have a royal commission in order to take the heat and the politics out of this matter and look dispassionately at all the arguments. Will the Minister at least consider that?

**Sarah Newton:** I just do not agree that politics is driving the issue. Our approach is totally evidence-based. If we were worried and felt unable to talk about the problem, as some have characterised us this afternoon, the Government would not have given a whole afternoon of debate to it. I accept the sincerely held views of hon. Members who do not agree with the Government, but that does not mean that our policy is not based on evidence. We are happy to debate the issue; there will be other opportunities and I will welcome those.

The pivotal role of Parliament is to scrutinise the work of the Executive and take on some of the difficult issues in our society. I am proud of our work together in the last Parliament on destigmatising mental health issues. A lot of people in this place were prepared to talk about those issues from personal experience and also with a huge amount of evidence. It is fair to say that there has been a huge culture change in our country. By talking about drug addiction and substance abuse problems, as we have today, we will contribute to a destigmatisation. As a result, more people will come forward. Families will be saved appalling loss and communities will be saved the blight of the criminal activity that goes along with this issue.

**Crispin Blunt:** If a royal commission looked into this matter, I hope that it would consider not only what is happening in the United Kingdom. This is a global problem that needs a global policy to address it. The sand is shifting under our feet as other nations begin to change their policies. If there were a royal commission, the United Kingdom could do some thought leadership about what is happening around the world.

**Sarah Newton:** I thoroughly agree that we must approach this matter from a global point of view. That is the fourth strand of the policy—the global strand. It is

about working thoroughly and consistently with colleagues at the United Nations and globally, and looking at the evidence base. Actually, some other countries look to us as leaders in this area, especially on psychoactive substances. We are global Britain. We are always out looking and working in partnership with other countries and we will look at the evidence base from them.

**Paul Flynn:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sarah Newton:** I am going to make a little more progress if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) touched on the issue of resources. Having a good, well implemented strategy requires resources, of course. There was a lot of misunderstanding about funding this afternoon. The Public Health England budget is ring-fenced. Yes, it is given to local authorities, which need to make decisions, based on consultation with and the health needs of their communities, about the allocation of resources. If some local authorities are disinvesting, that is sad to hear, because we put the evidence out there and the benefits of investment in good recovery services are clear—not just to the individuals concerned, but to the whole community.

I expect local authorities to use their ring-fenced budgets for public health for those services. But there is not just that budget. The Government have made record sums available for mental health services, and the national health budget is growing. The homelessness prevention funding has been ring-fenced and there is investment in innovative ways of working on homelessness prevention. There has also been the troubled families funding. The issue is about joining up those funds so that we can use the money in a smart way and tailor it to the needs of each family and person—they are all different—so that we can be really effective.

**Ruth George:** All the funds that the Minister mentioned are stretched beyond compare, especially the mental health funding. Yes, public health funding is ring-fenced, but it has been cut by £85 million. Drug treatment services are being cut, I am afraid, even though there is increased need.

**Sarah Newton:** What I see when I go around the country is a great deal of innovation where people are learning to use their resources more effectively.

One of the very important jobs of the champion is to look at what is happening well in parts of the country where people are not disinvesting in services and have excellent examples of partnership working. I praise the work that the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) is doing in really getting into the weeds in her community and understanding this issue. In doing so, she knows that it is only by joining up all the services in the community and involving employers that we are going to make the step change that we need to see. I am very clear—

**Paul Flynn:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sarah Newton:** I only have a few minutes left.

I am very clear that this is a very ambitious policy. It has been based on evidence. It has been some time in the coming because we have looked at reports and

research that has been done, particularly by the ACMD, to inform what we are doing. I absolutely want to put it beyond doubt that we see this strategy as joining up health, social and crime areas. It is a completely joined-up approach to government. We are trying to help people into recovery. The health interventions that people have so rightly spoken about are absolutely critical to the success of this strategy.

The strategy board will meet when we get back in the autumn. I am sure that Members will see that we have many opportunities to debate the outcomes framework that we will be putting forward, and we will hear about the really good work that the recovery champion is going to do. I hope that Members in all parts of the House will engage with the recovery champion, share the good work that is going on in their constituencies, and share their concern where things are not working, because let us be in no doubt—this is a complex issue that is going to require a huge amount of effort in every community in every part of our country. Despite our views on whether we should criminalise or not criminalise, we are all united in wanting to end the pain and suffering that is caused to too many people and too many communities by the use of drugs.

**Paul Flynn:** I would like to make a brief contribution, Madam Deputy Speaker, because there are four minutes to go.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** No—the Minister has summed up the debate.

**Paul Flynn:** There are four minutes to go.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Mr Flynn—are you making a point of order, because you cannot argue with the Chair across the Chamber?

**Paul Flynn:** I am not arguing with the Chair—I am arguing that the Minister has finished and I want to make a small contribution. Those are the normal rules of debate.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Mr Flynn, you have already made a contribution and the Minister has chosen not to take an intervention. She has concluded and the debate is thus concluded.

**Paul Flynn:** May I make a point of order, then, Madam Deputy Speaker, because the excuse that the Minister gave—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Mr Flynn—I am about to put the Question. You may make a point of order after I have put the Question.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered drugs policy.

**Paul Flynn:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will have heard the Minister say that she could not take a brief intervention from me because of lack of time. Could I just make the point that the Government's policy is not evidence-based, because otherwise they would be taking clear cognisance of the evidence from Portugal and from Uruguay—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I must stop the hon. Gentleman. He has been in this House for a very long time and he knows that is not a point of order for the Chair. He wishes to continue the debate, but the debate has lasted for some hours and it is now finished.

## PETITION

### Removal of greenfield sites in Bulkington from Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Plan

6.58 pm

**Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con):** I rise on behalf of the residents of Bulkington in my constituency in relation to the inclusion of two sites in their village, referenced HSG7 and HSG8, in the local plan prepared by Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council and submitted to the Planning Inspectorate on 6 June. The petition has been organised by Bulkington Residents Voice, a group hastily assembled to oppose the addition of those sites to the local plan, and it has been signed by 1,490 local residents, which is almost one in three of the local population.

The petition states that the two sites in Bulkington were added at a late stage in the preparation of the local plan, giving residents no time to prepare and submit objections; further, that Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council did not make any attempt to engage with or advise local residents of the addition of the sites; and, further, that the two sites would accommodate 691 houses, representing an increase of more than a quarter, and a further 2,500 residents. Both those increases are totally out of proportion with the current village setting and would lead to the loss of the village's identity.

The petition further states that there are no proposals for the additional infrastructure that development on this scale would entail; further, that there are no proposed economic improvements by way of job creation or business investment; and, further, that the sites are greenfield and located in the green belt, which is an important barrier between Nuneaton and Bulkington and where there is a presumption against development. The petition accordingly asks this House to cause Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council to remove the two sites from the local plan.

*The text of the petition is as follows:*

*[The petition of residents of Bulkington, Warwickshire, declares that the residents of Bulkington, Warwickshire, petition your honourable House that Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council prepared and made major policy changes to the proposed Borough Plan, without making any attempt to engage with, or advise local residents, or their representative organisation; furthermore, these changes committed inappropriate numbers of new houses to the village of Bulkington, yet this would not deliver any economic benefit to the village or more importantly to the wider Borough.*

*Therefore, the petitioners request that the House of Commons urges the Government to cause the Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council to remove from the Publication Version of the Borough Plan (2017–2031) the proposed developments in the existing Green Belt around Bulkington.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

## Lea Valley Greenhouse Glass Industry

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

7.1 pm

**Mr Charles Walker** (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a great pleasure to lead this Adjournment debate on the Lea valley greenhouse industry. You know, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you represent a large part of it, what an industry it is. There are 350 acres of glass greenhouses in the Lea valley—a magnificent sight to see. The industry employs 2,500 people and has a turnover of £500 million a year.

Let me put some more numbers into the record. You will know these, Madam Deputy Speaker, but many people will be ignorant of the facts and I want to inform their thinking about this great industry. Our glasshouse industry in the Lea valley produces 80 million cucumbers a year—75% of the UK's total cucumber production. It produces 70 million sweet peppers a year, which is more than 60% of the UK's sweet pepper production. But it does not end there. The industry produces thousands and thousands of tonnes of tomatoes, lettuce, baby leaf salad and herbs, as well as bedding plants, trees, shrubs and flowers—a smorgasbord of great things.

The Lea valley glasshouse industry also produces a huge number of aubergines. I am not particularly familiar with aubergines, but I was given a few by a greenhouse owner a few weeks ago and they were turned into moussaka by Mrs Walker. I had always thought that moussaka was an impossibly exotic dish left over from the 1970s, but it has a lot going for it. If anybody out there wants to try moussaka—a lovely, evocative word that rolls off the tongue—I advise them to get to know aubergines from the Lea valley.

I have visited these amazing greenhouses, and it is just extraordinary to see the labour and effort that goes into growing this fresh produce. One of the most beautiful things about going there is getting to see the boxes of bumblebees that are used to pollinate crops. Bumblebees are lovely creatures anyway, but to see them beetling around—if that is not mixing a metaphor—the greenhouses and pollinating really is a wonderful sight. The glasshouse industry is hugely important to the economy of the Lea valley and it is a hugely important part of this country's overall farming economy, which is why I am so pleased to see the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food here to respond to the debate.

I want to pay tribute to those who run the greenhouse industry in the Lea valley. All of them are fantastic people, and many of them are of Italian extraction. First generation Italians or their children and grandchildren run many of these amazing businesses, of which there are about 85 in the Lea valley. I am so lucky to have more than 10,000 Italians and their descendants living in my constituency. They throw a great party, we have a great town twinning event with Sutera every year and they are an absolutely fantastic group of people to know, work with and represent.

I want to discuss a couple of issues that may threaten the future of our glasshouse industry. The first relates to the vote on the EU. I am a committed Brexiteer and I know the Minister is a committed Brexiteer, as are many people in the farming community, but that is not to say that they do not have concerns. Our industry is

reliant on seasonal workers, many of whom come from eastern Europe, and they play a very positive part in the production of these amazing crops. I hope that the Minister will work with the National Farmers Union, the Lea valley glasshouse industry and other interested parties to make sure that the industry can still access the labour it needs to put this wonderful food on our tables.

There is, however, another and far darker cloud on the horizon, which is the proposed incinerator in the Rye House and Fieldes Lock area off Ratty's Lane in my constituency of Broxbourne. The planning application is for an incinerator that will burn 350,000 tonnes of rubbish. The incinerator was originally going to be on the New Barnfield site in Welwyn Hatfield, but in 2015 the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government threw out that application. In doing so, he said that the alternative sites, one of which is the proposed site in my constituency, were wholly unsuitable as locations. Those were not his words, but the arguments put forward by Veolia. In 2013, Veolia identified the Ratty's Lane site as

“a safeguarded strategic rail aggregate depot”

located on a floodplain and opposite a Ramsar site, which is one of the highest designations for a protected and treasured environment. It said the site was too compact to house a 350,000 tonne incinerator, let alone the recycling part of the operation, and was not easily accessible from the road network for more than 280 lorry movements a day. However, having said all that against the site, Veolia, when it lost its planning application for New Barnfield, suddenly changed its tune and decided that the area in my constituency was after all the perfect site for its incinerator.

As the Minister will be aware, this is causing huge concern to the 85 businesses that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) and I represent. This is a serious business. The interests of a French multinational such as Veolia are not unimportant, but its interests are certainly less important than those of the 85 businesses, many of which have been established for 50, 60, 70 or 80 years, that are contributing to our communities in the Lea valley.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, among others, and on the remarkable work he has done on this issue. Is he aware that many people in Roydon and Dobbs Weir in my constituency of Harlow have expressed numerous objections against this waste installation that we are all threatened with, yet all their objections seem to have been ignored?

**Mr Walker:** My right hon. Friend makes a number of excellent points. This application is hugely contentious. It is on the edge of Hertfordshire. I do not want it in my backyard, and up until 2015 Veolia did not want it in my backyard. However, what Hertfordshire County Council, the sponsor of the facility, is actually proposing is that all the smoke ends up in Harlow's backyard and Epping Forest's backyard, so it is your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow who are downwind and will get the fallout.

The critical point is that we have an industry that is turning over half a billion pounds a year and producing huge amounts of fresh produce that graces the restaurants

and cafeterias of the House of Commons and is to be found in the homes of millions of people up and down this country, and the producers of that food get very nervous when half of the 350 acres of glass might fall within a 5-mile radius of a 350,000-tonne incinerator. Their concerns need to be heard.

It is simply unacceptable for Hertfordshire County Council, the sponsor of the incinerator, to be the determining authority for the application. Hertfordshire both owns the contract and is the determining authority for the contract, and if it does not determine in Veolia's favour it has to pay a break-up fee of £1.2 million. This cannot be a safe decision. It cannot be a safe decision for my constituents, but it certainly cannot be a safe decision for your constituents, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow or for the 85 businesses that risk suffering the fallout from the facility.

It is no good for the Environment Agency to say, "There's no worry here. These are tall chimneys. This is not a problem." I am not saying that it will say that, but it does not matter what the Environment Agency says about this. The fact of the matter is that 85 producers are concerned that if they are downwind of this facility, they will lose contracts with supermarkets. That could be devastating. There are 2,500 jobs on the line and a half a billion pound industry.

I know that the Minister is not a miracle worker—he is pretty good, but he is not a miracle worker—and it would be unfair of me to suggest that he was, but what we do have in this Minister is a champion of the farming industry and a champion of our industry in the Lea valley. My simple request to him this evening is please to engage with the concerns of the Lea valley growers and our greenhouse industry, and please to reflect those concerns to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, because we need this application to be called in.

We need the chance to argue our case before an independent planning inspector—not just me, not just my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow and not just you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the NFU, the Lea valley growers, my constituents, my right hon. Friend's constituents and your constituents. We need the chance to argue our case before an independent inspectorate. That is what we are asking for today. Please, as our voice for agriculture, will the Minister listen to the concerns that I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow are raising today and take them to the Secretary of State, because this is a very important industry? No doubt he will have received representations from Madam Deputy Speaker, who is not allowed to speak in this debate. If she could, I am sure she would join me on these Benches.

I do not want to go on for too long. I said that I would be brief and I want to get home for my moussaka—I genuinely am having moussaka tonight. I thank my colleagues who have remained in this place for attending and for listening so intently and politely to what I have had to say on behalf of 85 businesses in the Lea valley that do an outstanding job, produce an outstanding product, employ 2,500 people and make a huge contribution to farming and agriculture in this country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Before I call the Minister, I commend the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for his eloquence in putting

the case so well, and the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for supporting the case. I of course am not able to make any comment from the Chair, but if I were able to do so I would tell the House how much I am in agreement with the hon. Member for Broxbourne.

7.15 pm

**The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) on securing the debate. I note your comments too, Madam Deputy Speaker. In your neighbouring seat, you clearly share many of his concerns and his passion for the very important Lea valley glasshouse industry.

I recognise the importance of the sector and some of the challenges it faces. For several years, I ran a glasshouse enterprise in Cornwall. I had two acres of heated glasshouses, a former tomato nursery and I grew strawberries for the best part of five years. I am therefore familiar with some of the issues and, having studied horticulture, I am familiar with the role that Lea valley enterprises play. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the Lea valley is the UK's largest cucumber and sweet pepper producer, accounting for more than 200 million pieces per annum—including 60 million cucumbers—and representing up to 75% of the UK's total cucumber production and over 60% of the UK's sweet pepper production.

Lea valley horticultural enterprises contribute some £500 million a year to the British economy and sustain 2,500 jobs annually. Today members cultivate around 120 hectares of glasshouses, extending beyond the Lea valley and across a dispersed area including London, Essex, Hertfordshire, Middlesex, Cambridgeshire and Yorkshire.

**Robert Halfon:** I want to pick up a different issue, although it is directly relevant to the Lea valley greenhouses, to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) and to you, my wonderful constituency neighbour, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have a woodpile in Nazeing—which is part of both the Harlow and the Epping Forest constituencies—which has burned down four times in the past four years, causing massive damage to one greenhouse glass enterprise as well as local residents. Many residents feel that not enough has been done, and we cannot understand why new licences are given to new companies to "run" the woodpile site. It causes enormous damage and expense—it burned down again only recently. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to look into the matter because it has a significant effect on the Lea valley glasshouse industry.

**George Eustice:** I am not familiar with the issue that my hon. Friend raises, but if there are concerns about the licensing of the woodpile operation he mentions I will ask officials to look at them.

I want to point out the history of the Lea valley. The success of the Lea valley over the years has been its fantastic contribution to feeding London throughout its history. From the middle ages onwards, it served the fledgling London with wheat, hay and barley, which came through to east London. The Lea valley has fertile alluvial soil, so by the mid-18th century it had become the leading market garden for Britain, growing a wide range of field vegetables and fruits. By the mid-19th century,

[George Eustice]

the advent of the railways resulted in greater supply to London. As the population grew and the glass tax was removed in 1845, Lea valley became home to the very first greenhouses and subsequently developed its industry in everything from grapes to cucumbers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne raised the issue of labour, and I can reassure him that I am in regular contact with representatives from the farming industry, including the National Farmers Union and others, and I am picking up that concern. Indeed, it was recently the subject of a report produced by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, and only last week we had a Westminster Hall debate on that very issue.

In the last 12 months the number of EU migrants to the UK has increased by about 171,000, bringing the total to more than 2.3 million. However, horticulture faces a particular challenge relating to seasonal workers, who come here for a few months and then return home. Between 1945 and 2013, a seasonal agricultural workers scheme enabled people from countries outside the European Union to work here on a temporary basis. The scheme was closed in 2013 on the advice of the Migration Advisory Committee, but we have always made it clear that we will keep the issue under review. We established a SAWS transition group, which has met regularly, and met as recently as 6 March to discuss some of the challenges that businesses are facing this year. For instance, changes in the benefits system in Poland mean that fewer Polish citizens come here, and the work being done in Bulgaria to encourage people to stay and take employment there has also had an impact.

We estimate that there are between 67,000 and 80,000 seasonal workers in the UK, and that is very important to the industry. The Home Office, which leads on the issue, has said that it intends to commission the Migration Advisory Committee to examine the issue of immigration in the context of the decision to leave the European Union, including the issue of so-called tier 3 low-skilled labour. We had some discussions with members of the SAWS transition group to establish when they will be able to give us accurate data for the third and fourth quarters of this year, with a view to meeting again before the end of the year to review the position. I am therefore well aware of the issue of labour, and I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will be looking closely at the issue.

One of the great things about leaving the European Union is that we will regain control, and it will be in the gift of the British Government to do whatever they choose to do. If we deem that we need additional labour in a particular area, it will be within our power to secure that labour, and to set up whatever work permit arrangements are required to satisfy our needs.

My hon. Friend dedicated most of his comments to the issue of the Hoddesdon incinerator proposal in his constituency. Applications of that kind are always incredibly contentious. I remember that, a few years ago, there were proposals for an incinerator in Cornwall, a few miles down the road from my constituency, and I am well aware of the deep-seated concern that people may feel in such circumstances. My hon. Friend made a number of flattering remarks about my knowledge of the issue. As he knows, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government would have to

lead in this regard, and planning issues are obviously a matter for the local authority in the first instance, but there is a role for the Environment Agency in a couple of areas.

As my hon. Friend also knows, Hertfordshire County Council is currently dealing with the planning application. One of the roles of the Environment Agency is to act as a statutory consultee in the planning process, and I am told that it is engaged in a dialogue with the council in that role. The agency also has a role in the environmental permitting regulations, dealing with any concerns that would arise as a result of an environment permit. I understand that it has received an application for an environmental permit, and that the application has been duly made, which means that the information has been received, but it has not yet been processed or assessed. I am told that the Environment Agency is due to start consulting on the permit application imminently and that it intends to hold a public drop-in session in due course. I understand that that consultation will take place in earnest in the weeks ahead.

I have asked the Environment Agency whether in principle there are certain issues here. It will not surprise my hon. Friend to know that it very much depends on the individual application and that it would not be appropriate for me to make any judgments on the case he described in his constituency. However, as a general point on some of the concerns about smoke, I am told that a properly constructed incinerator with the right kind of filtration would not necessarily have a problem such as he describes and residues would not necessarily be expected. I am also told that the environmental permit will assess and control emissions to air, land and water. That said, he is right that each case has to be considered on its merits. This case will be considered thoroughly on its merits. The consultation is under way. I would encourage any—

**Mr Charles Walker:** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He said that the application will be considered on its merits. As it currently stands, it will be considered by Hertfordshire County Council, which is both the owner of the contract and the determiner of the contract. It is impossible for anyone in my constituency, and I believe in the constituencies of Epping Forest and Harlow, to imagine that the application will be considered on its merits, given that Hertfordshire County Council, if it does not grant it, will have to pay a £1.2 million failure fee to Veolia. That is the real concern, which is why I am hoping that the Minister will help the Lea valley growers and the NFU to make representations to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for a proper independent inquiry by a planning inspector.

**George Eustice:** I understand the point that my hon. Friend makes, but he will be aware that I am not an expert on planning law and planning policy and that any such decision would be a matter for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

**Robert Halfon:** On that point, will my hon. Friend ensure that the consultation is open and transparent and that everyone can see exactly what is being said?

**George Eustice:** Yes, the consultation that the Environment Agency will conduct on the environmental permitting regulations will be an open process. As I said,

it intends to open the drop-in session to members of the public. I encourage anyone with concerns about this application, of which, according to my hon. Friends and the representations they have made, there are many in their constituencies, to contribute to the consultation that the Environment Agency is putting together. I understand that the consultation is open and that that drop-in session will take place shortly.

I recognise the points that my hon. Friends have made on this contentious issue and I will ensure that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

sees a transcript of the debate. I am sure that Members will continue to make representations to him. It is ultimately for the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to make any decisions along the lines that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne seeks.

*Question put and agreed to.*

7.28 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Westminster Hall

*Tuesday 18 July 2017*

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

## Anglo-Polish Relations

9.30 am

**Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Anglo-Polish relations.

I am grateful to be speaking in this important debate. My family and I left Poland and came to the United Kingdom in 1978, because of communism. My parents were staunchly anti-communist and refused to live under the tyranny of communism, but after martial law it was impossible to return, and we had to see our family, friends and fellow citizens suffering under the oppression of the Jaruzelski regime. I returned for the first time after the lifting of martial law, in 1983. I spent many summers with my beloved Polish grandfather, listening to his experiences and hearing of the suffering that he and his family and his generation went through during the terrible times of the second world war, and the horrendous brutality and destruction in Warsaw from 1939 to 1945. I also listened to his experiences of living under a communist system, with the terrible lack of freedom that ensued from that.

I am very proud of being the first ever Polish-born British Member of Parliament. Although there are other Members with relatives from Poland, I am the only one to have actually been born there, and I am proud of my unpronounceable surname. When I first stood to be on the Conservative candidates list someone said to me, “You will never be elected with a completely unpronounceable surname like that. You’ve got to change it or anglicise it”—as many others have done. I said, “In that case, I will never stand for Parliament, because I am very proud of my Polish roots.” Once during the selection process someone said to me: “Kawasaki—that’s not a very Shropshire name, is it? How are you going to get by with a name like that?” I said, “Well, it didn’t cause my grandfather’s generation any problems when they were fighting in the battle of Britain, so I hope it won’t cause me any problems today.”

I am proud of the fact that this debate is taking place at the same time as the royal visit to Warsaw, which accentuates the increasing importance of Poland as a European economy and a trading partner for the United Kingdom—as well as a defence partner for our country. Let us not forget that while we grapple with encouraging many of our NATO partners to spend the prerequisite 2% of GDP on defence, Poland is already doing so. In fact, it plans to increase defence spending beyond the 2% margin. However, differences are opening up between Poland and Germany—the two countries that the royal couple are visiting this week—with respect to their vision for the European Union and its component parts, and what authority it should have over sovereign nation states. I hope to get the Minister’s perspective on the differences that are starting to materialise between Warsaw and Berlin.

This year we celebrate the 77th anniversary of the battle of Britain, and I was proud last year to accompany Lord Tebbit, a man for whom I have enormous respect, to the RAF Club to celebrate the 76th anniversary. He and I, along with many senior Polish military officers and their British counterparts, had a wonderful dinner. In his speech Lord Tebbit—who, we should not forget, served in the RAF—said something that resonated enormously with me and will stay with me for the rest of my life. He said that in the summer of 1940 the balance between the Luftwaffe and the RAF was so even, and the outcome of that key battle was so uncertain, that it was unequivocally the arrival of the Poles, the largest foreign contingent in the battle of Britain, that tipped the balance in favour of the British side. Although the debate is about current Anglo-Polish relations, we must never forget the extraordinary contribution that those brave men undertook on our behalf to save our country. We must always celebrate that and teach our children and grandchildren about it. Although their country had been taken over by tyranny, they did not give up. They did not just lie back and take it. They continued their struggle against fascism by coming to the United Kingdom and fighting with us.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman’s points are extremely important. The contribution and enormous sacrifice made by the Polish people means that they have the support of every proud member of this nation.

The inquest on the suicide of Dagmara Przybysz opened yesterday. That bright, intelligent young woman committed suicide because she was bullied for being Polish. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the points he has made should be disseminated as widely as possible, so that no one will ever again be bullied for being Polish? They should instead be praised for it.

**Daniel Kawczynski**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. My right hon. Friend the Minister drew to my attention a newspaper article about that beautiful young Polish girl, who was found hanged in school as a result of being bullied by a racist gang.

**Glyn Davies** (Montgomeryshire) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Daniel Kawczynski**: I am going to make some progress, but then I will give way.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) is of course correct, and that is why the Polish war memorial is important. Such visible signs of the contribution of Poles to the United Kingdom are important, because we must explain to younger generations why so many Poles are here. Many are here because they came to continue the fight against fascism, and then stayed here as part of the community. No one accentuates the importance of that better than Senator Anders, whom I am sure the hon. Member for Ealing North has met. She is the daughter of the esteemed General Władysław Anders, who was an important figure for Poland. Not only is she the senator for Suwałki area, where British troops are deployed at the moment, but she has been appointed as a special roving ambassador to engage with the Polish diaspora around the world and commemorate and recognise their contributions to their host nations. I pay tribute to her, because Poland needs recognition for its unique contributions.

[Daniel Kawczynski]

An area of dissent in the European Union is refugees. Poland has recently taken more than 1.3 million refugees from the terrible fighting in Ukraine. My Polish friends tell me that there are now 1.3 million Ukrainians in employment in Poland, but some figures put the number of Ukrainians in Poland as high as 1.5 million or 1.7 million. On my summer holidays to the Polish seaside resort of Sopot, where I go every year, I see for myself the huge number of Ukrainians working in restaurants and cafés, and throughout the community.

Poland is not demanding a resettlement of those Ukrainians or any special help from the European Union in dealing with those huge numbers of refugees streaming across her border. In fact, Poland has already done a great deal to help and support those refugees in escaping the fighting and difficulties they have experienced in Ukraine, yet Germany and the European Union are now talking about sanctions against Poland for not taking the requisite number of Syrian refugees. I find that dangerous and frightening, quite frankly. We have a history of welcoming refugees to our nation, and we are proud of that, but that decision must come from the grassroots. It must bubble up from society, as happens in our country.

What frightens me is the idea that the European Union can somehow unilaterally dictate an allocation of certain types of refugee to be distributed to Poland, against the express wishes of the democratically elected Polish Government. The issue is clearly polarising, but we must respect the will of the Polish Government. I consider one European country or the European Union itself threatening sanctions to be blackmail and intimidation, and the United Kingdom must support Poland on the issue. The referendum showed that no matter what happens with the European Union, we believe in the supremacy of individual sovereign nations and their ability to be directly accountable to their people for all policies that they implement.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the same defence could be made of countries such as Jordan and Turkey, which have already accepted far more refugees than they can sustainably look after? If the United Kingdom was prepared to take a decent number of refugees from Syria and Iraq, instead of putting pressure on countries in the middle east to take more, would there not be less pressure on places such as Poland, which is already catering for refugees from other parts of the world?

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I do not really want to get into a debate about our domestic immigration policies. I am proud that the United Kingdom has provided more money than any country apart from America for refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, but of course we can do more.

A key point that I want to raise with the Minister is that because we are leaving the European Union, people say to me, “What’s it got to do with you? Your power and influence in the European Union is bound to wane over the next two years, and then you will have no influence at all.” One Conservative MP said to me today, “You’re blowing in the wind here; we will not have any influence in the European Union.” But the

fact remains that we will of course continue to have influence. As a major European power, security, stability, peace and confidence on the European continent is vital to us, and we must continue to engage and support countries such as Poland on this issue and others.

I say to the Minister that when Germany behaves in such a way, it needs to be called out for double standards. On the one hand Germany talks about the unique importance of solidarity within the European Union, and says that there has to be redistribution of refugees around the whole of the European Union, but on the other hand it implements policies that go completely against that concept. One example is the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—a massive project to build an undersea gas and oil pipeline from St Petersburg to Germany, completely bypassing the whole of central and eastern Europe. We all understand and appreciate the importance of energy security for all our NATO partners in central and eastern Europe. They are building liquefied gas terminals on the Baltic sea and starting to buy more gas from Qatar and the United States of America, but a common energy policy with the Russians is needed. The Russians understand only strength, and any differences between those countries will give Russia increased leverage to turn off the taps or to put pressure on some of those countries if things do not go its way.

I am really disappointed by Germany’s conduct over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, and I very much hope that my right hon. Friend and other Ministers will raise the issue with their German counterparts. What discussions has my right hon. Friend had with his German counterpart to highlight concerns about the lack of support for central and eastern Europe on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline? As I said, it is vital for our interests that countries in central and eastern Europe and the Baltic states continue to have energy security.

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) still wish to intervene? I was rude not to give way to my constituency neighbour from just across the border in Wales. I give way to him.

**Glyn Davies:** I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene and to express my admiration for the Polish people. A huge number of Polish people have moved to my constituency and, I am sure, to many others. They work incredibly hard and are committed to their families—that is their reputation—all on top of the commitment that those of us of a certain age know they made to the freedom of our country in the last war. We in Montgomeryshire have great admiration for the Polish people. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on the speech he is making.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I am grateful to my constituency neighbour and hon. Friend for those kind remarks.

Another key issue for our Polish friends is the need for a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland. I will be the first in the debate to recognise the contribution that the United Kingdom has already made in sending rotational troops to the Suwalki gap. We are all proud that more than 150 British soldiers from the Light Dragoons are in Poland playing their role in sending a strong message to the Russians that the new demarcation line between NATO and Russia is there to stay and must not be infringed, and that the United Kingdom will never tolerate any infringement on the sovereignty of our

NATO partners in central and eastern Europe. I am sure that is a red line for every hon. Member in this Chamber and throughout the entire House of Commons and House of Lords.

We are all scarred by the terrible consequences for Poland of the Yalta conference—being imprisoned behind the iron curtain for 60 years—and of the initial attack on 1 September 1939. I am particularly scarred, if I may say so, after listening to my beloved grandfather speak of those consequences. It will take generations to forget and forgive what happened at that time. However, we must now show the Poles that we are resolute, and that our word is our bond when it comes to upholding the article 5 clauses in the NATO treaty that guarantee Poland's sovereignty and independence.

I have asked many questions on the Floor of the House about the steps the Government will take to be at the vanguard of pushing for a permanent NATO base in Poland. I have had various oral replies, none of which have been satisfactory. The answer from Ministers is, "That is a decision for NATO." Of course it is, but we have an opportunity to show our Polish friends and allies that we are at the forefront of understanding their requests for a permanent NATO base. We ought to use our senior position within that organisation to push very hard to ensure that there is a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland. We need to take the lead on this issue.

We also need to take the lead in trying to alleviate tensions with Russia and on the Minsk II agreements, which have so far been prioritised and led by France and Germany. I was recently discussing with a Conservative colleague why we did not get involved initially in the Minsk I and II agreements. As a major European power, we clearly have a duty and responsibility to join Germany and France in trying to resolve the tensions between Russia and Ukraine, which are a major source of instability in central and eastern Europe.

When I was debating with German Members of Parliament at the Royal United Services Institute last week, I challenged them on the German stance with regard to permanent NATO bases in Poland. I have to say that I did not get unequivocal support from them; they are rather sitting on the fence. The Minister may correct me if I am wrong, but I do not believe the Germans want a permanent NATO base in eastern Poland. They are happy with the main focus of NATO being in Germany and protecting Germany. The only NATO base in Poland at the moment is right on the Polish-German border, in Szczecin, so if there were any incursion, only a tiny bit of Poland would potentially be protected.

The Germans and Angela Merkel have a long-standing relationship with President Putin. Angela Merkel probably has the greatest understanding of the Russian President, speaking Russian and having known and negotiated with him for a long time, but we in the United Kingdom need to challenge the Germans on that issue. Yes, we must have dialogue with the Russians and co-operate with them, but we need to ensure at the same time that there is a carrot-and-stick approach to them, and part of that must be a permanent NATO base in Poland.

I am conscious that other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will shortly wrap up my comments, but the other point I want to raise with the Minister is that we must fight, along with our Polish friends, not to tolerate

a single European army in the post-Brexit world. We all remember the picture of Signor Renzi, Mrs Merkel and Monsieur Hollande standing on top of an Italian aircraft carrier stating that they wanted a single European army. Some people on the continent even say that they can no longer depend on the British and Americans for a security umbrella for Europe. That is very wrong and very dangerous, and nothing must happen to usurp the power and responsibility of NATO as a collective defence mechanism for the whole continent.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Does he agree—it appears he is on the same line—that the security of Europe in the past, the present and hopefully the future, even in the central European belt, has been thanks to NATO, and that we should build and strengthen our relationship with all the NATO nations and not allow the misreading of history that says the European Union cemented peace, when it was in fact NATO?

**Daniel Kawczynski:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. In the referendum campaign in Shrewsbury, one couple came up to me and said, "I'm going to vote for remain because the European Union has maintained peace in Europe over the last 60 years," and I had to spend the next 15 minutes explaining very succinctly that it is nothing to do with the European Union. What has kept peace in Europe in our time, thank God, has been that collective defence mechanism—anchored, I have to say, by support from the Americans and the Canadians. Undoubtedly many very important countries are part of that defence mechanism, such as Norway and Turkey, which in my view are unlikely to become members of the European Union. It is very important that those countries—in addition to America, Canada and the United Kingdom, which is pulling out of the European Union—are central to the collective defence capability that we all require.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman: we must trumpet the importance of NATO. We must also work with our Polish friends to ensure that they take the lead within the European Union in ensuring that, although the United Kingdom is pulling out of the EU, NATO continues to be supreme as the sole common defence umbrella for the whole continent.

I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the 900,000 Poles who are living in the United Kingdom. Prince William said yesterday in his speech in Warsaw that Polish is now the second most spoken language in the United Kingdom.

**Glyn Davies:** Not Welsh?

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I hear my hon. Friend from across the border mentioning Welsh, but he will have to take that dispute up with Prince William directly.

I have a wonderful Polish teacher who is helping me with my Polish grammar, Mrs Watrobska, to whom I would like to pay tribute. I spend the first 15 minutes of every lesson, every week, complaining about how difficult and unnecessarily complicated the Polish language is. She just listens to me and keeps faith, but I am finally getting to grips with the rather complicated Polish grammar.

[Daniel Kawczynski]

One statistic that I want to share with the Minister is that 87,000 companies have now been set up in the United Kingdom by the Polish diaspora. I would argue that these people are, in the main, ideal immigrants. If we were to design a newcomer to our country, it would be a Pole. They are highly educated and highly skilled people. Many of them have finished university education, and they have an extraordinary work ethic. It makes me so proud when so many people come up to me, knowing that I am from Poland—whether it is farmers in Shropshire or people in the building trade, construction, architecture, design or fashion—to say, “We love these Polish workers. They are dependable; we can rely upon them.”

Of course that makes me very proud, and that is the sentiment. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Minister will agree that British people appreciate Poles and the contribution that these very hard-working people make to our country. Many of them have expressed to me concerns about their rights in a post-Brexit world and in the transition we are going through. This Government wanted to settle the issue of the reciprocal rights of EU citizens—both theirs and ours—at the very forefront, before negotiations started, understanding the importance of getting the issue resolved as a priority. Unfortunately, Mr Tusk and Angela Merkel prevented us from doing that.

The Government now have a very effective and positive plan to ensure that these people have guarantees to stay in the United Kingdom, and I am sure that the Minister will allude to those guarantees when he makes his speech. Let us not forget—this is the strongest message I want to give to our Polish friends—that just because we are pulling out of the European Union, it does not mean we will not continue to encourage highly-skilled Polish workers to come to our country. We will continue to celebrate their contribution to our economy and we will continue to issue work permits to highly-skilled Polish workers who wish to come here, work and make a contribution to our society.

I now turn to the newspaper article that my right hon. Friend the Minister highlighted to me, about a young Polish girl, Dagmara, of just 16. I am not in the habit of showing newspaper articles; I hope I am not infringing any official rules, Sir Roger. I shall put it down.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. It is not welcomed by the Chair because *Hansard*, of course, cannot see the articles to which the hon. Gentleman is referring, but he is more than free to quote from them.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I am very sorry, Sir Roger. I wanted the camera to pick up the face of this beautiful young Polish girl who so sadly died, hanged, following a racist incident.

Having come from Poland myself, I have to say that I personally have experienced nothing but kindness and understanding. I find it amazing and gratifying that, even as a foreigner to this country, I have been elected to the House of Commons. That obviously says a lot about my constituents. However, there have been some reported cases of racism against Poles, and it is obviously sickening and very worrying. I would like to assure our Polish friends that the Government—I am sure the Minister will agree with this—are doing everything

possible not only to punish in the severest way those who are responsible, but, through our schools programme and other measures, to ensure that people are aware of the extraordinary contribution that Polish people make to our country and why we all welcome them to our shores.

I would like to touch on the extraordinary number of British investments that are taking place in Poland. Tesco, which was initially incepted by a Polish immigrant to this country, as I am sure hon. Members know, now operates widely across Poland. There is also GlaxoSmithKline. In the financial services sector, Aviva is making great progress. I pay tribute on the record to the Polish Ministries that are working in a very collaborative, professional and effective way, not only in supporting British companies but by helping them better to understand regulations and by listening to feedback from British multinational companies about some of the problems that they have faced and taking them on board when it comes to reforms. My understanding is that the Polish Government are very serious about creating a pro-business approach. Poland is open for business, and they are very keen to attract as much British investment as possible.

I would, however, like to highlight for the Minister one case and concern that I have come across. A British company called EuroEco Fuels, in the biofuels industry, operates in the port of Szczecin. I heard from various colleagues that it was having enormous problems with the port of Szczecin authorities. I do not have enough time to give a significant explanation of some of the red tape and, the company argues, infringements against them by the port of Szczecin authorities, but so grave were my concerns that I took the time to visit the company earlier this year to see at first hand what its problems were. I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade and Investment has written to his counterparts in Warsaw. Unfortunately, the situation is not yet resolved. I wanted this Minister to know of that particular problem; I wanted to highlight it to him and his ministerial colleagues to see whether they can do anything to help EuroEco Fuels with its ongoing and highly controversial deliberations and concerns with the port of Szczecin authorities.

I think that we need a permanent prime ministerial trade envoy to Poland. The Minister will need to find someone very senior from the House of Lords or someone—

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** Who speaks Polish!

**Daniel Kawczynski:** No, I am not referring to myself; the Government need someone with much more gravitas and experience than me. But I am serious. Prime ministerial trade envoys are doing a great job in countries such as Iran and Indonesia—the Minister will know that our hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) does a very good job there. We do not have a trade envoy for Poland, yet we are Poland’s second largest trading partner. I urge the Minister to ensure that the Government consider appointing a trade envoy to Poland, so that all of us who are interested in bilateral trading relations with Poland can get behind that man or woman and help them to make the United Kingdom Poland’s No. 1 trading partner. We are currently its second

largest trading partner after Germany. I see no reason why, over the next 20 years, we cannot become Poland's No. 1 trading partner.

As long as I am a Member of this House—I have been one for 12 years now—I will always do whatever I can to promote relations with Poland. I say this as someone who was born in that country and who loves that country, its culture and its history very much. I feel that our two countries are inextricably linked and that we are very important bilateral strategic partners, and I for one look forward to our relations with Poland going from strength to strength over the coming years.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Order. Four hon. Gentlemen wish to speak, and I propose to start calling the Front Benchers at 10.30, so do the maths.

10.6 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** The maths is fairly easy to work out, Sir Roger; thank you. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on setting the scene so well. His knowledge of Poland is second to none in the House, and we appreciate his contribution to the debate.

We all know about the very significant Polish community in the UK. There are the Polish nationals who have come to the UK since Poland joined the EU in 2004, but there already existed a very large and significant Polish community in the UK—they came around the time of the second world war—and that is why I wanted to speak on this issue. I am the MP for Strangford, and we have a large contingent of Polish people who have lived in the constituency for a great many years; they came here originally during the second world war. The 1951 UK census showed that the number of Polish-born immigrants had quadrupled since before the war, to more than 160,000.

As I said, the history with Northern Ireland dates back to world war two. Polish people integrated well with the local population. People in my constituency have passed down fond memories of the Polish brigade stationed in Ballyhalbert at the 315 Squadron base. Just last year, we had a commemorative event at the watchtower in Ballyhalbert, which was much used in the second world war. Today, as the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham said, Prince William and Kate are on their visit to Poland. They were very careful not to mention Brexit; I think that was a great idea—when in Rome, do not annoy the Romans. It is important that we have that relationship, which we hope will continue to grow after we leave the EU.

The Polish people are remembered for their manners and politeness and their sheer determination, even though they were based in Northern Ireland, to fight against the Nazis who invaded Poland. The 38th Irish Brigade also fought alongside the Polish brigades in the assault at Monte Cassino. It is good to know that the bonds forged in war have remained strong locally. That has been enhanced through the reputation of the local Poles as hard-working decent people. Some of those Poles married local girls back in the second world war, and Polish names can be found through the Ards peninsula and where I live. About 1.4 million eastern Europeans

live in Britain. That includes 916,000 Polish people, and 80% of them are in work, so they come with a work ethic. Those are the figures according to the most complete official picture so far. A Polish shop opened a couple of years ago just a couple of doors up from my advice centre. Again, that is an indication of the presence of the Polish population and those who want to enjoy foods from back home.

A study of migration from the eight eastern European countries known as the EU8, conducted by the Office for National Statistics, shows that Lithuanians are the second largest group in the United Kingdom. The ONS study confirms that the food product manufacturing industry is particularly dependent on migrants, with EU8 citizens making up 25% of the total workforce. In my area, in the agri-food sectors, the importance of Poles and eastern Europeans to the workforce is enormous. We need to ensure that that continues.

The latest figures from the ONS are that in 2015 an estimated 831,000 residents of the UK were born in Poland, and an estimated 916,000 residents have Polish nationality. A 2013 analysis by the ONS of the 2011 census reported that Polish—here I have to disagree with my friend the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies)—was the most spoken language in the UK after English. If the ONS says that, who am I to disagree? It refers to people who describe Polish as their main language.

As the briefing paper for the debate set out, in December 2016 the inaugural UK-Poland intergovernmental consultations were held in London; that was the first time the two Governments had held a

“structured, comprehensive dialogue at Cabinet level.”

We welcome that. They agreed a series of collaborative measures on defence, foreign policy, security, business and the economy and science and innovation. The bilateral deployment of 150 soldiers within Enhanced Forward Presence, which has been mentioned, is good news.

The Governments also agreed to sign a defence co-operation treaty—let us be clear that it will not be like 1939; we will hold to and enhance this one—to strengthen UK-Polish industry co-operation, to co-ordinate opportunities to support the growth of UK and Polish small businesses, to showcase UK-Polish research collaboration, to increase academic exchange and to continue to co-operate to tackle global challenges including energy security, counter-terrorism and cyber-crime. They agreed to broaden and deepen our country-to-country dialogue by establishing an annual British-Polish civil society forum in 2017, bringing together UK and Polish academia, businesses and think-tanks to enhance the vibrant Polish community in the UK, including in my constituency.

I will conclude, because I am conscious that others want to speak. There will clearly be an opportunity to foster relations after Brexit. It is essential that we do so, especially on defence strategies, building on the history of our two nations. It can and should be done, inside or outside Europe, whatever the case may be. That is the feeling coming from Polish Government officials, and it is clear that the Brexit Minister is aware of and working on it. I encourage him and everyone here, including this Minister, to keep the House aware of the relationship between the two nations and enable it to grow.

10.11 am

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): I think my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) missed out from his list of trade envoys our brilliant trade envoy to Nigeria—I cannot imagine who has that job. I just refresh his memory on that.

I, too, will start with a history lesson, although not one that goes back as far as the second world war. Let me go back to the time of Mrs Thatcher and the setting up of what became known as the Know How Fund, Britain's technical assistance programme to central and eastern Europe. The fund, of which I was a board member, started in Poland, because the British Government saw the attractions of Poland and the innate spirit of entrepreneurial activity there, and decided that they would work with individual Polish organisations—not governmental organisations—to take reforms forward. I spent many years afterwards doing non-exciting things such as trying to import British accounting, law and stock exchange and banking practices to Poland, with some great success. That is why so many British companies feel comfortable doing business in Poland now.

**Daniel Kawczynski**: Of course I recognise the role that my hon. Friend undertakes as the excellent trade envoy for Nigeria. I agree wholeheartedly about the initial support that Britain gave to Poland after the communist era in the form of technology transfer and support in setting up institutions. He will, of course, agree that Britain was at the forefront of ensuring that the Paris Club nations rescinded many of Poland's communist era debts.

**John Howell**: I agree. The point that I would make is that it is a fundamentally good way of transferring British technical assistance, for the benefit of both countries, as it transpires. It makes the other countries much more receptive and makes it easier for British companies to operate there, and it certainly improves the activities in those countries.

The involvement with Poland goes back more years than I care to remember, but it has not stopped there. I still have a great deal of involvement with Poland and Polish MPs. It is worth remembering that Poland supplies many Members of Parliament to the European Conservatives Group at the Council of Europe. In a post-Brexit world, the Council of Europe goes far beyond the 27 EU members, with a full membership of 47. That says a lot about the Council's interest in human rights, democracy and the rule of law. I have heard Polish members of the Council of Europe participate in many debates on refugees, and I know full well that they understand the needs of Syrian and Ukrainian refugees in Europe, because they have said so in public debate. The point that they make balances good practice across Europe and seeing the refugee pattern as a whole with keeping an eye on what Poland can take for itself.

My hon. Friend mentioned that Prince William had been to Poland recently; Donald Trump was there as well, which led to many protests. There have also been protests about the court reforms that the current Polish Government are undertaking. Will the Minister comment on those? The difficulty with the court reforms, according to the opposition, is that the Government there are seeking more power over the courts, trying to end the separation of powers within Poland and introducing

more rules to allow members of courts to be chosen by parliamentarians. Is that compatible with the country's continued membership of the Council of Europe and its commitment to democracy?

My experience with Poland goes back many years, and I hope that it will continue for many more years to come. It is a place full of great entrepreneurs who contribute to our lives every day.

10.16 am

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): It is nice to have a positive discussion about Poles in this Chamber—not polls suggesting that Hillary Clinton could or could not have won; not polls suggesting that we will or will not stay in the European Union; not, dare I say, polls suggesting a landslide majority. Here is a positive debate that we parliamentarians can have about Poles in this country and the relationship between Poland and this United Kingdom of ours.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski)—indeed, my hon. Friend—who is chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Poland. On being elected to this House, he could have set aside any labels that people might attach to him, saying that he is just a constituency representative, but he stands up passionately and fervently for positive relations between this United Kingdom and Poland. I am sure that the Minister will give him due credit for the work that he undertakes in this House.

I have a number of points to direct to the Minister. I recognise that two of them probably do not fall within his bailiwick, but I hope that he will at least undertake to consider them. First, it is great news that for the first time, Belfast will have a permanent Polish consular service. A property is under construction at the moment, and for the first time, that service will be available to all the Polish nationals who have made Belfast their home.

It is appropriate to place on record our appreciation for the decades of dedicated service given by Jerome Mullen, honorary consul for Poland in Northern Ireland. He is a quiet champion who has often been thrust into difficult circumstances when there have been inter-community tensions. He has stood up passionately for Polish people in Northern Ireland and represented them. I hope that the Minister will take it upon himself to pay tribute to Jerome and the work that he has done in his capacity as an honorary consul and representative.

The battle of Britain has been mentioned. I think that it is appropriate to highlight that, whenever Polish airmen came to this country in exile, they were first offered the opportunity to serve under the British flag, wear British uniforms and participate as reservists only. Equipment was in short supply, but there is a wonderful story that the *Belfast Telegraph* set up a public fundraising campaign. The idea was to raise £7,500 to buy one Spitfire, but the campaign got £88,633 16s 5d and bought 17 Spitfires, including for the Polish airmen of the 315 Squadron—the Dębliński squadron, which my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to. Those airmen served our country, their own country and their aspirations for Europe so well and so diligently. Their record pertains to this day.

I met a number of people during the election campaign who raised concerns about this country's decision to leave the European Union. I recognise that dealing with those concerns falls naturally to the Home Office, but as

part of fostering good relations, I think it is appropriate that I raise them today. One Polish national, who has been living in Belfast for 15 years, travels home every six weeks, flying through Birmingham under a Polish passport. Every time he re-enters Belfast, he is stopped to have his credentials checked. This is an EU national who has freedom of movement, travelling from one United Kingdom city, Birmingham, to another, Belfast. There is a constitutional issue when someone in his position is not allowed to go down the EU national route—the route we all use when we go on holiday—but is separated off and has to prove his credentials. That needs to be raised with Border Force and the Home Office.

The second concern is from a gentleman who has been a Belfast veterinarian for 10 years. He employs 13 people and has totally established residency in the city of Belfast.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** Just for clarification, could the hon. Gentleman explain his constituent's visa entry problem? If he is an EU citizen, he can go down the EU route. I am puzzled by the problem that the hon. Gentleman is explaining to the House.

**Gavin Robinson:** That is the conundrum. He should naturally go down the route for EU nationals, as we do when we go to Spain, Poland or anywhere else in the EU, but he is directed out of it as a Polish national. Whatever has happened since the decision to leave the European Union, he is being subjected to controls that I think are inappropriate—the Minister's response indicates that he agrees—and that need to be investigated.

An applicant for British citizenship needs to have held a residency card for one year. My office has been contacted by two constituents, Polish nationals who have been in Belfast for many years and have established businesses and families, because their applications for British citizenship were turned down even though they had held residency cards for a year. An unduly onerous constraint is being placed on people who have chosen the United Kingdom as their home, such as those two Polish nationals. They have chosen Belfast as their home, lived there for more than 10 years and attained residency cards. At the time when they were turned down for British citizenship, they met the criteria to be in this country.

As representatives of the people in this country, we need to resolve these niggling issues collectively, because we do not want leaving the European Union to be a bumpy ride. We want to make it as smooth as possible and build on the strong relations between the United Kingdom and Poland.

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his role in the all-party group on Poland; he is a very active member of the group who has many Polish citizens living in his constituency. I thank him for his support and encourage him to come to the Belvedere Forum, which is hosted in Poland and brings together people from different walks of life to promote bilateral relations. I will talk to him about it another time, but I very much hope he gets involved.

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** In the interests of time, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) may wish to treat that as a rhetorical intervention.

**Gavin Robinson** *indicated assent.*

10.24 am

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) on securing this important debate. I understand that its focus is on the future, but I hope I will be forgiven for using it as an opportunity to promote my constituency's shared history with Poland. As the Member for a Scottish constituency, I would have preferred the debate's title to refer to "British-Polish relations", but I will forgive my hon. Friend for that oversight.

There is a strong link between Scotland—particularly the area I represent in the Scottish borders—and Poland. After the fall of France in May 1940, the 1st Polish Armoured Division was established in Duns in my constituency. It trained in Berwickshire before taking part in the Normandy landings. After the war and the Communist takeover in Poland, many Polish soldiers in the west were unwilling to return to a country where their personal freedom was far from assured, so many settled in the UK, including a relatively large number in the Scottish borders. That link can still be seen today in the "Great Polish Map of Scotland", which was the brainchild of Polish war veteran Jan Tomasik, who lived in Galashiels. It stands near Peebles, just outside my constituency, and is thought to be the world's largest terrain relief model.

Another famous Polish migrant was Wojtek, the beer-drinking, cigarette-eating, ammunition-carrying brown bear that was officially enlisted in the Polish army and fought in the Italian campaign before being stationed near Hutton in Berwickshire. In Duns, which is twinned with the Polish town of Żagań, a statue of Wojtek was unveiled by the mayor of Żagań last year after a blessing by a Polish priest. The statue stands as a reminder of the important link between our communities.

To this day, there remains a sizeable Polish community in the Scottish borders—around 1,300 people, according to the most recent census data. Their contribution cannot be overstated: they work hard, integrate well and add some cultural diversity to the borders. Hawick's Saturday Polish school, which offers courses to Polish and English-speaking adults, is a great example of how the community does well at integrating while maintaining and promoting its own culture. I know that there is some anxiety among the community about its future as the UK leaves the European Union. Ensuring that Poles continue to feel welcome here is an absolute necessity. I am pleased that securing the rights of EU migrants is one of the first priorities of the negotiations; I look forward to the situation being resolved as quickly as possible.

Looking to the future, there is much we can do to improve and build on the special relationship that the UK has with Poland. As one of the fastest-growing economies in the EU and one of our key allies, Poland will have an important role to play in the forthcoming negotiations. I am encouraged by the establishment of annual bilateral summits between the two countries, the first of which took place last year. The focus should be on pursuing the measures agreed at those meetings, particularly on defence co-operation, and further work to strengthen industry co-operation and small business growth in our two countries. It is clear that Poland recognises that our leaving the EU does not mean that our important trade and defence links should be compromised.

[John Lamont]

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham again on securing this important debate, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to say a few remarks. I am confident that our relationship with Poland will continue to strengthen and will continue to be as positive as it has been in the past.

10.28 am

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to begin the winding-up speeches in this debate. To pick up on an earlier comment from the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), I wondered whether I would be allowed to take part in a debate on Angles and Poles. However, tracing the migration routes on a map apparently proves that when the Angles came over from northern Europe, those who turned north were known as the acute ones, while those who turned south were known as the obtuse ones. That may explain quite a lot.

I want to highlight two aspects of the debate. First, it reminds us of the critical and decisive role that Polish servicemen and women played in ensuring that the United Kingdom did not fall under Nazi rule in the 1940s. Second, it gives us the opportunity to celebrate the contribution of just a small number of Polish nationals and people of Polish descent in and around my constituency. We have heard a lot of reminders today about the part that Poland played during the second world war. I have to say that I think there has been a massive failing in how we have taught not only our children, but ourselves, the history of these islands.

During my relatively short time here in Parliament, I have heard MPs in the main Chamber talking about how Britain—or, sometimes, England—stood alone against the Nazi menace. The simple fact is that if Britain had stood alone, Britain would have fallen. The United Kingdom would not have stood up permanently against the force of the Nazis without the support of service people from Poland and many other countries.

**Stephen Pound:** The hon. Gentleman is making an extremely important point. It seems that the links between Poland and this country, which were forged in blood—those links of fraternity and shared struggle—are so powerful that they can never be broken. Was he in the House when his hon. Friend, the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), spoke about the Clydebank blitz, when an entire section of a great city was flattened and the most potent response to the blitzkrieg was from Polish destroyers in the Clyde at the time, which were similar to the *Blyskawiza*, the destroyer that sunk the *Bismarck*? This connection between us and the Poles is far too strong ever to be threatened. Does he agree that we need to tell more people about this glorious, joyful, courageous, magnificent history of Poles in the UK?

**Peter Grant:** I am very grateful for that intervention; it means I can now take out several parts of my own speech.

**Stephen Pound:** Forgive me.

**Peter Grant:** I am sure that the hon. Gentleman made those comments more eloquently and probably more briefly than I would have done, so I am grateful to him.

We have already heard that it was a Polish squadron that was the best in the entire RAF at doing what the fighter squadrons were there to do, which was to shoot down Nazi aircraft. In the early 1940s, one in every six bomber crews in Bomber Command was Polish. In total, 19,000 Poles served in the RAF. The contribution that Poles made in helping to crack the Enigma code has already been highlighted. Poles also played a crucial role in taking Monte Cassino, it was the Poles who eventually sank the *Bismarck*, and the Poles were the only people to shoot down Luftwaffe bombers during the worst night of the blitz of Clydebank.

The list goes on and on, and those are only the parts of the history that we are allowed to know, because we can be certain that there were things done behind enemy lines that will never be made public—not even today—and there were also things done on the eastern side of Poland that the Soviets, who conquered the country after 1945, made sure were never, ever going to be told.

Perhaps the darkest of those stories, which has not been mentioned yet, is the deliberate massacre of 22,000 Polish soldiers—prisoners of war—under the direct orders of Stalin. It was an attempted genocide. The motive was to rid Poland of any potential leader, so that even after the war Poland would not be in a position to stand up to military conquest from the east. One of the great tragic ironies of the second world war is that we went into it to defend Poland from a military invader, but at the end Britain and the United States handed Poland back to an even worse dictator than the one who originally invaded on 1 September 1939.

It has not been mentioned today but it must be put on the record again that there are more Polish nationals recorded in the Righteous Among the Nations than those of any other nationality anywhere on Earth. More than 6,000 Polish citizens risked arrest, torture and death for themselves or their families to save Jews from the holocaust. That should also be remembered.

I want to talk about the Silent Unseen, the Polish secret resistance, who have very strong connections with Fife. Many of them lived just across the constituency border at Silverburn House in Leven and in Largo House. General Sikorski was headquartered for part of the war at Tulliallan, in the far west of Fife. I am delighted that thanks to my good friend and constituent Maciej Dokurno, working alongside the Polish consulate, the Polish Embassy and others, the contribution that the Silent Unseen made to the war effort is now—only now—beginning to be recognised.

One of the great heroes or heroines of the Polish resistance was Elżbieta Zawacka—her name is often anglicised as Elizabeth Watson—who was the only female member of the Silent Unseen. She was arrested and imprisoned by the Soviet authorities as a British agent and spent a significant part of her life in prison. After she was released, she continued to work for the liberation of Poland and was an active member of the Solidarity movement. Thanks to her, Poland was eventually liberated, not in 1945 but almost 50 years later, when the people of Poland were finally given the right to choose their own Government and their own future.

That act of handing Poland over to the Soviets at the end of the war is something that we can never allow ourselves to forget. We have heard a lot today about the enormous debt of gratitude that we all owe to Poland for what Poles did for us for during the war, but we

should never forget our debt of remorse for what we did to them and their country afterwards. I believe it was one of the darkest days in the 20th-century history of the United Kingdom.

As I have said, a lot of the history of the Poles during the war was never really given its proper place, sometimes for genuine reasons of national security, and sometimes because the Soviet Union did not want to recognise anything that had happened, and certainly not the massacre at Katyn, for example. The Soviet Union did not want to recognise that those who fought for Poland under the command of British forces were not enemy agents but troops fighting against the Nazis as well.

A lot of people—some of whom are in the Chamber today—are trying to make sure that this story is told and continues to be told, as it deserves to be. When I learned that I was going to speak in this debate, I put a wee post on my Facebook page, saying that if there was anything that people wanted me to raise, they should please let me know. I have had any number of comments on the page and by email giving the names of Polish people who my constituents have lived beside, worked beside, been treated by in hospitals, been served by in shops, and so on. That makes it very clear that the Polish nationals in Fife are welcome, and I hope they will always be made welcome.

I received a message from someone I did not know called Slawek Fejfer. When I saw the Polish spelling, I wondered whether it was a pseudonym, because I thought it was somebody who lived in Fife. He asked me particularly to raise the fact that Polish nationals do not have the right to vote in most UK elections. I was pleased to be able to remind him that EU nationals can vote in elections that are under the control of the Scottish Government, and I sincerely hope that all the elections in the United Kingdom will soon follow suit, because it seems to me that we do not vote for what or where we have been, but for where we want to go together. It is only right that those who have chosen to make their future part of our future should have a full say in that future.

I checked up to find out whether Slawek's was a genuine name. Not only did I find that it is genuine; apparently he lives in a place called Shrewsbury—I have never heard of that place before. I hope his constituency MP, the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), is listening to his concerns and will support his demand that he and his family should have the right to vote—possibly for the sitting MP—next time the opportunity comes along.

To finish, the greatest recognition that we can give to our Polish colleagues and friends now is to allow them to continue to play a full part in the nations that they have chosen to call home. It is almost exactly a year to the day since we had a similar debate here in Westminster Hall. At that time, the denial or the delaying of the granting of the right of Polish nationals to live here permanently took up a great part of that debate. Despite that being one of the top priorities for the Brexit negotiating team, it has still not happened, and I cannot understand why. We have had comforting and reassuring words; we do not yet have a legally binding guarantee. I would like the Minister to tell us today that that legally binding guarantee will come and will be unconditional.

I do not understand why the leader of the United Kingdom Government cannot say today what the leader of the Scottish Government said over a year ago to our

Polish nationals and nationals of other European countries who live here among us. What I want the UK Government to say to them is what the Scottish Government have already said to them: "This is your home. This is where you belong. We want you to stay for as long as you and your family want to stay here with us."

10.39 am

**Mr Khalid Mahmood** (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for securing this debate. Before I go any further, I pay my condolences to the parents of Dagmara Przybysz, who was bullied and suffered a racist attack. She is not the only person who has been treated in that way. A significant number of cases of racist treatment of Poles have led to injuries and deaths. I wholly condemn such behaviour and all of us in this place should condemn any form of racist attack against any individual. As I say, I pay my condolences to Dagmara's family and all those who are supporting them.

A lot of Members have mentioned the statistics relating to the Polish community in the UK; let me see whether I can clarify some of the issues. The latest figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2015 an estimated 831,000 residents of the UK had been born in Poland. An estimated 916,000 people resident in the UK are of Polish nationality. If we get the figures together, it gives us a framework. A 2013 analysis of the 2011 census conducted by the Office for National Statistics reported that Polish was the second most spoken language in England, after English. It is not just Harry and William. About 546,000 people—1% of the population—describe it as their main language.

As well as the Polish nationals who have come to the UK since Poland joined the EU in 2004, a significant community was already here of Polish people who came to the UK during the second world war. The 1951 UK census showed that the number of Polish-born immigrants quadrupled from before the war to more than 160,000. A lot of Members have talked about the bravery of the Polish pilots who joined the RAF to fight in the battle of Britain. In Birmingham, we have Castle Bromwich, where the Spitfire was manufactured. Many Polish air crew and pilots who were based there worked as mechanics to quickly turn around the Spitfires that had been in action. A lot of the pilots fought bravely and went into action again and again, every time they were required or called upon. I pay tribute to all those people. They played a huge role, and that example reinforces the role of the Polish community in this country. It is why I am utterly appalled by the racist attacks on the Polish community, which I wholly condemn.

An issue was raised about the NATO base and Poland. I have discussed some of those issues with General Ben Hodges, the current NATO commander—the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham talked about Germany and where the second NATO base should be—and he said that in the event of any action, the logistics of getting the mass of equipment and troops to the frontline as quickly as possible would be critical. Establishing a base in Poland would therefore be a positive thing to do and would ensure a strong role for NATO. As part of that, it is crucial, in light of what has happened in Crimea and the need to protect northern Europe, that Poland continues to play an integral role in our NATO defences, and I support that.

[Mr Khalid Mahmood]

The hon. Gentleman raised a significant number of issues, one of which was a trade envoy for Poland, which would be a positive thing. Members have talked about how work in their capacity as trade envoys has produced significant support for bilateral relationships. Trade envoys help ensure we get more trade on both sides and create better relationships. Trade is usually one of the better ways to improve relationships, so it is important we do that.

The hon. Gentleman talked about being a Polish Member of Parliament. Probably the first Polish Member of Parliament was Mark Lazarowicz, who represented Edinburgh North and Leith, although he is no longer in the House. I believe he was the first MP of Polish heritage, and he worked hard to represent the community.

Another issue that has been raised is how we get more investments in companies already involved in Poland. It is positive for us to have better trade. Depending on how the current Brexit negotiations go, we could be put in a very different arena. There are significant issues for us to deal with in terms of where Poland stands, what happens with Brexit, how we move forward and what other agreements there may be. Poland's status within the EU means that some of those issues will have to be worked out separately.

In December 2016, the inaugural UK-Poland intergovernmental consultations were held in London. It was the first time that the two Governments held a "structured, comprehensive dialogue at Cabinet level."

They agreed a series of collaborative measures in defence, foreign policy, security, the economy and business, and science and innovation. Those measures included:

"the bilateral deployment of around 150 UK armed service personnel to Poland within enhanced Forward Presence... agreement to sign a defence cooperation treaty...strengthening of UK/Polish industry cooperation...coordinating opportunities to support the growth of UK and Polish small businesses...a showcase of UK-Polish research collaboration and increased academic exchange...ongoing cooperation to tackle global challenges including energy security, counter terrorism and cyber crime".

One issue that needs to be added to the list is the status of those in the Polish community in the UK who are not registered British citizens. What will happen to them? The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union are putting proposals to the EU in relation to that, but I would be interested to hear from the Minister what progress has been made since the inaugural meeting in December 2016. The citizenship and status of those Poles who live here is very important.

Time is limited, so I will come to a conclusion. I thank all Members who have participated in this debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has acted as an assistant. Some great interventions have been made throughout the debate.

10.47 am

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) for initiating this debate. May I say how much we all appreciate his hard work as chair of the very active all-party group on Poland?

The UK-Poland relationship is at its strongest in living memory, and it is a genuinely strategic partnership. That is partly a result of sustained commitment by this Government. Perhaps I can give a flavour of the investment we have made in building the partnership, while addressing as many of the points that Members have raised as possible.

My hon. Friend is unique in this House for his Polish origins, but there are many Polish links across the UK, and I am pleased to have such a strong Polish community in my constituency. In Melton Mowbray, the strong Polish community dates back to the second world war. Most were RAF pilots, but looking at my hon. Friend, I am not sure he would ever have been able to fit into a Spitfire.

As has been mentioned, Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are in Poland today, celebrating our rich shared history. Today they visit Gdansk's Shakespeare theatre, which was built on the site of a 17th-century theatre that once hosted touring English players performing works of the English renaissance. The visit also looks ahead to the future. Yesterday Their Royal Highnesses visited Warsaw's new centre of digital start-ups, which has very strong links to London. They oversaw the final stages of a competition among Polish start-ups seeking the chance to develop their products in the UK. The successful tech entrepreneurs will join the 30,000 businesses Poles have set up in the UK. I note that my hon. Friend said that there were 87,000 such businesses. Let us agree to split the difference and say that there are lots of Polish businesses in the UK, and we are very pleased with all of them.

My hon. Friend mentioned the problem of EuroEco Fuels. I can confirm that our ambassador in Poland has raised that case with the Polish authorities; the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade are monitoring the case very closely. Also, may I invite hon. Members to the excellent UK-Poland Belvedere Forum that was mentioned? I was delighted to launch the first forum in Warsaw in March; the next forum will be held in London next spring.

The strong contribution of the Polish community to our economy and society is abundantly clear to all of us. It is the driving force behind the deepening relationship between our two countries in business, science and culture, and is behind the growth in trade that reached £15 billion last year. Poland is the UK's leading trade partner in central Europe, accounting for 40% of our exports to the region. We heard mention of a possible trade envoy this morning. I am not aware that we have any trade envoys to countries inside the EU, but of course it is possible that that may change in due course.

Since my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took office a year ago, we have enhanced the bilateral relationship dramatically. We have established new annual dialogues between our Governments and our civil societies to build broader, more vibrant and more diverse collaboration. We already work together on a range of priorities, from tackling modern slavery and serious organised crime to the fight against financial fraud. Above all, our mutual security interests are central to our co-operation.

Within NATO and beyond, we share a steadfast commitment to Europe's security and defence, demonstrated by the deployment in April of 150 British troops now stationed in Orzysz. We look to agree a bilateral defence treaty to build on that partnership further, because it is

not just within our respective borders that our interests align. We are working hand in hand with Poland on defence and security matters across the globe. That was clearly demonstrated in March by the joint visit to Ukraine of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and the Polish Foreign Minister, Witold Waszczykowski. Further afield, our Governments are committed to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, and to the global coalition to counter Daesh. Poland's election to the UN Security Council will see our co-operation deepen further once it is in place in January.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham raised the question of a permanent NATO base in Poland and whether we can guarantee Poland's sovereignty and independence. I want to be crystal clear that our commitment to NATO's collective defence and Poland's sovereignty is unwavering. Our contribution to NATO's enhanced forward presence is an historic commitment to Poland. I heard the gratitude of the Polish Government for the UK's support directly when I met the deputy Defence Minister in Warsaw in March.

This debate has celebrated our close co-operation and has raised several pertinent questions. Foremost are the rights of EU citizens in the UK. The Government have always been clear about the valuable contribution that they all make to our country. We have always sought to provide as much certainty as possible to the 3 million EU citizens in the UK, and, crucially, the 1 million UK nationals in the EU. That is why we have put EU and UK nationals first in our exit negotiations. We want to reach a reciprocal agreement for EU citizens in Britain and UK nationals in Europe as quickly as possible. Our detailed proposals represent a fair and serious offer to EU citizens. I hope that that will be recognised in the EU and that we can reach the agreement we seek to protect the interests of all.

I want to say very clearly—this is perhaps the most important immediate issue facing us—that I, the Government and all of us utterly condemn any violence against Polish people in the UK. I have addressed Polish audiences on this issue and cannot overstate the point too much. Poles are valued, and we condemn and deplore any violence against them. When it is motivated by racial hatred on the back of some kind of EU argument, it is absolutely disgusting, reprehensible and unacceptable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham mentioned the tragic suicide of a Polish girl, whose inquest has just taken place in Truro. One incidence of hate crime is one too many. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that hate crime of any kind has absolutely no place in British society. I can reassure Members that we have the most robust legal framework in the world for tackling the issue. The Government published a hate crime action plan last year that includes working with schools to equip teachers and parents to challenge and report hatred, as well as new funding for projects to tackle the problem.

The Nord Stream pipeline was mentioned. The issue is that it would go directly from Russia to Germany, bypassing Ukraine, where there are existing pipelines. I reassure hon. Members that the UK remains committed to ensuring a diverse and strong energy market. It is clear to all of us that reliance on any single supplier represents a risk to Europe's energy supply. That is why we are working with our European partners to minimise

that risk, and any new developments must be fully compliant with EU legislation. To that end, we are watching carefully developments in the Senate, which might reinforce sanctions against Russia, which would have implications for the pipeline.

My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned constitutional reform. I can assure the House that Her Majesty's Government follow developments in Poland closely. The rule of law is a vital part of every democracy. In active democracies, rule of law issues such as these are best dealt with in the countries concerned. As members of the EU they must of course comply with the high standards we expect. At the May General Affairs Council, Poland and the European Commission agreed to resume dialogue on the issue. It is not for me to prejudge the outcome of that dialogue, but Members can rest assured that there is a clear and important focus on the issue that my hon. Friend raised.

The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) mentioned the consular work in Belfast, which we acknowledge. The Poles are doing that very well. As my intervention implied, I was puzzled by his point about the Border Force entry requirements for a Pole, as an EU citizen travelling between cities in the UK. I urge him to take that up with the Home Secretary. In order to assist that process I will ask my office to forward to the Home Secretary an account of this debate so that they can be alerted to the issue he has raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham also raised the prospect of Poland being threatened with fines or penalties for not complying with the refugee relocation mechanism. The UK continues to support refugees and host communities through significant development aid and by resettling the most vulnerable people from the region. We are also working internationally to tackle the drivers that cause people to leave their homes in the first place. Unmanaged migration to Europe is a shared and complex problem. We are committed to working with all our European partners to tackle the migration crisis.

The UK and Poland have long been close allies and friends. As we prepare to leave the European Union, a strong partnership between our countries is more important now than ever. That is why we have established new dialogues and re-energised relations. The unparalleled contacts between our peoples are at the heart of our partnership, and they represent our greatest opportunity. The children of Poles who have chosen to make their lives in the United Kingdom have made friends in neighbourhoods and classrooms across our country. As they enter the workforce—in business, academia, the sciences, the arts and even politics—they will undoubtedly feel a strong affinity to both Poland and the UK. That provides a catalyst to drive forward a stronger UK-Poland relationship. I am sure I reflect the feelings of hon. Members of all parties when I say I am determined to make the most of that opportunity

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Mr Kawczynski, you have 30 seconds for a final comment.

10.59 am

**Daniel Kawczynski:** I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate, and I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for his

[Daniel Kawczynski]

comprehensive response to the points raised. I am pleased that we now have an annual Anglo-Polish—sorry, British-Polish—summit. I look forward to working with the Minister in future on British-Polish relations.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*

**Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair):** Will Members leaving the Chamber please do so quickly and quietly?

## Drones: Risk to Aviation

11 am

**Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the risk to UK aviation from drones.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. On Sunday 2 July, the runway at Gatwick Airport was closed twice—once for nine minutes and once for five minutes—as a result of the incursion of a drone. Five flights were diverted to other airports and several others were put into holding patterns, at great cost and inconvenience to airlines, the airport and, most importantly, passengers. In 2014, Airprox Board investigations into aircraft near misses with drones found that there were three, of which one was of the most serious category A. In 2015, the figure had risen to 27, with 13 category A incidents. In 2016, it had risen to 71, with 26 category A incidents—a huge increase in the most serious type of incidents. I secured this debate to find out from the Government what action they are taking and considering to counter that increasing threat to the lives of aircraft crew, passengers and those living under flight paths.

I am not anti-drone, and nor is the British Airline Pilots Association. I thank BALPA, along with the Civil Aviation Authority, Heathrow Airport, National Air Traffic Services and the House Library, for providing information on this subject. When properly and safely controlled, drones are of great value in, for example, precision agriculture, inspection of power cables, aerial photography, mapping and police work. Just this morning, I spoke with a constituent who runs Cloudbase Images Ltd. He was recently asked to carry out some work in the proximity of an airport. He contacted air traffic control there and they discussed a safe way of carrying out that work, which meant modifying the client's requests. That is an example of how drones should and can be operated safely and professionally.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue to Westminster Hall for consideration. He mentioned the British Airline Pilots Association, which has warned that the use of drones could cause what it refers to as a catastrophic crash. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is the time to step in and, perhaps, draw up the protocols used by the firm that he referred to and make them part of aviation law? There is not much sense in closing the door after the horse has bolted. Now is the time to get the protocols in order.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and I will come on to it. He is absolutely right. One of the reasons for having this debate is to find out what the Government are doing and urge them to take action quickly where it is necessary.

My constituent was concerned because the airport said that very few people contacted them, even though it is adjacent to a big city where a lot of professional drone work is carried out. He was worried that others were not taking steps to contact air traffic control or to make the appropriate safety arrangements.

There has been enormous growth in the ownership of drones. Some 530,000 were bought in 2014 alone. Of course, the vast majority are for leisure use. When used responsibly, they are a great asset. They encourage

interest in aviation and aerodynamics and lead to innovation. But there is also irresponsible or downright dangerous use, which poses a risk to aircraft and passengers. The key is regulation and enforcement that protects aviation without seriously damaging what is becoming an important sector of the economy.

Drones are currently subject to the Civil Aviation Act 1982 and the Air Navigation Order 2016, which stipulate—for all drones—that they must not “endanger persons or property” and that whoever is controlling the drone

“must maintain direct, unaided visual contact”

at all times. Drones weighing more than 7 kg must not be flown at a height of more than 400 feet, or 500 metres horizontally, nor in

“Class A, C, D or E airspace”

or

“within an aerodrome traffic zone during the notified hours of watch of the air traffic control unit”.

To operate a drone outside those limits, or to carry out aerial work—even non-commercial work—requires an operating permit from the Civil Aviation Authority. That permission is given on a case-by-case basis by the CAA. By September 2016, 2,500 permits had been issued, which strikes me as a small number compared with the number of people who I believe are carrying out work with drones at the moment, whether commercial or non-commercial. There are further requirements for someone who wishes to operate regular flights with a drone. The CAA will also wish to be assured of the competence of the person piloting the drone.

I wonder how many people who purchase drones for recreational or commercial use are fully aware of the requirements. I spoke with someone recently—someone who I and presumably they themselves would regard as responsible—who had lost control of a drone. It had flown more than 10 miles at a height of 100 metres before running out of power.

So my first question to the Minister is what work is being done to ensure that all purchasers of drones, whether for leisure or commercial use, are aware of existing regulations. Although I believe that further, tighter regulation is essential—I will come on to that—the Department and CAA can do much right now.

Looking ahead to what needs to be done, the first task is to establish how much damage the collision of a drone with an aircraft would cause. The Government, together with the CAA, BALPA and the Military Aviation Authority, have carried out research on that and the report is complete; I understand that it will be published soon. When will that be and what action does the Minister intend to take on publication?

From speaking to those involved in this area, I understand that the risks arising from a drone impact are likely to be serious, even with very small drones, and that there is a particular risk to helicopters, military or civilian, such as those used by the police, search and rescue or air ambulance services. The possibility of a drone strike is now listed by the Joint Helicopter Command of our armed forces as one of the five greatest risks to life in its sphere of operations.

BALPA believes that a drone of only a few tens of grams could cause serious damage in a collision at speed. The most popular drone weighs 1.5 kg—

1,500 grams. We will need careful and comprehensive regulation covering all but the smallest and least powerful of drones.

**Richard Burden** (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a telling speech about the need for action. Is it not time for some Government action? They consulted on possible regulations some time ago now; the consultation finished months ago. They were then waiting for a framework of regulation from the European Aviation Safety Agency. That was published in May. It is not too much to expect Ministers to come forward with a proper action plan for the appropriate regulation of drones, which could promote safety and at the same time safeguard the innovation that the responsible use and production of drones can provide.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I know that the Minister takes the matter extremely seriously and that the Government are looking at it. It is important that it is taken up quickly, because technology moves on. People are buying drones in the thousands every week and they need to know what the situation is. Airprox incidents are occurring at more than one a week at the moment, and some of them are extremely serious. That is not just in the UK but across the world. The UK could be a world leader in ensuring safety in this area.

I believe that we will need careful and comprehensive regulation covering all but the very smallest and least powerful of drones. In other words, it is likely that almost all drones sold will need to be covered by specific regulations, not just those over 7 kg, which are currently subject to the stricter rules. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) said—he speaks from great experience, having looked at these matters for the Opposition—the Government published a consultation in December 2016 with a final date of March 2017. He also rightly referred to the European publication from May this year. It is time that we had a response. One of the major reasons for my calling this debate is to give the Government the opportunity to set out the timetable for their response.

It has become clear to me as I have looked at this problem that there is no one solution. More regulation needs to be introduced urgently, and I am grateful to BALPA for sharing with me the work that it has done on this issue.

First, we need compulsory regulation for all drones. Perhaps there could be a *de minimis* exemption for the very smallest and least powerful, but, as I said, BALPA reckons that even a drone of a few tens of grams can cause serious damage, so it would have to be *de minimis* in the strict meaning of that phrase. It is essential that any drone capable of causing damage to aircraft and on the ground is registered to a named individual on purchase, and the registration should be transferred if the drone is sold on. All drones should be sold with a copy of the drone code, and the registration process should include a statement that the owner has read and understood it, and agrees to abide by it, so that it is taken seriously by purchasers of all drones.

Secondly, if somebody wishes to operate drones above a certain size and capability—again, I suggest it should be a fairly small size, given the potential damage of a

[Jeremy Lefroy]

small drone on impact—they should be required to acquire a licence that shows their competence to do so. Thirdly, there should be mandatory geo-fencing around airports and other sensitive areas, such as prisons, so that drones are prevented from flying in places that would create significant safety risks.

Fourthly—I believe this needs to be looked at carefully—third-party liability insurance should be considered for all registered drones. It is clear that even relatively small drones are capable of causing serious damage or injury. Accidents do happen, and people should know that they are protected from potential bankruptcy when they are buying something that does not cost them very much in the first place. In addition, if people have to take out insurance, they think about what they are doing much more carefully than they would if they think there are no risks involved. Buying insurance shows that a person knows there are serious risks. Finally, investment in technology is required to allow air traffic controllers to see drones when a conflict with manned aircraft is possible.

As always, there is a balance to be struck when introducing tighter regulation. However, consider how safe aviation is now, compared with 50 years ago. That was brought about by sensible and effective regulation, both in the manufacture of aircraft and engines and in the control of airspace. The same must apply to drones.

11.13 am

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** It is a pleasure to respond to this brief debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for bringing these matters to the House's attention. He is right that they are salient. His concernment about drones is a result not of any amaritude, but of a fear of risk and an understanding that drones may not only pose problems but may have beneficial uses. I shall speak about both those things in a moment.

Before I start to do so, I want to deal with the intervention of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden). He is right that it is time that we did more. We looked at these matters closely and consulted—I shall speak about that in more detail in a moment. The Opposition have publicly made it clear a couple of times recently that they are happy to work with us in looking at what more can be done. I have spoken to them privately—I am happy to make that known—and I can confirm that that is very much our spirit too. As a Parliament, we want to act properly and reasonably swiftly to take action before any of the fears that I ascribed to my hon. Friend become realities. There is a seriousness about this and an intent to act. That is what I want to make clear to the Chamber, and the intervention of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield gives me the opportunity to do so.

Let me deal rather more widely with the issue of drones. Of course, we are aware of the risks to safety, security and privacy. A misuse of this technology is wholly unacceptable, as my hon. Friend said. However, it is important to recognise that this is an emerging technology with potential benefits. There is a growing market as the technology offers the UK opportunities, and not just economic ones. The positive use of drones

was well illustrated when, as many here know, the firefighters at Grenfell Tower used them after the incident to inspect the top floors, which had been deemed too unsafe to be inspected by any other means. The west midlands fire service has been using drones since 2007 for assessing sites and for wide-area searches. Drones can be used beneficially and safely, and they can increase effectiveness and efficiency.

Some airlines are using drones to conduct safety inspections of their planes in much less time, making the operations more efficient and leading to fewer delays on the tarmac for customers. Using pioneering technology that improves services and delivers economic benefits is a key element of the Government's industrial strategy. Drones have the potential in many ways to transform the way in which businesses operate and interact with their consumers. They have a range of applications. We are working with industry to explore those uses, but my hon. Friend is right to say that that has to be done within a framework that guarantees safety and security.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and I referred to the British Airline Pilots Association, which has asked for a protocol to be put in place. Has the Minister had the opportunity to speak to it and hear its ideas about how a protocol would work?

**Mr Hayes:** I hope to deal with that later, but if I do not, I am more than happy to get back to the hon. Gentleman. As this is a short debate, we will not necessarily have time to explore all aspects of the subject, and there some important matters I want to make absolutely clear.

The misuse of drones poses a significant challenge. We already have regulations that prohibit some of those misuses. Alongside those offences, we can prosecute operators for the negligent or malicious use of drones. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford will be aware that it is an offence under the Air Navigation Order 2016 to endanger an aircraft. Those convicted can face a prison sentence of up to five years. The order applies to all aircraft, including drones, and stipulates that "a person must not recklessly or negligently cause or permit an aircraft to endanger any person or property".

Under article 94 of the order, the person in charge of a drone weighing under 20 kg must maintain direct, unaided visual contact with the aircraft to avoid collisions, and small drones should not be flown above 400 feet.

My hon. Friend asked whether we can do more. It is important to broadcast those measures as widely as possible. We have worked with the CAA to do that—I shall speak about that—but I accept that there is always more to do. I will look again at whether we need to go still further with those discussions and with the work that results from them and this debate. As you know, Sir Roger, I take the view that Westminster Hall debates must have a purpose beyond the Minister simply repeating what he has said already or affirming Government policy; they must help us move that policy on. I will happily look again at whether we can do still more.

In addition, the Secretary of State is able to make restriction-of-flying regulations as necessary. Flying restrictions already prohibit drones from being flown over high-risk areas, which are sensitive sites such as airports and so on. When incidents occur, drone users are for the most part clearly unaware of the rules, or

recklessly breaking them. The point about awareness was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford. We need to make people absolutely aware that if they behave in a way that is prohibited, they will be pursued, and that if they act recklessly, action must be taken. It is as simple as that.

We have taken action. We worked with the Civil Aviation Authority and the industry to launch safety advice via a new drone code and a consumer drone website. A Drone Assist app has also been created by NATS to educate users about local flying restrictions. However, as I have said, one can always do more, so I will take a look at that.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** Does the Minister agree that knowing who the person is who is responsible for a drone is vital? That is the point I made about compulsory registration. There is a story—perhaps apocryphal, but perhaps not—that quite recently a drone was flown into the Shard, in London. People only found out who owned the drone when the owner went to retrieve it and asked for it back—which strikes me as quite an example of chutzpah. Does the Minister agree that registration and individual responsibility for drones is critical?

**Mr Hayes:** I have heard the point my hon. Friend makes very clearly, and if we are to consider further action, that will be one of the areas to look at closely and, as I said, urgently. The argument in favour of registration is advanced frequently, but it is none the worse for that. Certainly, I have heard what he said and we will take it into account.

The CAA launched a campaign to get large retailers such as Maplin and John Lewis to have drone code leaflets alongside drones sales. CAA research demonstrates how those efforts have been successful: awareness of the drone code has risen by 50% in the six months from August 2016 to February 2017.

The Government have also been working with drone manufacturers to ensure that airspace restrictions are adhered to. The software that implements such a restriction is known as geo-fencing, to which my hon. Friend made reference. Many of the leading drone manufacturers already include forms of geo-fencing capability in their drones. For example, DJI, the world's leading drone manufacturer, builds geo-fencing into all of its drones. As a result, when someone tries to fly a DJI drone in a geo-fenced area, the drone either refuses to take off or, if already flying, refuses to enter a geo-fenced area and instead hovers in place.

My hon. Friend and I have had a private conversation on the subject—it is only fair to let the Chamber know that—which made clear to me that we both understand the significance and value of geo-fencing. It is a good example of the industry pioneering new technology safely. The Government are working with the industry to improve how geo-fencing can be made more secure and effective in future. Other wider security measures need to be considered, and we will discuss those with industry as well.

There is also a cross-Government counter-drones group, which has been undertaking a programme of work to improve our defences against drones with a focus on sensitive and important locations. Many trials and demonstrations have taken place to examine the applicability of various technological options to detect

and counter the misuse of drones. Work is also being done by the Department for Transport in conjunction with UK airports and the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure on implementing operational mitigations against drones being launched near an airport. Furthermore, for those users who still seek to break the rules, we have acted to improve enforcement. We have delivered a memorandum of understanding agreed between the DFT, the CAA, the Home Office and the police with regards to the policing and monitoring of drones.

We heard earlier about the consultation, which took place up to March this year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield mentioned. The consultation looked at three key areas: stimulating drone innovation and enterprise; ensuring safety and operation within the law; and laying the foundations for a developed drone market. It set out our firm intention to keep rules and regulations at pace with this emerging market and to ensure that actions to tackle misuse can be taken.

To be clear, the Government intend to introduce further measures once we have fully analysed the evidence presented in our consultation process. My hon. Friend asked, not unreasonably, when that would be. I have assured him previously, and do so now again publicly, that it will be very soon indeed. I have also committed to the Opposition that I will keep them fully informed of that. The approach they have taken on this is a good illustration of how Government and Opposition can work together. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield has been pressing properly, as Oppositions should, for the Government to take action, and we will do so in the spirit that has been engendered by the conversations we have already enjoyed. Let us move together as a Parliament on this matter, which stretches beyond any party political divide.

It goes without saying that this is a matter of public safety, but it is also a matter of not inhibiting the beneficial use of drones. It is easy to say, “If we didn't have any drones, everything would be fine,” but as I have already mentioned in the illustrations I have given and the examples I have offered, drones can be used productively, helpfully and safely. Nevertheless, the framework for the technology has to be in place. As with all technological change and innovation, it is a challenge for legal frameworks to keep pace with such highly dynamic circumstances.

**Richard Burden:** During discussions on the Vehicle Technology and Aviation Bill in the last Parliament, the Minister said that he hoped to respond to the consultation and produce draft regulations in the summer. Are we still looking at that kind of timeframe?

**Mr Hayes:** For me, summer is an endless affair—my life is a constant summer, with a touch of spring and the warm glowing fires of winter—but frankly we need to act early this year, and given where we are, that means summer. The hon. Gentleman asks the question, perfectly reasonably, and I am happy to answer that I hope to be able to do something in the summer—if it can be done. I want to get it right, as I do not do not want to proceed on the basis of hastily doing something that we then regret, because this is a challenging and complex area for the very reasons of technological change that I mentioned, although they are not a reason to do nothing.

**Jeremy Lefroy:** Will the Minister, who is indeed a summery person, undertake to publish the report on the impact of drones on aircraft during the extended summer to which he referred?

**Mr Hayes:** I have talked about the critical role of the CAA and about the existing restrictions around airports, so there are two points there: first, to ensure that the law is in the right place; and, secondly, to ensure that enforcement is adequate. As it is about both those things, airports in particular, but also other critical national infrastructure, will of course need to be taken into account in our consultation response and any further measures that we might consider.

Shakespeare said in “Henry V”:

“All things are ready if our minds be so”,

and our mind is ready to take further action. Tennyson, the great Lincolnshire poet, said:

“dream not that the hours will last”,

by which he meant that there is a time when we should act, and that we should not dream that it will go on forever. Notwithstanding my sunny disposition, my eternal summer, it is important that we act swiftly, proportionately and carefully, but without delay. That is the message that I take from this short debate.

In the near future, we will publish the consultation response—as I said, in the summer. I hope that will address some of the concerns expressed, but we will also consider further steps as necessary.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.29 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## Taxi Trade

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the taxi trade.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. The black hackney carriage is one of the great icons of our capital city, the knowledge of London produces the most qualified taxi drivers in the world and the licensed taxi trade is a mainstay of public transport systems in towns and cities across the UK, but unless action is taken, London’s famous black taxi risks being driven off the road altogether.

The taxi and private hire industry is, in many respects, at the cutting edge of an industrial revolution that is sweeping the world at unprecedented scale and pace. Breakthroughs in technology offer unlimited potential to improve our quality of life and revolutionise the way we travel, but we have seen on the streets of London and other major cities around the world how technological advances can be exploited by multinational companies that seek to drive competitors off the road with a business model based on poor pay and conditions for drivers, exploitation of regulatory loopholes and predatory pricing that is made possible by huge venture capital and aggressive tax avoidance.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend knows that black cabs are actually manufactured in Coventry and on its outskirts. A lot of investment—Chinese investment, actually—has gone into black cabs over the past few years. The developments that he describes may have a consequence for the production of black cabs, meaning that a lot of jobs could be at stake. I studied the Taylor report, and I noticed that it is actually very weak in dealing with that situation. A lot of people—not least taxi drivers themselves—are quite concerned about the consequences.

**Wes Streeting:** I wholeheartedly agree. My hon. Friend can be proud of the role that Coventry’s manufacturing plays in the licensed taxi industry. My argument is that there are two possible futures, both for the manufacturing of vehicles and manufacturing jobs, and for other areas of the taxi and private hire industry: a bright future or an existential crisis. The Government have a clear role in ensuring that we head towards a bright future rather than a bleak future.

The all-party parliamentary group on taxis, which I am proud to chair, was founded with that in mind, to ensure that the trade has a strong voice in Parliament. For the past six months we have conducted a wide-ranging inquiry on the future of the trade, which led to the publication of our report, “Lessons from London: The future of the UK taxi trade”. I will focus on that report and its recommendations.

I am glad to see the Minister here. I know that he takes an interest in the future of the trade and in these issues, and I look forward to working with him. He will be pleased to know that, during our inquiry, we engaged with a wide range of stakeholders in and around the industry to look at issues such as passenger and public safety, the effectiveness of regulation, and the future of the taxi trade. I was delighted that an APPG inquiry, as

opposed to a Select Committee inquiry, generated such interest. We received 115 pieces of written evidence and heard from a wide range of witnesses at three oral evidence sessions.

I want to place on the record my thanks to that wide range of stakeholders, which included the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association; United Private Hire Drivers; Transport for London; the GMB and Unite trade unions; Addison Lee; Gett; mytaxi; the London Taxi Company; Guide Dogs UK; and the Chair of the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I also want to say a particular thank you to my constituents. It would take some time to name all the constituents I have had conversations with about this issue—as many people know, Ilford North still has a reputation for being “green badge valley”—but I particularly thank Danny Fresco, Jim Ludlow, Steve Kenton and Sean Harris for the time they have taken to engage with me throughout my time as their Member of Parliament. It is a source of regret that, although Uber was invited to give evidence, it chose not to, because it has a direct role and responsibility in many of these issues. I hope that its level of engagement will change.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work with the all-party group, particularly in producing such an excellent report. Does he agree that a lot of the report’s recommendations are applicable not just in London but across the whole of the UK? He will be aware that taxi drivers from my constituency in Cardiff, and many others, made submissions to the inquiry. The group’s findings apply to many of the issues that the trade faces across the UK.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I really welcome his engagement with the inquiry as a Cardiff Member. In many respects, London bears the brunt of these issues, but many other towns and cities across the country are equally—if differently—affected. Our intention when producing the report was to ensure that we learned lessons from London but also addressed issues that apply across the UK.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** I am sure my hon. Friend realises that the regulations were actually eased some years ago, under the coalition Government. That makes local authorities powerless to do anything about these issues—Coventry, for example, has the same problem with Uber. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I have consulted trade unions and taxi drivers themselves, and they are very concerned.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend leads me neatly into the inquiry’s first theme: the effectiveness of regulation. Some taxi and private hire vehicle legislation is more than 100 years old. It includes the Town Police Clauses Act 1847 and, in London, the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869 and the London Cab Order 1934. I should probably declare that I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association and an elected member of the London Borough of Redbridge. I strongly agree with the Local Government Association and the Law Commission that we need a taxi and private hire vehicle licensing reform Bill. There have been sweeping changes

across the taxi and private hire industry, and legislation and regulation have not effectively caught up. That is causing a wide range of issues.

**Julia Dockerill** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Wes Streeting:** I certainly will. I welcome the hon. Lady to her place.

**Julia Dockerill:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. He mentions looking again at taxi legislation. Does he agree that pedicabs, which are something of a problem in central London—they have created a lot of concern about passenger safety and congestion, particularly in the west end—should come within that legislation?

**Wes Streeting:** I wholeheartedly agree. Rickshaws are not just a nuisance on the streets of central London that add to congestion, but given some of the exorbitant prices that their riders propose to charge, they increasingly also rip off tourists. I saw a rickshaw outside Parliament the other day whose rider was proposing to charge £10 for a cycle up the road from Parliament Square to Trafalgar Square. That is terrible value for money and reflects badly on our city. If tourists want an expert guide to take them around London, they should hail a black taxi.

Turning to the need for effective regulation, there has been an explosion in the number of private hire vehicles on the streets of London, and new entrants to the taxi and private hire market have emerged. I am in no way opposed to competition, and I strongly encourage innovation, but the Minister and licensing authorities need to address the issue of fair competition. There have been calls for improvement. The APPG took evidence about the impact of the considerable growth in private hire on congestion on the streets of London. Similarly, many passenger groups and drivers complain about the erratic driving of people who are not properly qualified to drive cabs. I commend to the Minister the recommendation in our report that licensing regulations for private hire vehicles should be updated to include mandatory enhanced topographical tests for PHV drivers, so that they have some awareness of the local community in which they operate.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend and the all-party group for the report, and I apologise for the fact that I cannot stay for the whole debate.

This is also an issue in my constituency and in the borough of Trafford. Does he agree that, although it is obviously an issue of safety, it is also an issue of customer confidence and trust? When unregulated or poorly regulated drivers, or drivers who are subject to poorly enforced regulation, come into an area that they do not know, and where they do not know the customer needs, that has an impact on the reputation of the whole of the legitimate industry.

**Wes Streeting:** I wholeheartedly agree. In fact, many passengers have experienced the frustration of being in a car where the driver has their nose in the sat-nav, rather than concentrating on the road in the way they ought to. Often drivers choose to take routes that the passenger, who lives in the area, knows full well will be heavily congested, but because the driver lacks basic

[*Wes Streeting*]

awareness of the roads around them they end up taking routes that are inefficient and add to congestion, which delays passengers. That is why we recommend in our report that the licensing authorities should produce a code of conduct for the use of apps by taxi and private hire vehicle drivers, and that the Government should consider introducing a national code of conduct with basic minimum standards for drivers in all parts of the country to adhere to.

**Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate, which is long overdue. We really need an in-depth debate on taxi licensing, and he is making the argument for why. I congratulate him on his review.

My local licensing officer makes a point relevant to the one that my hon. Friend is making, talking about the problem of:

“Cross-border hiring and control of taxis coming into our area. We cannot set the standards for these vehicles and we have no authority to enforce...them. We are concerned about the impact that this could have on public safety.”

One of my local councils, Rossendale Borough Council, was licensing taxis the length and breadth of the United Kingdom not so long ago, which affected other authorities. That cannot be right.

**Wes Streeting:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who leads me neatly on to cross-border hiring, but I want to address plying for hire first.

**Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): I have read the report, which is very good. As a former taxi driver, I know how taxi drivers operate and the issues that they face along with passengers. Cross-border hiring is a massive issue. The report says that there has been a 30% reduction of income for drivers in London, but in other areas it is even bigger. A lot of drivers are leaving the trade because other drivers are coming in from other authority areas where following regulations and getting licenses is easy. There should be a cap not only on private hire vehicles—

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman to keep his intervention short and to ask a question, not make a speech.

**Mohammad Yasin:** I am going to do so. I have another meeting to go to, so I have to make the point now. Does my hon. Friend agree that there should be a cap not only on vehicles but on private hire drivers' licences?

**Wes Streeting:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, and I welcome him to his place in the House. He brings with him considerable expertise on this topic and others, and he will be a great representative for the people of Bedford. He anticipates what I am going to say about cross-border hiring and the cap on private hire numbers. However, before I do that, I want briefly to pick up one issue that has been floating around for some time but has yet to be addressed properly.

The Government recognised that the pace of change in the taxi and private hire industry necessitated some change to legislation and regulations, so they asked the Law Commission to do some work on that. In 2014, the

Law Commission produced a report, including a draft Bill, in which it identified plying for hire as one of the grey areas in need of clarification by legislation.

Many hon. Members will know that under existing regulations licensed taxi drivers in London have to undergo about 8,000 hours of training to pass the knowledge, and only licensed taxi drivers are allowed to ply for hire by picking up from a rank or in response to someone hailing a cab. With the introduction of new technology, there are people effectively hailing private hire vehicles all the time through the click of a button, and that is causing real anger and anxiety on the part of licensed taxi drivers. It is not simply that people feel that the existing law is being flouted. There is a lack of clarity about how we move forward when things have changed, with new technology platforms.

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point. My local taxi drivers have shown me where they can locate 15 or 16 Uber cabs sitting around St Albans in car parks. Because they are hailed from the station, that does not count as plying for hire, but it is—it is touting for business but being on another street. Surely that cannot be allowed.

**Wes Streeting:** I agree. Actually, in some cases, Uber cars use taxi ranks constantly on the streets of central London. There are real issues about how the existing law is enforced and there is a need to clarify it. In our report, we strongly supported those who made representations, particularly the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and other trade unions, including Unite, for which Mike Hedges gave evidence to our panel. We need Ministers to clarify their position on the two-tier system by issuing a formal response to the Law Commission's 2014 report and by introducing a legally enforceable statutory definition of plying for hire.

**Graham Stringer** (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a case for the updating and modernisation of the regulation and law applying to private hire and hackney carriages. He referred to the Law Commission report, which recommends a national system, and we have had reports from competition authorities that refer to deregulation. Does he agree that the licensing of hackney carriages and private hire vehicles should remain a local authority affair and that, when we look at the facts, deregulation nearly always leads to a worse service?

**Wes Streeting:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, who leads me directly on to cross-border hiring. He is correct that, although the Government have not formally responded to the Law Commission report and have not introduced as anticipated a new licensing reform Bill for taxi and private hire vehicles, the Deregulation Act 2015 meant that private hire vehicle drivers operating in one area could be licensed in a different area: an issue known as cross-border hiring. In practice, that means that where local authorities have rightly and appropriately determined specific licensing conditions suitable for their local community and population, drivers can abuse the patchwork quilt of licensing regulations across the country to flout rules.

Most alarmingly, we saw evidence of that happening in Rotherham. Right hon. and hon. Members will be acutely aware that in response to the terrible child

sexual exploitation scandal, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council rightly introduced one of the toughest licensing regimes in the country, including the requirement for drivers to have a recording device—either a camera or audio equipment—in operation at all times when someone under the age of, I think, 16 was travelling in the vehicle. However, the council found that private hire drivers could flout those conditions by licensing their vehicle in another part of the country. They could then operate on the streets of Rotherham quite legally and the council could do nothing about it. We heard compelling evidence from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) about the risks presented to the people of Rotherham because those robust standards are being undermined.

Rotherham is the most serious example, but it is not the only example. Reading Council decided not to grant Uber a licence, yet drivers from Uber license themselves in London and drive around the streets of Reading. I was struck by the evidence provided to my office by the Mayor of London about the number of TfL licences granted and where the drivers live. For example, 747 people have TfL-issued licenses but live in Birmingham, 260 people live in Manchester and yet have licences granted in London, and 378 people live in Bristol but have licences granted by TfL in London. That is clearly flagrant abuse of the system.

We set out a common-sense approach to dealing with this problem: to create a statutory definition of cross-border hiring under which a journey must begin or end in the licensing authority where the licence was issued. That would be simple and easy to enforce and would solve the problem instantly.

**Stephen Doughty:** My hon. Friend is making a strong point, and I completely agree with him. Is he aware that this problem is replicated in other parts of the country? In Cardiff we see people with licences granted in Rhondda Cynon Taf, Caerphilly, Newport and other locations coming in and working almost entirely in Cardiff, which has different standards. There may also be a specific issue on insurance. People are often insured in other authority areas and may be underinsured for where they operate the majority of their work, or indeed for where they leave their car on the street.

**Wes Streeting:** My hon. Friend again makes a powerful point, which was very much reinforced by the evidence we received during our inquiry. I really hope that the Department for Transport acts on cross-border hiring; I think measures on that will be welcomed by local authorities across the country. I am conscious of time and the fact that several hon. Members wish to speak, so I will canter through some of the report's other recommendations, but I will indulge my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) before I do.

**Mohammad Yasin:** I have to go to another meeting, so I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. One main issue that is very important but is not mentioned in the report is the safety of drivers. Drivers are very vulnerable, especially at night time, and if they have four or five passengers in their car they can get a lot of abuse. There is no mention of driver safety in the report, and I would like something to be added. Does he agree that driver safety is a serious issue that we need to be concerned about?

**Wes Streeting:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point, and I will pick it up when I talk about passenger safety. He is quite right that driver safety is something we should take seriously.

We heard compelling calls from a range of stakeholders, particularly people from London, about the need for local licensing authorities to have the power, to be exercised when they need it, to cap the number of private hire vehicles on the streets of a particular town or city. In London, we have seen an explosion in the number of private hire licences to around 120,000—up from 60,000 in, I think, 2010, which is a huge increase. Those private hire vehicles contribute to the congestion on the streets of London, which is filling our air with toxic emissions that result in the preventable deaths of more than 9,000 Londoners each year.

A report by the London Assembly, “London Stalling”, found that the number of private hire vehicles entering the congestion zone had increased by 54% since 2013, and that private hire vehicles are a cause of rising congestion. Those are not necessarily the most polluting vehicles on the streets of London, but the congestion to which they contribute means that more toxic fumes are being pumped into the air. There are two aspects to that. One is that Transport for London and the Mayor of London have been clear that they would like to cap the number of private hire vehicles on the streets of London to tackle the problem, but that they do not have the power to do so. The Government should be permissive in this area, trust local authorities to make appropriate decisions and give them the power to cap the number of private hire vehicles where appropriate. Of course, such a cap would only work if the Department for Transport also tackled cross-border hiring. I hope we will see effective action in both of those areas.

On passenger safety, I have already talked about cross-border hiring and the flouting of local licensing rules, but there is also the issue of insurance, which has already been referred to. All taxis and private hire vehicles are required to hold hire and reward insurance whenever they are carrying a passenger. However, we found during our inquiry that licensing authorities had no way of confirming whether a private hire vehicle had a hire and reward policy in place after its initial licensing, and that police and enforcement officers were only able to tell whether a vehicle was insured or not, rather than what type of insurance the driver held. We recommend that the Government legislate to require all private hire vehicles to have full hire and reward insurance for the duration of a licence, and explore the potential for private hire vehicle operators to have their own hire and reward fleet insurance, to cover all their registered drivers and vehicles.

We also heard powerful evidence on accessibility. I am proud that black hackney carriages are accessible and are a key part of the disability transport network of this city and many others across the country. However, there is still further to go on this. Some 42% of assistance dog owners were refused by a taxi or private hire driver in a one-year period, so although I strongly welcome the action that the Government have already taken in this area—introducing a £1,000 fine for taxi and private hire vehicle drivers who refuse to transport wheelchair users—there is a lot further to go.

First, we need to make sure that all drivers can communicate with passengers and understand their disability access requirements. That is why I strongly

[*Wes Streeting*]

support the measures that the Mayor of London is trying to introduce on English language testing for drivers before they are able to take a licence. Secondly, the Government and the licensing authorities should require all private hire and taxi drivers who are given a licence to undertake mandatory disability equality training and take an associated test to make sure that they can properly support disabled passengers.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Wes Streeting:** I will have to make progress, otherwise I will encroach on the time for other Members to speak. I have talked about the need for taxi and private hire drivers to undergo topographical training, so that they are better drivers and have better skills.

However, my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford—he is no longer in his place; he has another commitment—made a powerful contribution on driver safety, and we really need to look at that, particularly since card payment machines have been put in the back of black taxis. Drivers in my constituency feel more vulnerable than ever if something goes wrong with that machine, because they have to get out of the vehicle to deal with an issue in the back. I have heard stories of drivers being abused or people not paying their fare. Drivers put themselves at risk, and we might want to look at increasing the penalties and sentences for people who abuse taxi drivers in the way we are considering for other public sector workers.

On the future of the taxi trade, it is often said that taxi drivers are not interested in modernisation and are stuck in the past, but I have not found that to be the case. Drivers are keen to drive the new zero emission capable taxis and are excited about the opportunity to reduce polluting emissions from their vehicles. To ensure that they are able to drive them, we hope that the Government will put in place an adequate rapid charging infrastructure to support their use. We also need to make sure that those cabs are affordable. I know that the Government are already looking at grants, as is the Mayor of London, but we also need to look at exemptions from vehicle excise duty. I know that we will have to make that case to the Chancellor and the Treasury, but exemptions would make a real difference to drivers' ability to take up that challenge.

We also need to have a serious discussion on the fares regime, particularly in London, and the extent to which taxi drivers are heavily disadvantaged by fares, which are often set without adequate consultation with the trade. We also need a discussion about the extent to which competitors—particularly Uber—are able to offer artificially low prices and flood the market with drivers in order to drive their competitors off the road. That affects not just licensed taxi drivers but private hire drivers, including Uber drivers, who have seen their incomes fall in recent years because it is in Uber's interest to flood London with as many drivers as possible to maximise its revenues, even if that is at the expense of fast journeys and decent pay and conditions for both taxi drivers and private hire drivers. We need to approach this from the point of view of fair competition, rather than the elimination of competition.

Action by Ministers is long overdue. The debate about the future of the taxi trade has often been unfairly characterised as a debate between those who support

competition and innovation and those who want to cling to the past. That is a lazy analysis. As I have demonstrated this afternoon, the taxi drivers I represent are not afraid of innovation or competition; increasing numbers of drivers are embracing new platforms such as Gett and mytaxi. Many cab drivers also accepted card payments long before it was mandatory, and a great many more are keen to get behind the wheel of the new generation of carbon neutral, electric-capable taxis to play their part in improving air quality and protecting our environment.

However, the consistent theme I found as a constituency MP during our inquiry was that taxi drivers find it increasingly difficult to compete with both hands tied behind their backs in a changing marketplace. Our challenge now is to make sure that the trade enjoys a bright future as well as a proud history. I strongly believe that, with smart and effective regulation and new national standards, the taxi and private hire industries can succeed. I say to the Minister, who is a good man, that many small businessmen and businesswomen and their families are counting on Ministers to act.

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** I do not intend to put a time limit on speeches at the moment. I think we will fit everybody in, so long as everybody bears in mind that other hon. Members want to speak. I want to bring in the Front-Bench spokespeople at about 3.30 pm.

2.59 pm

**Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on securing this debate and on an excellent report. As a vice-chair of the all-party group on taxis, I would love to take lots of credit for the report, but he has worked really hard on it, and we need to take on board many of the things in it.

In Sutton, as in many London constituencies, there is a range of black cab drivers, Uber drivers and other private hire drivers, and some have approached me over the last couple of years to speak about the trade. Black cabs are having an incredibly difficult time, and especially yellow badge drivers, who are restricted to ply for trade in outer London, not least because there are few pick-up points. Business is really drying up for them, and they are finding it very difficult. We need to find ways, as the hon. Gentleman outlined, of modernising the trade, while giving the premium product that a black cab is and allowing them to survive and thrive in and around London.

I know that, until recently, Heathrow was a significant issue for cab drivers because a lot of Uber drivers were taking up parking spaces around the airport. That added to the congestion around Heathrow, which as we all know is pretty horrendous at the best of times.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that people want to become environmentally friendly with their vehicles, but there is a huge onus and cost on black cab drivers when they have to renew their cars. The boundaries are always being pushed, environmentally. To invest maybe £35,000 or £50,000 in a new vehicle is really hard for black cab drivers when they are seeing their trade reduced at the same time. That is partly because of the environmental issues, and it is partly because over the years there have been too few suppliers—only

two or three—of black cabs. That has helped to push the price up, to the cost of the drivers.

We have talked about the modernisation of the trade. It is good to see the change in drivers' attitudes; they are keen to look at card payments and to have greater access for wheelchair users. I remember, probably about 15 years ago, joining my best friend in trying to get a cab. At the time, black cab drivers had to pay about £1,500 to get ramps to make the cabs accessible. The driver stopped, took one look at us and said, "I don't want to get my hands dirty," and got back in his car and drove off. That was ridiculous, so I complained to Transport for London, and the driver rightly got hauled over the coals. I know that all the cab drivers I see would be rightly horrified by that. They stick together and keep together as a trade really well, so any stain on the trade from one rogue driver does them all no good whatsoever. It is great that they stick together and stick up for black cabs.

Black cabs are a premium product, so they will always cost more than, for example, Uber cars. A few people want to drive Uber off the ground, but the majority of the black cab trade take the view outlined by the hon. Member for Ilford North: they accept competition; they just want fair competition. That is absolutely right. Uber is disruptive by nature, so it will always come in and cause difficulties for a long-established, regulated trade such as black cabs. However, it has to be fair. The pricing has to be fair to drivers and to competition.

Uber does supply something that we have not talked about yet, which is flexibility for drivers. We were talking about the modernisation of the economy last week as a Government, with the release of the Taylor report. A lot of Uber drivers like the flexibility. They like being able to have a few hours here and a few hours there, possibly as a second income to supplement a lower-paid job. It is important that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater when looking at Uber and how to tackle this, to ensure a relatively level playing field for all concerned. The average Uber driver gets about £15 an hour, and we need to look at that in the bigger scheme of things when talking about competition between the two and how drivers are affected.

I totally agree that we must tackle cross-border hiring. I would be interested to know exactly how it would work. The hon. Gentleman talked about cars starting and stopping in a particular regulated area. I live on the outskirts of London. If I lived quarter of a mile further south, I would be in Surrey. I wonder how it would work in those border areas, when we are trying to get out of central London, but the principle is absolutely right. I have the same figures as him, and it cannot be right that we have 69 people coming from Cardiff and 83 people coming from Leeds to drive cabs around London. I do not think it would be too difficult to tackle cross-border hiring between Leeds and London, but maybe Carshalton and central London is a bit different. I would be interested to see how that might work.

I agree that the plying for hire definition needs to be modernised. I would not want it to exclude the competition being established in London, but the grey area needs to be removed, so that everybody knows exactly where they stand. It is all part of the modernisation. I agree as well that the Mayor should have the power to cap the number of private hire licences. I asked the Department

for Transport on 27 April what representations it has had from the Mayor of London on changing the law, so that he can cap that number. The answer came back that the Department has had zero formal representations. I am interested to know what has happened since April and what the Mayor of London has done to push that forward. I would certainly support him on that.

I agree that we need to incentivise the take-up of electric cars. I know that companies such as BluePoint are establishing charging points around London. It would be good to look at how that might work in taxi ranks, so that black cabs could have better access to charging points, rather than them just being for the new generation of private electrical cars.

Finally, it is absolutely right that an English test is being introduced for private hire drivers, but we need to ensure it is measured, practical and does what it needs to, to ensure that drivers can speak to passengers and understand signs. The idea of writing essays about a variety of things seems a little distracting. I would rather see a really practical English test, so that they can do their job.

We need to get the balance right between black cabs and the competition, including Uber. There is a lot to commend in the report, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North once again on his work.

3.7 pm

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). His account was exhaustive, and the work of the all-party group has been extremely helpful. A proper discussion of the issues around the industry is long overdue. I do not want to rehearse the arguments that have been made, but I will make a few observations on some of the things I have learned over almost a decade of trying to understand how the trade works in my area.

Although the APPG's report is excellent, it has a picture of a black cab on the front—it has a London focus, which is entirely reasonable. However, one thing that has struck me as I have gone around the country is how different things are in different places, and how difficult that makes it for us to cope with all the different local circumstances. That is why there will always be a role for the local licensing authority.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), who led an Adjournment debate on this subject just over a year ago. He gave a brilliant account, which should almost be obligatory reading for Members as they start to consider this issue. I also pay tribute to the local people in my area who have explained the issue.

The complexity of the issue is shown by the Law Commission report back in May 2014. Whatever one's view of that report, the fact that it ran to nearly 300 pages—I am not sure how many people have got through it from beginning to end; I have started it on a number of occasions on trains—and had 3,000 submissions demonstrates a huge amount of complexity and detail. I will come back to how we respond to it, but as I read it, I found myself thinking about how it applied to my area. I am very grateful to several local people: Paul Bradley and Rashel Mohammed of the Cambridge Hackney Carriage Association, and David Wratten, who works for Cambridge City Licensed Taxis and

[Daniel Zeichner]

represents the taxi drivers working from the station. As we begin to look at just one area, we realise how many different groups and interests there are within one trade.

The Local Government Association handbook advises councillors on how to deal with such issues. It runs to a full 60 pages and involves a lot of training. I am grateful to my councillors, Jeremy Benstead, Kevin Blencowe and Gerri Bird, for putting up with simplistic questions from me over the years as I try to understand the issues. I recommend that hon. Members go out with local taxi drivers to understand the job from their point of view and to see some of the problems they face on a daily basis. Many of us use taxis as passengers, but going out with the drivers and hearing them explain what they are up against is a very different thing. I am grateful, particularly to Paul and Rashel, who have taken me out on numerous occasions.

We have hackney carriages in Cambridge, but we do not hail them. It may be different in other places, but they all work from ranks and a lot of them are dual licensed, which causes total confusion in the minds of the public. People really do not understand the difference in a city such as Cambridge, and I think it might be similar in other places. We have a different set of distinctions from London. In many places the cap on numbers for taxis was lifted some years ago. I am pleased to say that the Labour council in Cambridge acted bravely. They went through the process of testing the market and reintroduced the cap a year or two ago, which has helped. We had a massive over-ranking problem, which is typical of historic cities. The problem is not completely solved, but the cap has helped. The problems that we still have are how to deal with basic technological things such as making sure the ranks are filled from feeder ranks.

Also, there is the problem, which was touched on by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), of cross-border issues when neighbouring authorities have different approaches to taxi licensing. That is not untypical. The Cambridge Labour authority takes a rigorous view. The councillors are very hands-on in their approach to managing appeals. However, neighbouring authorities take a different view, which creates a real problem when they are contiguous and we see large numbers of taxis coming in from other areas.

We have also had some self-inflicted problems. The Deregulation Act 2015 created additional problems. The idea that someone's booking can be passed on to someone else might have seemed a good idea in terms of efficiency, but it means people do not know what they are getting. It is like going to a supermarket checkout with a box of Jaffa Cakes that gets substituted for an own brand and being told it is the same thing when it is not. People have told me that they have phoned up to get their taxi—or, in this case, their private hire vehicle—and then someone else has turned up, someone who they did not want to see turning up because they had had problems with them before. In a way, that has taken choice away from the consumer, and I am not sure that was what the Government intended.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North made strong points about the access issues and guide dogs. I have heard about heart-rending cases from people who have told me about disagreements they have had with

taxi drivers who have not exactly welcomed them into their cab with either a guide dog or a wheelchair. As we have heard, progress has been made on that, but more needs to be done. Training is needed. My hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish tried to introduce a Bill in 2016 to make such training mandatory, so I hope the Government will come back to that.

Another set of issues raised with me around the country are the opaque set of charges for drivers using a rank at a railway station, supermarket, hospital or retail park. All those institutions are now trying to maximise the value of their assets. In the old days, railway stations were places for getting people around, but now they seem to be a source for raising funds. I have asked questions and I still have not had satisfactory answers. The issue is decidedly opaque and we need to make sure that such privileges are not being abused.

A huge range of issues needs to be tackled, as evidenced by the Law Commission report. We have seen the change in technology—I will not re-rehearse the arguments. I am not one of those opposed to changing technologies. Technology can be applied in the right way, as Gett and other applications have shown. I hope that in the future we will see such technology used in a transformational way for public transport, not just for taxis and private hire vehicles.

There are so many challenges, yet we still do not seem to have had a response from the Government. I really hope that at some point we will see a substantial piece of legislation introduced to deal with the issues. There is clearly a consensus around the idea of national standards to deal with the cross-border hiring issues. The Local Government Association, the all-party group and many others have called for that, and it was a manifesto promise from my party. It cannot be right that someone denied a licence in one area can turn up on the same streets within a few days, as we have seen in some places around the country, with a licence from somewhere else. That completely undercuts public confidence and frustrates local councillors, who feel they have no enforcement powers. We have to find a way forward. I hope I am not abusing the system, Mr Wilson, if I conclude by saying that I will be presenting a private Member's Bill tomorrow, which I hope will tackle the issues.

3.15 pm

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson.

I like this quote from GMB section secretary, Andy Peters:

“It appears that London has become the licensing centre to send London minicabs all over the UK rendering local councils redundant in taxi licensing.”

That about sums it up. In St Albans we have reliable and heavily regulated taxi licensing, but my local taxi drivers have said, “What is the point of being licensed with St Albans if TfL can license drivers?” TfL does not seem to have such high standards. We have heard from other speakers that if someone has lost their licence in one area, they will be denied a licence elsewhere. But it seems TfL is not so picky, because someone denied a licence in St Albans was told to try TfL, which is dreadful. The cost to register with TfL for a private hire driver's licence is £250 plus a medical fee, and registering a vehicle costs an additional £100, so that is a total of £350. In St Albans, the cost to register for a private hire licence is £420.50 plus a medical fee, and registering a

vehicle costs an additional £300, so that is £720.50 plus a medical fee. There is also a driver's knowledge test, which is £95 for a first attempt and £64 thereafter.

It does not take a mathematician to work out that someone might as well hop down the road to London and get a TfL licence if there is no way of stopping drivers coming from there to St Albans, where our drivers are heavily regulated. St Albans drivers have told me that if they infringe their driving licence in any way, shape or form, the licensing authority jumps on them. If there is no point in having our licensing regulations, everybody might as well be licensed with TfL and then work all over the place.

It worries me enormously that when I talk to St Albans District Council, it says that although it is trying to work with London, TfL and Uber vehicles are allowed to come to the district to collect or drop off pre-booked jobs. My taxi drivers have shown me an app that shows where all the Uber cars are, and they are not simply dropping off in St Albans and heading back. They are stopping there. They come first thing in the morning and hover about until someone is looking to book a taxi. I told my local taxi drivers that the problem is young people saying, "I'll get an Uber cab. It's cheaper." But it is cheaper because Uber is not obeying the rules. It is outside the licensing rules and touting for business. It claims to offer a journey within six minutes, but if the driver is supposed to be in London when they start a journey, they could not possibly be in St Albans in six minutes. They hover around in supermarkets and nearby roads and offer cheaper fares.

My council has stated:

"During enforcement checks any TFL or UBER vehicles that are found in the District without pre-booked jobs are advised to go back to the area that they are licensed. We have found that the amount of TFL and UBER vehicles...has declined"

when enforcement happens. That is the equivalent of swatting a fly off the rump of a horse. A taxi driver who is in the wrong area is simply asked to go back to where they are supposed to be. Nothing happens as a consequence, so they are all back within a few days. There are not enough licensing officers in St Albans, paid for by the heavy licensing fee, to ensure that we can keep those drivers out of the area. So we have a situation in which my local taxi drivers, many of whom are Bangladeshi, are faced with losing their livelihood.

There are big complaints when Tesco or other such companies move into areas and mop up all the trade. Local authorities can protect themselves from big rapacious companies that Hoover up all the vacant premises and suppress other small operators in the area. It seems to me particularly poor form, then, that London can spew out licences and the taxi drivers can go off and, in effect, operate remotely. They are not obeying the spirit of the law, and they certainly have a detrimental impact on taxi facilities in areas such as mine. It worries me that local authorities that can stop numerous shop premises being turned into coffee shops because they think that would alter the area's feel and offer, or deny Tesco a huge superstore because they feel it would draw trade from the city centre, cannot deny a fleet of rapacious Uber taxi drivers in my constituency the right to hover around in the car park, sucking the lifeblood from taxi services.

Maureen, who operates for Gold Line in St Albans, said to me much the same as the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has said: there should be strict

rules that a job must be started in the area where a driver is licensed. There are obviously a lot of journeys from St Albans to Luton and Heathrow airports, and there is no thought of stopping people going out of area, but when a taxi driver turns up in an area and hovers about all day, that is completely outside the regulations that cover their licensed hire vehicle. I am told that operating outside the licensing provision also has the potential to negate their insurance, so young people who think getting into these cars is the cheap option might find, if they were in a car crash or some other kind of accident, that they were not insured.

Unite the union has spearheaded a cross-border taxi campaign against Uber. Frankly I do not care whether the firm concerned is Uber or anyone else. What I am saying is not anti-Uber; it is anti-unfairness in the taxi trade. As for just shooing away taxi drivers who are meant to be licensed and operating in a proper fashion but are found hovering where they are not supposed to be, no licensing authority in the country can afford to be shooing out Uber drivers full-time. If those drivers do not behave and Transport for London will not do anything about it, the Government need to do something. I ask the Minister to look at the matter as a serious issue of unfair business competition and health and safety.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Phil Wilson (in the Chair):** Order. I am imposing a four-minute limit on speeches now, because I want to bring in the Front-Bench speakers at half-past 3.

3.22 pm

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for doing so much hard work on the report. I also thank the Cardiff taxi drivers with whom I have worked for a number of years—particularly the members of Taxi Drivers Cardiff—and the GMB union. I draw attention to the relevant declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank the GMB for raising these issues with me in the first place, and for working alongside me to get under the skin of what is going on.

At the root of the matter is the fact that drivers tell me they work all the hours God sends, but cannot make a decent living. That comes down to several factors, which break down into three areas. One is drivers' experience with the companies they work for. Another is their experience of dealing with councils, as well as the resources available and the implementation of licensing regulations—but, fundamentally, it is about the powers that councils have. Although powers were recently devolved under the Wales Act 2017, we are dealing with the legacy of legislation that is well over 100 years old and takes us back to the 19th century. Clearly, that is not fit for purpose. The third factor is the wider regulatory environment.

I thank Dragon Veezu, which owns taxi firms across the country, for its willingness to engage. I criticised it in the House some time ago, and since that time we have had some positive and constructive engagement. I welcome the fact that it dealt with some of the charges and unfair fees that drivers faced, for example. A lot of progress is still required in that relationship, but at least we are having a dialogue and there is openness. I welcome that and hope that it will continue.

[Stephen Doughty]

I am also pleased about the engagement that we have had with Cardiff Council in particular. I want to praise the new council leader, Huw Thomas, and the cabinet member, Michael Michael, for their willingness to put the creation of a fair playing field for the Cardiff taxi trade at the heart of their new “Capital Ambitions” document, which was published a couple of weeks ago. There will be a meeting with them shortly to discuss practical methods of implementation.

I also want to praise the Welsh Labour Government for opening up a consultation on the taxi trade in Wales, using their new powers. There have already been meetings between the Economy and Infrastructure Secretary Ken Skates and representatives of the GMB and others. I hope the Cabinet Secretary will listen to the debate, as many of the issues that are being raised are relevant in Wales.

There are four issues that I particularly want to highlight. First, the question of cross-border hires is clearly at the centre of the debate. Many people who have been licensed in neighbouring authorities, at lower standards, and often with lower insurance costs, come in and do all their work in Cardiff. Their cars can be seen parked in Cardiff every week. That is not supposed to be going on. Not only do they undercut the market in Cardiff, but the council often cannot enforce against them because of the regulations. Uber drivers also come in, perhaps using the TfL licences that have been referred to. I have even heard of Uber drivers being paid large sums up front to drive down from London and other cities to Cardiff, effectively to run a loss-making business and undercut the existing Cardiff trade. That is simply unacceptable, and it cannot go on.

The second issue is that it seems absurd not to be able to impose a cap on the number of private hire vehicles. That is clearly at the core of the matter. There is a cap on hackney drivers in Cardiff, but the number of private hire licences has continued to go up. It is simple economics—supply and demand. There are too many taxis in Cardiff, and the result is that each driver gets a much smaller part of the pie, so that they cannot get by on their daily wage.

Thirdly, on the question of a fair playing field, standards are not implemented fairly across authorities. A particular issue is safety glass in cars. Drivers in Cardiff are often asked to remove glass, at their own expense, whereas that is not required in neighbouring authorities.

The fourth issue is taxi companies dealing with such issues as account work and introducing a fair playing field. Those are the issues that drivers in Cardiff want to have addressed, and I hope that the Welsh Government and this Parliament will listen.

3.26 pm

**Jon Cruddas** (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): This is a hot-button issue for many of my constituents, and it will continue to be so, as it was during the general election campaign, until we sort out a basic framework of fair competition. In my view that would include the capping and regulation of taxis in London, which has been mentioned, the powers afforded to the Mayor of London, and wider issues to do with cross-border hiring and minimum standards across the sector.

Like other hon. Members, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on securing the debate and on all his hard work on the matter since he was elected. Like him, I have many constituents who are black cab drivers, and there is frustration about the effects of deregulation and the lack of effective licensing. There are implications for passenger safety in this city and across the country. There has been a dramatic effect on the livelihoods of many of my constituents and their families. Many cab drivers I know have had their income slashed in the past few years, and many are considering leaving the trade for good. That is tragic for some of the most qualified taxi drivers on the planet, and for the iconic black hackney carriage in this city. This is a big debate.

One point in the introduction to my hon. Friend's report that is worth mentioning is that there is a tendency to simplify the debate as being about the past versus the future and innovation. In my experience that is not the case. The cab drivers I know and represent have not been afraid of technology or innovation. On the contrary, they have embraced it, but there is a need for a fair, level playing field. Technological innovations cannot be used to destroy drivers' conditions and residents' protections. Moreover, big multinational companies cannot be allowed to ride roughshod over our democracy and to undermine, through lobbying and personal connections, attempts to create minimum standards and effective protections in cities such as London.

I want to make three basic points, which have been made earlier and will no doubt be made in the Front-Bench speeches. The first is about the number of minicabs in the capital, and the implications for congestion and pollution. As we have heard, it is estimated that in seven years the number of private hire car drivers has doubled to 120,000. As things stand, TfL is legally obliged to issue a licence to any driver who meets the criteria. We should put a cap on that.

That leads to my second point, about the general licensing environment. The simple reality is that drivers can dodge areas with more robust licensing by gaining a licence from an authority with weaker regulations. So standards designed to keep residents safe are being dodged through the avoidance of other licensing regimes. Minicab drivers should not be able consciously to acquire licences in areas with less stringent conditions.

On the more specific question of cross-border hiring, private hire vehicles are currently not restricted from taking bookings anywhere in England and Wales, provided that the vehicle driver and operator are licensed by the same licensing authority and the booking is accepted within that authority. There is little that licensing authorities can do about drivers who work outside the area for which they are licensed. The obvious question is how licensing authorities can effectively regulate and enforce private hire activity in the areas in question. They cannot. As we have heard, a significant number of London-licensed private hire vehicles appear to be working solely in areas outside the capital, so there appears to be a clear need for the Government to legislate to create a statutory definition of cross-border hiring. Should a journey have to begin or end in the licensing authority area where the licence was issued? That appears to me a pretty sensible suggestion. It would allow flexibility for private hire operators to fulfil passenger requests.

My final point is about national minimum licensing standards. The problems associated with cross-border hiring are linked with variations in licensing standards across the country. In some areas, drivers do not need even a Disclosure and Barring Service check to receive a licence, so drivers are not necessarily screened for criminal convictions before being allowed to carry passengers. Surely we need new minimum licensing standards for all licensing authorities to impose.

Overall, the proposed reforms are pragmatic and sensible. I very much welcome them and support the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North and the coalition that he has assembled.

3.30 pm

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson; I think this is the first time that I have done so. It is probably good news for you and others that I will not take up too much time.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on introducing the debate, on the sterling work that he has clearly done as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis and on producing the report. He started today by saying how iconic the black hackney carriage is in its association with London. I certainly concur with that. When I was growing up, my dad's aunt stayed just outside London, and we certainly associated the hackney carriage with London. The training and knowledge that these drivers have has been well documented in TV series, documentaries and so on.

It does seem a wee bit ironic that at the same time, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned, Transport for London is clearly undercutting other taxi services around the country in terms of the licences they are issuing. As we heard from the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), that is having a real impact on drivers in her constituency.

The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) touched on the fact that taxi operation varies from area to area and from country to country. Where I stay, my experience of taxis is that passengers phone local private hire companies; in my licensing area, people are not allowed to flag down vehicles. That makes it harder for unlicensed operators to operate, and it makes the whole start-or-finish issue or cross-border issue a bit more difficult. I am fortunate because I know all the local taxi drivers. I can phone the company and say "It's Alan. I want to go to x, y or z." I do not even have to give full details of the address. I can take my pet dog in the car; that is not a problem. That is in stark contrast to the experiences of people who rely on their guide dog because of mobility issues. We have heard about the unsatisfactory experience of people not being able to get their guide dog in cars. I certainly support the call for equality training to ensure that people are not effectively discriminated against, which would be under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

That brings us full circle. It is really important that we do not have a race to the bottom, which is the concern that we have now about Uber and how it operates. The hon. Member for St Albans said that she does not care whether it is Uber or whatever; the bottom line is that there is an issue that we need to address. In Scotland, Uber operates only in Glasgow and Edinburgh; it certainly does not operate in my area, so it is not the same issue as we face here. Clearly, that company has a model, and

once it undercuts people and puts other drivers out of business, it will continue to expand that model elsewhere. As I said, we cannot have a race to the bottom. We have heard about insurance issues. Clearly, some people are getting into these cars and do not understand the wider implications. Yes, they might save a few pennies, but it could cost them in the long run.

The key theme that came out in the debate was that the existing legislation is outdated. I have just touched on the DDA. I agree that there should be penalties for abuse of taxi drivers; they need more protection. Another good point made by the hon. Member for Ilford North was about providing assistance for taxi drivers to upgrade their cars, particularly given air pollution issues. The Government have still to respond to the air pollution case. They have lost three times in the High Court now; they cannot afford to lose in the High Court again. I think that further grant assistance must be given for the upgrading of black cabs, particularly in London. I will throw out one further thing to the Minister. Previously, there was a grant system for conversion to liquefied petroleum gas. I do not think that is available any more, but it is a good interim step towards reducing emissions before we get to zero-carbon transport, so I ask the Government to think again about LPG.

In Scotland, the Scottish National party Government have already made changes to licensing, under the Air Weapons and Licensing (Scotland) Act 2015. The process began in 2012-13, but even by the time the legislation was going through Parliament, in 2015, it was already recognised that it had not kept pace with technology and the apps system that is now used for taxi drivers. The SNP Government have therefore pledged to review it and bring in changes accordingly. I urge the UK Government to think likewise.

3.35 pm

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to speak in this important debate on the future of the taxi trade. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on securing it. I also congratulate him and the all-party parliamentary group on taxis on publishing the report, "Lessons from London: The future of the UK taxi trade".

I draw hon. Members' attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding my membership of the GMB, which organises in this area.

As has been mentioned, all too often debates about the taxi trade in the past have been wrongly framed as innovation versus tradition. It is not the case that there is a trade-off between innovations that improve the taxi trade and regulations that provide protections to the existing trade and deliver improved safety and accessibility for passengers. Sadly, however, the Government's hands-off approach to taxis and private hire vehicles means that in too many areas we are seeing a race to the bottom on quality, accessibility and, perhaps most worryingly of all, safety.

As technology and the industry have evolved, our regulation of the taxi and private hire industry has failed to keep pace. To address that, the Law Commission published recommendations and a draft Bill in May 2014. The commission recommended significant regulatory changes. The report found that the

[Cat Smith]

“balance struck between national and local rules lacks an overarching rationale, resulting in duplication, inconsistencies and considerable difficulties in cross-border enforcement...The outdated legislative framework has become too extensive in some respects, imposing unnecessary burdens on business and artificially restricting the range of services available to consumers; and insufficiently comprehensive in other ways, undermining the fundamental goal of protecting the travelling public.”

The Government have not responded to that report to date. I ask the Minister when he intends to do so, or whether the Government ever intend to respond. We are now at the point at which the Government risk waiting so long to respond that elements of the Law Commission’s work become outdated, and at present the Government have no plans to introduce a taxis Bill.

One significant challenge facing the taxi trade that has yet to be addressed by Ministers is cross-border working by private hire vehicles. There have been increasing concerns about private hire vehicles operating outside their licensed geographical areas. We have heard about that practice in this debate. It puts taxis at a competitive disadvantage, as they have to return to their licensed area after taking a fare outside their borough, unlike private hire vehicles, and some councils in this country hand out too many licences, clogging up the streets and worsening congestion and air quality. Because of the lack of national standards, there are implications for quality, safety and accessibility, which cross-border licensing undermines.

If a private hire driver has obtained a licence by having to pass a local knowledge test in one area, but primarily operates elsewhere, there is no guarantee that they will know the local roads well. There is almost no way a potential customer can know that at the time of booking. The implications for safety are worrying. Local authorities are currently permitted to set their own “fit and proper” criteria for licensing; there is no minimum national standard. Private hire drivers are therefore able to operate in an area with stringent safety criteria, but can legally fail to meet those criteria by obtaining a licence elsewhere. Concerns have been raised about that occurring in Rotherham and Oxford, where strict safety measures were put in place following instances of child sexual exploitation.

The questions of what steps should be taken to ensure passenger safety and how to prevent sexual assaults should not be for each licensing authority to decide, but should be decided at national level on the basis of what regulations would best protect passengers. Rather than addressing the problem, measures in the Government’s Deregulation Act 2015 permitting subcontracting have made the situation worse. Those make enforcement by local licensing authorities more difficult, in addition to stripping customers of their right to choose which operator they wish to travel with. I therefore ask the Minister what steps the Government will take to combat the problems associated with cross-border working. One obvious measure to mitigate the problem would be the introduction of national standards for licensing authorities—something that the Labour party has repeatedly called for. Will the Minister now commit to introducing such standards? The Government have previously stated that many of these issues should be the responsibility of licensing authorities, but issues

such as disabled access and safety standards should not be at the discretion of localities, varying greatly across the country.

While the industry has changed significantly throughout the years, and continues to do so, increasingly spurred on through technological change, legislation has not. As a consequence, the distinction between taxis and private hire vehicles is increasingly confused, in part because of the imprecise concept of plying for hire, which is not defined in statute. The Law Commission’s 2014 report supported this distinction remaining in place; however, we have seen a growing number of apps, such as Uber, that allow users to see the position of available vehicles at any particular moment—in effect, virtually plying for hire. The result has been a reduction in the number of people taking the geographical training for licensed taxi drivers.

The former Mayor of London identified the need for action and planned to introduce a minimum five-minute wait for customers requesting a car and beginning a journey. That was motivated by concerns about the impact that Uber’s business model has had on the city, including Uber’s contribution to rising congestion. Those plans were abandoned, reportedly after intense lobbying by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. As reported in the *Daily Mail*, the then Prime Minister and Chancellor enjoyed close relationships with Uber and were hostile to the idea that the company should be subject to further regulation. The advent of smartphone apps is changing the industry and presents many clear benefits to passengers, but companies such as Uber can enjoy unfair competitive advantages because they do not have to follow the same regulation and compliance as incumbent businesses. The current Mayor of London has committed to supporting a legal definition of plying for hire, and the Law Commission supports a statutory definition of pre-booking. I hope the Government are no longer acting as a paid lobbyist for Uber, and that the Minister will today outline what steps he intends to take to ensure a level playing field between operators.

Everyone in this room wants to see the future of the taxi trade, and indeed the private hire industry, accessible to all. It should therefore concern us all that 42% of assistance dog owners were refused a journey by a taxi or private hire vehicle, despite that being illegal. That has a devastating impact on the confidence and independence of disabled people, and I would like to praise the work of Guide Dogs on this issue. Will the Minister commit to mandatory disability equality training for all taxi and private hire vehicle drivers?

Finally, we have seen real progress in London towards zero emission vehicles. What steps will the Minister take to secure a greener trade across the whole country in future?

3.42 pm

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes):** Prejudice gets a worse name than it deserves. Burke said that prejudice

“engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved.”

I seek, I strive, I emule to little more than to match the prejudice of the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), whom I congratulate on securing this debate, in his advocacy of the importance of London black cabs. They add quality to our kingdom and are symptomatic

of the best of British and emblematic of its capital's character. The hon. Gentleman should be aware that in anything I subsequently say that is my starting point. We can be proud of our London cabs and should be hesitant about anything that endangers their future, which is certainly not the Government's intention.

The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that in recent years the taxi and private car hire market has experienced very significant change. That has been particularly true in our capital city. My suspicion is that it is not the end of a process but the beginning. I suspect that we will see continuing change as the ways in which people communicate and acquire services change. He said that it was important not to be stuck in the past. I spend a good deal of my life wishing that I could be, only to be dragged to the present by imperatives and drawn to the future, seduced by the promise of improvement and opportunity. Nevertheless, it is right to say that, whether we like it or not, changing communications are likely to mean that the services provided to us—in this case, by private hire vehicles and taxis—will change too. That does not mean that we should allow ourselves to be seduced—to use the word a second time in a short debate—by the Whiggish idea of progress. It is not true that all technological change is beneficial, and it is not true that all the alterations that the hon. Gentleman set out are likely to add to the quality of what is provided to people in London and elsewhere.

Let me now address some of the specifics in the excellent all-party group report and congratulate the whole of that group on producing it. It is clear to me that we share a common aim: open, safe and fair competition in the taxi and private hire car market. There will be a debate—a proper discussion—about how we can achieve that objective, but it is one to which we can all sign up. I am reassured that in the report there is an appetite to continue to encourage the best of the trade and to seek out ways to improve what is not as good as it should be.

As the hon. Gentleman argued, the Government are responsible for the legislative framework within which licensing authorities set their own standards and requirements, so have an important role to play, but those licensing authorities must play their part too. I will come back to that point, which was raised by the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) when he spoke of inconsistencies, and by my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main).

**Stephen Doughty:** Obviously, that is the case; however, the Minister is aware that the law in this area dates back almost 170 years—some of it is under the Town Police Clauses Act 1847. Given that the Welsh Labour Government are now looking at introducing new legislation to deal with many of the issues we have discussed today, will the Minister make a similar commitment on the UK Government's behalf?

**Mr Hayes:** Most of what inspires me goes back to the time of Jesus Christ, so I do not think the fact that something goes back a long way is necessarily indicative that it is inappropriate, but I certainly want to make sure that it is fit for purpose. Part of the job of government is to make sure that the legislative framework that we operate in is suitable for the changing circumstances, as I described. If they are as dynamic as the hon. Member for Ilford North and I suggest, we certainly need to

review these matters regularly and thoroughly. He is right that in the light of that changing landscape, we need to look at such things closely.

I am aware of the changing landscape of the taxi and private hire market, and the impact that changes in the way people engage services have for the public and on traditional business models, which, in my own use of taxis, I personally prefer. It is right that we address some of the specific issues raised in the report, and I shall try to do that in the short time available to me. Having said all that, using an app to request a taxi or a private hire vehicle is increasingly popular with the public and has the potential to change the structure of the market significantly. There is a taste for a certain kind of access to a certain kind of vehicle. That is an undeniable fact. I see it among people I know—friends and others—although personally, I prefer to hail a taxi. I like the theatre of that, as well as the quality that it ends in, but that is not the way that everybody goes about their lives and business, and we have to face that reality. Given that appetite, the important thing is that we are mindful of the disadvantages that it might bring too.

It is the case that in addition to accepting pre-booked journeys, taxi drivers have the exclusive right to ply for hire in the area in which they are licensed. This is the fundamental difference in the licensing of taxis and private hire vehicles, and underpins the requirement for taxi drivers to have the geographical knowledge that is indicated, in London at least, by the knowledge—the acquisition of detailed understanding of the character and geography of our city.

The all-party parliamentary group recommends that the Government introduce a legally enforceable statutory definition of plying for hire. That will, of course, be considered, but the Law Commission's view was that it was not practical to define plying for hire:

“No statutory list of factors could be sufficiently determinative to give clear guidance, leaving many of the current grey areas unresolved.”

I welcome the recent efforts of Transport for London to ensure that competition within the taxi and private hire market is fair. Private hire vehicles do not have the hard-earned right to ply for hire, and I wholeheartedly endorse action against those who break the law. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, Transport for London has quadrupled the number of dedicated compliance officers on the street, meaning that there are now more than 250. Not only do those enforcement officers ensure fair play among legitimate parties, they play a vital role in preventing unlicensed, unvetted, uninsured and unsafe drivers and vehicles from circumventing the regulations and stealing business from the legitimate trade.

**Mrs Main:** The thing is that those officers do not come into the areas where Uber drivers licensed by TfL operate, so the one or two officers in my area have all the responsibility for driving them out.

**Mr Hayes:** Yes, that is true; my hon. Friend makes a valid point about the scope and powers of those missioned with doing what I described. I am certainly prepared to consider both of those things in direct response to this debate. If these debates are to be meaningful, they must take policy further forward; they must not simply be repetition of the status quo or an opportunity for

[Mr John Hayes]

Ministers to read out speeches written for them by other people. We will certainly consider those matters particularly.

Clearly, we place premium importance on passenger safety, and points have been made about that; again, I will re-examine those matters in some detail. The Department has undertaken to monitor the adoption of the recommendations made in the statutory guidance, and I assure all here today that I will give the matter my personal attention. I will be judged on what I do, rather than what I say, so I serve notice on all taxi and PHV licensing authorities that I will be asking those that do not adopt the recommendations made as a result of consultation and engagement why not and for what reasons. I will write to all licensing authorities accordingly as a result of this brief debate.

A point was made about access for disabled people. That point has been raised previously, and I return to it—indeed, I had a discussion this morning with the Minister responsible in my Department about this very subject. We want to say more about it quickly, and we will do so; we have been considering it for some time, as the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) will know. Again, we have been partly catalysed by the fresh opportunity that this debate gives us to consider these matters.

The other thing that I commit to is further discussion with the all-party group. I invite the hon. Member for Ilford North to come to my Department to explore each of the detailed recommendations in the report. Time does not permit me to go into them now, but I am happy to have a dialogue with him to see what more can be done. By the way, there are some contentious things in the report. I do not want to give the impression that I have read it assuming that it is all fine and dandy. The issue of the difference between licensed vehicles and licensed drivers is—I say this in the kindest, most general way possible—fudged in the report, and we need to explore it. To say that there were 88,000 vehicle licences and 120 licences issued to people is a slight misrepresentation of the facts. I could go on; there is the effect on congestion as well. Light goods vehicles and other vehicles may well do more damage in terms of congestion than the growing number of private hire vehicles, and we need to explore that. However, the report is a useful and valuable contribution to the debate, and we will discuss it and be inspired by much of what it says.

In addition to all of that, there is more work to be done. I have established a working party to look at licensing, and I am extremely keen to deal with the inconsistencies across licensing authorities. There is a strong case for considering the cross-border issues; they are not straightforward, as the hon. Gentleman knows, but we must consider them closely. As I have mentioned, I am keen to move forward on accessibility and how disabled people must sometimes, for example, endure drivers not being prepared to take guide dogs in taxis. That is not acceptable, and it cannot be allowed to continue. The checks put in place by licensing authorities must be thorough and consistent to ensure safety.

I have repeatedly stressed my admiration for black cabs, but I hope also to recognise that it is a dynamic marketplace where technology has changed, and I will continue to do so. To return to the fundamental message

that I want to articulate in this short debate, it is important that the framework that we have put in place is fit for purpose, recognises those changes and preserves the best of what we have now.

There will be a working party, consideration of licensing and cross-border issues, and an urgent meeting with the hon. Gentleman to discuss the report. I am prepared to go further and meet the Mayor of London, representatives of the London taxi trade and, of course, Uber. Devising a plan for the future will require us all to work together for the common good.

I started with Burke, so I will end with Disraeli, who said:

“The secret of success is constancy to purpose.”

My purpose is to get this right, not for its own sake but for the effect that it has on all those who work in the industry and all those who use taxis and private hire vehicles. Our responsibility—indeed, I go further—our duty is to ensure that that is done thoughtfully, carefully and effectively. In securing this debate, the hon. Gentleman has aided that purpose.

3.57 pm

**Wes Streeting:** I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. Having listened to others' remarks, I am minded to draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I thank all members of the all-party parliamentary group on taxis, the secretariat for their hard work and the sponsors, Gett, mytaxi and the Licensed Taxi Drivers' Association, which are reflected in our group register, for making all the work possible.

I am grateful to the Minister for how he summed up and responded to the debate. All that we can ever hope for as Back Benchers putting the case to Government on various issues is open minds and open doors. I am glad that he has offered both open-mindedness to the range of issues presented and the various challenges of solving those problems and, most importantly, an open door to discuss each of the recommendations, as he has generously offered, so that we can feed back to the thousands of drivers across the country who are following the issue. Of all the issues that I hear about as a constituency MP, there is more, and more consistent, engagement among members of the public on this issue than on any other. As the Minister acknowledged, the drivers whom I represent are more interested in what will be done; I hope that in the autumn, we will start to see some progress. I am glad that work is under way in the Department to secure progress.

I am reflecting on this debate. One ongoing concern that is still with the courts is working conditions and rights for taxi and private hire drivers. We touched on it to some degree—

**Mr Hayes:** I know that the hon. Gentleman has only a few seconds left. The Taylor review has just been published, and we will consider how it applies to the sector. That is specifically why I set up the second working party. I do not want to pre-judge the courts, but I assure him of that.

**Wes Streeting:** I agree. Similarly, we did not want to pre-judge the courts when we did our work. I am none the less glad that GMB is pursuing a test case in the courts about the legal status of many private hire drivers.

Self-employment is a great thing; exploitation of self-employment rules by private operators is something else entirely. That is where the tension lies.

With just a few seconds left, I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this debate. I look forward to meeting the Minister, and I know that my constituents will be glad to hear about progress thereafter.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the future of the taxi trade.

## Catfishing and Social Media

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

**Ann Coffey** (Stockport) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of catfishing and social media.

Catfishing is a growing phenomenon. The internet has brought about many positive changes, but it has also brought the complex challenge of safeguarding people from those who want to deceive and harm them online. A catfish, as everybody knows, is a predator fish that scuttles along the bottom of the ocean feeding on smaller and more vulnerable fish. A human catfish will use another person's online identity to create a fake account and will then try to form relationships online, over social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat, or dating apps such as Tinder. The victim believes that they are communicating with the person whose identity the catfish has stolen. The catfish often deceives another person into an online romance, perhaps getting them to send sexually explicit images or money. However, there is always more than one victim, because as well as those who are deceived by the catfish's fake identity, the person whose identity has been stolen is also a victim.

One in three relationships now starts online. The public should not have to continuously contend with the prospect that the person they are in communication with is not who they say they are. I want to explore how we can better protect victims of catfishing, including the person who has had their identity stolen.

I have been approached by a number of people who have been catfished. Their cases are all different. The extent of catfishing first came to my attention last year when I was informed by the Lady Detective Agency that one of my constituents, Matt Peacock, had had his information used by a man who created fake social media profiles in order to meet women online. Mr Peacock, a male model, has had his identity stolen online for the past four years by the catfish, who has used his pictures on dating websites to lure women. The catfish has also used photographs of Matt's nephews and nieces, claiming that they were his own children in order to appeal to single mothers as being caring.

Matt's family has been put under tremendous strain. His wife has been contacted on many occasions and wrongly told that her husband was cheating on her by asking girls and women for sexual photographs and videos. Matt got so frustrated that he contacted private detective Rebecca Jane Sutton in Manchester for help. Within 48 hours, they tracked down and met the catfish, who admitted using Matt's identity to deceive dozens of women. The man apologised, which, crucially, Matt and Rebecca captured on tape. He also revealed names of other women he had deceived and promised Matt that he would stop doing it. However, just four days after the confrontation, a woman the detective agency had warned about the catfish rang to say that he had contacted her again, pretending to be Matt and asking for graphic videos. Being unable to resolve this, the detective agency contacted Stockport police and handed over all the evidence, including the full taped confession, but the police said that they would not be taking any action because they did not consider any notifiable

[Ann Coffey]

crime to have been committed. According to Ms Sutton, the police officer said, “This is the same as going into a bar in the 1980s and pretending to be a millionaire when you actually work on the bins. There is nothing we can do about it.”

But this is not the 1980s. It is 2017, and there is a world of difference between exaggerating one aspect of yourself and creating an identity online that has been stolen from somebody else. Many people tell white lies about their age, occupation or height to seem more attractive to a potential partner, but the difference with catfishing is in the totality of the misrepresentation and the creation of a completely stolen identity with the intention to exploit.

At the moment, there is no specific criminal offence of catfishing. Matt and Ms Sutton are campaigning for a new law to make it illegal to use another person’s identity online. Matt has told me about his disappointment when the police said that no crime had been committed:

“It affected me and my whole family. We spoke to one girl who the ‘catfisher’ had targeted, pretending to be me. She told me she had felt like committing suicide after being deceived by this man. I vowed then to do all I can to sort this out. I do not want a phone call from a girl who has harmed herself after falling for this fraudster who is pretending to be me. Something needs to be done and if people knew pretending to be someone else online was an offence then they might be put off.”

Matt believes that the only way forward is through a new law. He contacted Facebook, which asked him to prove who he was and eventually took the fraudulent page down. However, the next day, the catfish had created another profile, again using pictures of Matt to lure women in. Matt says:

“People of my generation live their lives through social media and trust in an entity that is massively flawed. The law has not kept up and I am determined to do something about it.”

I have also been contacted by other victims of catfishing, including Anna Rowe, who started a petition in February 2017 to make it illegal to create a fake online profile with the intention of using it to make sexual contact. So far, she has collected nearly 42,000 signatures. Anna’s catfish used Facebook accounts, emails, Skype, Snapchat and Instagram accounts to create a fake identity with the background story of a man divorced for 15 months and looking for a meaningful long-term relationship. She eventually discovered that she was in a relationship with a man who had used stolen profiles and was married. Since she publicised her case, Anna has been contacted by many other women who have been deceived by the same man.

In a third case, I was contacted for help by a mother who was worried about the traumatic effect that being catfished had had on her son. The 20-year-old young man, Axel Grassi-Havnen, had been catfished for four months. He has been so upset by the emotional strain it put him under that he has put a video on YouTube to warn other young people to be aware of catfish.

What can be done? Technology is limited in what it can do to deal with persistent catfish who are determined to deceive others and are uncaring of the trauma and emotional distress they inflict. Having a better understanding of privacy settings on Facebook and sharing images only with friends rather than making them public gives some protection, but that does not help people with high public profiles or those who are inexperienced in using social media.

Facebook has launched an initiative in India to counter personal photos being stolen. It has introduced profile picture filters to mark the photograph, because research has shown that a photo marked with a filter is 75% less likely to be stolen. There are now a number of websites for searching someone’s information to confirm their social media profiles and suggest whether they are catfish. A number of dating websites have dedicated fake accounts teams; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat have measures in place so that an account that impersonates somebody can be taken down. Using artificial intelligence to detect fake accounts helps to deal with the enormous challenge that the sheer volume of them poses to identifying and removing them; Facebook announced an initiative in that area earlier this year. Nobody wants to stop people setting up anonymous accounts—they may want to do so to express an identity that they cannot reveal in real life, because of prejudice or discrimination—but there is a difference between that and stealing somebody else’s identity in order to exploit another person.

However, it is very challenging for technology to set up enough barriers to stop the determined catfish. I welcome the work that is already being done by social media websites with internet charities such as the UK Safer Internet Centre and Get Safe Online in promoting awareness of potential risks online and measures that can be taken to prevent individuals from being exploited by catfish. However, more can be done by the social media giants to be proactive in safeguarding people from harm—for example, regularly flashing warning notices about catfish.

The Government’s new digital charter and the Green Paper on internet safety provide an opportunity to arrive at agreements with companies about how to make websites safer. I am pleased that the Government have proposed to work with technology companies and charities to develop the digital charter, which will

“seek to balance freedoms with appropriate protections to improve safety on line, particularly for children”.

It is important that we have initiatives by Government and by the companies that will work, that are acceptable to users and that develop partnerships with the police and other agencies on the sharing of information.

There is a gap technologically at the moment, but there is also a gap legally. Action Fraud, the UK’s national fraud and cyber-crime reporting centre, estimates that two thirds of all romantic fraud cases begin on online dating websites. In the UK in 2016, there was a record number of romantic fraud cases being reported, with a record £39 million thought to have been given by victims to those they believed to be romantic partners online. These were all cases that involved prosecution for committing financial fraud online, but in the three catfishing cases that I have outlined, it is the emotional trauma caused by someone creating a fake online account that has been particularly damaging.

As I have indicated, there is no specific criminal offence of creating a false profile online. However, such conduct might—depending on the circumstances—fall within one of about six more general criminal offences. The most pertinent to catch catfish include malicious communications. Under section 1 of the Malicious Communications Act 1988, it is an offence for a person to send to another person an electronic communication that conveys

“information which is false and known or believed to be false by the sender”.

Sending false information via electronic communications on social media could fall within this offence, but only if the sender can be shown to have had the purpose of causing distress or anxiety. That would be difficult to prove, and the Crown Prosecution Service would be reluctant to prosecute.

Under section 127 of the Communications Act 2003, it is an offence for a person,

“for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another”,

to

“send...by means of a public electronic communications network, a message that he knows to be false”.

A person who sends a social media message that they know to be false—that is, by pretending to be someone else—could fall within this offence, but only if the sender had the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, which again is difficult to prove.

In 2016, the CPS updated specific prosecution guidelines for cases involving social media communications. The guidelines say that prosecutors should begin by conducting an initial assessment of the content of the communication and the conduct in question, and classifying them in one of four categories. The fourth category refers to communications

“which may be considered grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or false”.

However, the guidelines say that cases that fall within category 4 will be subject to a high evidential threshold and in many cases a prosecution is unlikely to be in the public interest.

We need some clarity in the law, and that could be achieved if stealing another person’s identity, as happened in the case of my constituent, was made an offence. Of course, the argument for adding intent would be that an absolute offence would catch people who were just playing a prank on a friend and were not intending to cause harm, unlike the catfish. However, it is for the police and the CPS to decide on prosecution, and if the accompanying prosecution guidance made clear the scope of the offence, that concern would be overcome.

Creating a new offence of catfishing would have the very desirable effect of making people less likely to steal somebody’s identity online, and it would certainly enable the prosecution of persistent catfish, who cause others such distress, including my constituent and his family over so many years. As yet, we do not even know how many victims that man preyed on or the extent of their emotional distress.

The law has a purpose in reflecting what people know to be wrong and enforcing that through penalties against the person who breaks the law. Catfishing is wrong. As I said earlier, there are huge positives about the internet and the digital revolution, such as instant access to information, the ability to keep in touch with friends and family across the world, and the ability to share interests with people thousands of miles away. There are currently 37 million users of Facebook in the UK, which is 65% of the population over the age of 10. That is a massive number and it is growing. The challenge is to harness the positives of the internet and balance them with the need to protect and safeguard people

from predators. That is not an easy task. People need to be informed and be responsible, but we as a Parliament have a role, as have social media platforms. The digital charter and the Green Paper provide an opportunity both for the development of a real partnership between legislators and technology companies, in order to protect users from aggressive and harmful predators, and for subsequent legislation to outlaw the menace of catfishing.

4.16 pm

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) on securing the debate. I know that this is an important issue for her and for her constituent, Mr Peacock. I am glad that she has brought it to the attention of the House, and I welcome the opportunity both to raise awareness of the problem and, as she has done, to set out clearly the legal position and what might be done about it.

The UK is a world leader in the fight against online abuse, exploitation and harmful content. We take the approach of working in partnership with the technology industry, using legislation where necessary, and we also work with groups across society to ensure that behaviour that would not be tolerated offline cannot thrive online. That is the principle that underpins the internet safety strategy, which is part of the wider digital charter that the hon. Lady mentioned. I listened to her contribution, and I will endeavour to address all the points that she raised in my response.

I will start by saying that I agree with her about the vital need to balance freedom and responsibility online, so that we can enjoy all the benefits of the internet but try to mitigate the harms and harmful practices that the internet has allowed to come about.

**Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con):** Like the Minister, I first pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) for an absolutely superb exposition not only of her constituent’s case but of the wider situation.

Members listening to and participating in this debate would like the Minister to address a couple of points. First, there is no excuse whatsoever for people taking someone else’s identity online. Such behaviour is reprehensible and creates two potential victims. The hon. Member for Stockport outlined how the law has proved to be absolutely deficient so far in this area. I am not one for jumping to legal remedy, but the lack of legal redress for her constituent is obvious, and the Government need to look at that situation carefully and sympathetically.

**Matt Hancock:** That is an important point, and I will come on to it later.

The internet brings benefits, but also the new challenges that we are considering. The central point is that fraud, whether it is committed online or offline, can cause serious damage, and fraud includes identity theft. Victims can suffer both financial and emotional harm, and we know that fraudsters not only make money but exploit social relationships. Both those things need to be taken seriously.

The Fraud Act 2006 already includes offences that would apply to anyone who assumes a false or non-existent identity to commit fraud. In particular, section 2 sets out the crime of fraud by false representation, which would cover a person pretending to be someone else for

[*Matt Hancock*]

the purposes of making a gain for himself or another. That obviously applies in the online world, too. The use of a false identity for fraudulent purposes is a crime, but identify theft in and of itself is not a criminal offence, which speaks to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Lord) raised about taking someone else's identity. That is the situation as we find it.

Perhaps I should go through some of the things the Government are considering to try to address the problem. First, there is the question of raising awareness of identity fraud. Identity fraud and wider cyber-crime are important issues. We need to ensure that people understand the safer behaviours they can use online. The hon. Member for Stockport mentioned the UK Safer Internet Centre and Get Safe Online, which provide advice on relationship scams and online dating issues. Get Safe Online is an independent organisation funded by industry and Government to ensure that there is a place to go for high-quality advice. Often even basic research, such as checking social media sites or using search facilities, can help in checking whether a person is actually who they say they are.

We expect websites, including social media companies, to respond quickly to reports of harmful content and abusive behaviour on their networks. That includes having easy-to-use reporting tools and robust processes in place to respond promptly when abuse is reported, including the suspension or termination of the accounts of those who do not comply with acceptable use policies. As the hon. Lady said, social media companies are taking some action using people and artificial intelligence, but it is clearly not solving the whole problem.

We have taken action to tackle online harms through legislation where necessary, including in relation to cyber-stalking, harassment and perpetrators using grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. We have introduced a new law making the fast-growing incidence of revenge porn a specific criminal offence, which is what the hon. Lady is seeking. The most relevant legislation is the Malicious Communications Act 1988, which contains the offence of sending material, including electronic communications, to another person that is false and known or believed to be false by the sender, with the purpose of causing distress or anxiety to the recipient or any other person to whom it is intended to be communicated. The Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 made changes to that offence, and to section 127 of the Communications Act 2003. The changes were aimed at ensuring that people who commit those offences are prosecuted and properly punished. Where there is emotional abuse, it might be captured under the domestic abuse offence of controlling or coercive behaviour. That is the legal position.

The Crown Prosecution Service has revised its guidelines on social media to incorporate new and emerging crimes being committed online. Advice was added to the guidelines about the use of false online profiles and websites with false and damaging information. For example, it may be a criminal offence if a profile is created under the name of the victim with fake information uploaded that, if believed, could damage their reputation and humiliate them. Whether the CPS prosecutes any offence will depend on it meeting the evidential and public interest tests in the "Code for Crown Prosecutors".

The Digital Economy Act 2017 requires us to publish a code of practice for social media companies. We have not yet published it, but we are required to, so we are working on it. The code of practice will include guidance on arrangements for notification by users; the process for dealing with notifications; terms and conditions in relation to those arrangements and processes; and the giving of information to the public about the action providers take against harmful behaviour. We will be consulting on that shortly.

The hon. Lady said that no one is seeking to end anonymity. It is interesting that on some social media sites anonymity is not allowed or made very difficult, but that is not true across the board. For instance, we welcome Facebook's real name policy, which requires all its users to provide their real and full name when signing up. Claiming to be another person, creating a false presence or creating multiple profiles goes against Facebook's terms and conditions, but that is not the case for all social media sites. Policing such things is incredibly important, but there is collaboration between social media sites and dating sites to link up online presences. For example, Tinder allows users to link their accounts with other forms of social media, such as Facebook or Instagram. That can help, and we welcome such things, but it is not necessarily for Government to tell social networks how their facilities should work. The very nature of social networks is that they are designed for people to share information, but all social networks are expected to act responsibly to protect the privacy of users. Getting the balance right between freedom and safety online is a key part of the internet safety strategy and the digital charter.

**Mr Lord:** I have been listening carefully to the Minister's remarks. A minute or so ago, I think he said that if the victim—in other words, the person whose identity has been stolen—has reputational damage, that is potentially a criminal offence. I cannot think of anything worse than that damage. In this case, it was proven that this man's identity was taken and that multiple women—perhaps many women—were contacted and asked for graphic and sexual images of themselves.

*Ann Coffey indicated assent.*

**Mr Lord:** I see the hon. Lady is nodding. Either the law is deficient, or the police and the CPS are giving the wrong advice to her constituent. Things need to be tightened up.

**Matt Hancock:** As I said, the CPS guidance in this area has been updated, because technology moves fast and the CPS has to update its guidance and interpretation of the law from time to time. My hon. Friend is exactly right in what he said and in reporting what I said, which will be in *Hansard*, but I said it as a conditional—such activity could be a criminal offence, because it depends on potential prosecutions. It is not for this place to determine guilt or innocence; it is for this place to determine what the law should be.

The guidance was updated fairly recently, and we need to see the impact of that, but my hon. Friend should rest assured that we put in place the internet safety strategy to look broadly at the impact of the internet and ensure that we protect the freedom, innovations and magnificent improvements that it brings to many areas of life, while doing that in a safe way that protects

people from harm. Freedom exists within a framework of protecting others from harm, hence why the internet safety strategy will look into all these issues. Since I am responsible for that strategy and have heard the debate today and looked into the case in preparing for the debate, I will ensure that the issue of catfishing is considered.

There have been movements in this area, and I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Stockport and my hon. Friend the Member for Woking to ensure that the victims of catfishing, who can suffer both financial and emotional harm, have their voices properly heard. They need a strong response to ensure that the law is properly and appropriately up to date to deal with the challenges that the internet has brought in this area and in this case. We have to learn the lessons. I hope that I have provided assurance that we take harm caused online extremely seriously, and I look forward to working with the hon. Lady to find the solution.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## British Prisoners in Iran

4.30 pm

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered British prisoners in Iran.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Many hon. Members, and many people watching the debate across the world, will be aware in some sort of manner of my constituent Nazanin Ratcliffe. The reason I called this debate—why I think it is important to discuss the issue in the House—is that many hon. Members here and people around the world may not know the details of Nazanin's condition and that of other such prisoners who are detained in Iran at the moment.

Nazanin Ratcliffe, her husband Richard and daughter Gabriella lived in West Hampstead until April last year. Nazanin went to work every day in a charity. On the weekends, Richard and Nazanin would take their daughter to play in a soft play area in the Sherriff Centre opposite West Hampstead tube. They would play on the swings in a park in Fortune Green, near my house. The biggest worry in their lives in the early months of last year was which school Gabriella would go to when she grew up. Their situation was not any different to many of the young families who live in my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn.

Last year, Nazanin, a British citizen, went to Iran on holiday and took her daughter Gabriella, who was then two years old and is also a British citizen, to see Nazanin's parents in Tehran. After two weeks, they decided to return home to London. Nazanin was detained at the airport in Tehran and the daughter was placed with the grandparents.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Nazanin is a British citizen and I understand that she also has Iranian citizenship. Obviously, the Iranians do not recognise her British citizenship. As far as they are concerned, she is Iranian, so we have a real problem in trying to influence the Iranian authorities. Have I got that wrong?

**Tulip Siddiq**: That is no excuse for evading responsibility for a young mother, a British citizen, who has been detained in Iran, and a three-year-old daughter who has been separated from her mother and father. Those excuses are used by the Government to evade responsibility.

**Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): I apologise, Mr Hollobone, as I will have to leave this debate early for another engagement. I congratulate the hon. Lady on introducing this timely and important debate. Is it not the case that Nazanin Ratcliffe's situation is symptomatic of a regime that is systematically abusing human rights? If the Supreme Leader and the re-elected President Rouhani want to learn anything, they should look back to the history of ancient Persia and King Cyrus, who founded the first ever fundamental charter of human rights, a facsimile of which currently sits in the UN building in New York. They should look back for leadership—and also look forward and get into the international norms of human rights, not just for British or joint citizens but for Iranian citizens as well.

**Tulip Siddiq:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. There are problems with Iran as a whole in terms of human rights. In this debate, I will concentrate on my constituent Nazanin, and Kamal Foroughi, who the hon. Gentleman may be aware of.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab):** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Nazanin's sister-in-law lives in my constituency. She sent me a letter signed by a number of my constituents. It says:

"As part of her family we have been tirelessly campaigning for the British Government to do more than just raising their concern about her treatment and the effective abandonment of her young daughter Gabriella in Iran."

Does my hon. Friend join me in calling on the British Government to do far more?

**Tulip Siddiq:** I will call on the British Government to do a lot more.

**John Howell (Henley) (Con) *rose*—**

**Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab) *rose*—**

**Tulip Siddiq:** I am going to make some progress before taking interventions. I know that a lot of hon. Members want to come in and I will take interventions. Before I do that, I want to outline the plight of my constituent Nazanin.

Gabriella's short life has already been spent in exile. After they were unlawfully detained at the airport, what followed was a shambolic process of secretive courts, secretive trials and secretive convictions. Nazanin was placed in solitary confinement, in a room one and a half metres square, with no window and no natural light, and with no access to lawyers or to her family. Before Nazanin went to prison, she was in perfectly good health. We then found out that she had suffered from arthritis in her neck and body. There were times when her limbs stopped working and she could not move for periods of time. She suffered from weight loss and hair loss. She was often denied access to medical treatment. The one time she did have access to a specialist, he said that Nazanin needed urgent hospitalisation.

**Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con):** I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. I am particularly concerned about the continued incarceration of my constituent Roya Nobakht, who is being held in Evin prison, having been charged with gathering and participation with intent to commit crime against national security, due to a comment on Facebook. Will the hon. Lady join me in calling on all the authorities to ensure that appropriate medical attention and health assistance is always available for our constituents?

**Tulip Siddiq:** I will mention the hon. Lady's constituent later in my speech. I agree with her about access to medical treatment, but it is not just physical treatment, as hon. Members will be aware. Mr Hollobone, I am sure you will agree that if a woman is separated from her husband, her daughter and her family, it has an impact on her mental health as well. Through the monitored conversations that Nazanin has with her family, we are aware that she has been suicidal and has gone on hunger strike.

**Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab):** Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband, has immediate family in my constituency. The way Nazanin has been treated is dreadful. Will my hon. Friend also consider how Richard has been treated, since he is now separated not only from his wife but from his daughter?

**Tulip Siddiq:** Richard Ratcliffe lives about 10 minutes down the road from me. Theirs is a family I can relate to. It is like many young families in my constituency. I am pleased to say that Richard is in the Public Gallery today listening to the debate. He has been tirelessly campaigning for the release of his wife and daughter since they were detained.

**Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con):** I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for securing the debate. She is well aware of the circumstances in Iran of Mr Foroughi, whose son is a constituent of mine; both families have been working very closely together. She makes an eloquent point about the humanitarian treatment of the detainees, in particular the medical treatment. Does she agree that it is not just that they should get treatment but that once the assessment has been undertaken or the treatment has been given, the results should be shared with the family? I know that in Mr Foroughi's case the trauma has been increased by the lack of knowledge of the outcome of the medical examination.

**Tulip Siddiq:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for coming with me to deliver a petition to the Foreign Secretary. I agree that the toll taken on the families of those who are held in Iran, who have no contact with their families other than monitored calls, is really shown when speaking to and meeting members of the families. That is, if people bother to meet with them.

Thousands of people in the world have spoken out because of the sheer level of injustice in Nazanin's case. Led by Richard Ratcliffe, organisations such as Amnesty International, Redress and Change.org have galvanised thousands of people to campaign for the release of Nazanin. At this time, almost a million people have signed a petition saying that Nazanin should be released. Six UN rapporteurs have also said that Nazanin should be released, and the European Parliament has adopted a resolution to say that Nazanin and other EU citizens with dual nationalities should be released.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this issue to the House of Commons and asking the Government to do something about it. Last November, an article in *The Sunday Times* suggested that these political prisoners were being tortured and, more importantly, that Iran seeks a ransom from the British Government of £400 million. What does my hon. Friend make of that? Surely it is diabolical, to say the least.

**Tulip Siddiq:** That is very worrying. The problem is that, when the families speak to prisoners of conscience in Iran, the calls are heavily monitored and there is no freedom to express exactly what is happening. It is all shrouded in secrecy, so there is no real evidence of what is going on behind closed doors. It is no surprise that the UN working group on arbitrary detention said that the detention was unlawful, arbitrary and against international law.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have listened to that shocking case. Does she agree that it is incumbent on our Government to do far more to seek the release of those people?

**Tulip Siddiq:** My hon. Friend anticipates the conclusion of my speech, when I will ask the Government and the Minister to do more to release not just Nazanin but Mr Foroughi, Roya and all other prisoners of conscience who have been held in Iran for so long. I have tried my best to raise this matter in the House as much as possible with the two Foreign Secretaries who have been in office in the time that Nazanin has been in prison. This is the second Minister with responsibility for the middle east I have addressed about this issue. I also raised it at Prime Minister's questions, and the Prime Minister said that she had raised the case with the Iranian President, but she did not go into whether she would call for Nazanin's release.

**John Howell:** I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this important debate. She is being very generous with her time. She is describing a scandalous systematic abuse of human rights in Iran. Does she accept that, when the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 was put together, we missed an opportunity to put a human rights clause in there? In the two years since it was signed, there has been no improvement at all in Iran's activities.

**Tulip Siddiq:** I agree that it was a missed opportunity, but there have been other big missed opportunities, including a visit by diplomats to Evin prison, which I shall talk about later.

To mark Nazanin's 100 days of detention, Richard Ratcliffe and I went to No. 10 when David Cameron was Prime Minister and handed in a petition. With the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), we went to the Foreign Secretary's office to deliver a petition signed by 261 MPs and peers calling for Nazanin's release. I have tried to raise this issue as much as possible in the House, especially during the International Women's Day debate, in which the rights of women were examined over and over by Members of the Opposition but Nazanin's case was largely ignored. It has been raised in the House several times, and people are worried about it, but the Government, to their shame, have not echoed the calls for Nazanin's release.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the elements of this case that the family cannot understand is why the Foreign Secretary and the former Foreign Secretary have not taken the time to meet Richard and the family? I know Ministers have, but surely the Foreign Secretary can give a case of this seriousness some of his personal time.

**Tulip Siddiq:** That is something the families have raised with me over and over again. Why will the Foreign Secretary not meet with the families? Let me be clear: we do not doubt the sincerity of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff, but the fact is that this is not working. The Foreign Secretary needs to meet the families.

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. She is being very generous with her time.

It seems to me that the Foreign Office has behaved somewhat defensively in relation to this case and others. Given that there are 600,000 dual nationals in Britain, this is not going to be a single issue. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need urgently to develop a policy on diplomatic support for dual nationals? Currently, we seem to be responding to the Iranian Government's appalling policies and behaviour with poor treatment.

**Tulip Siddiq:** I am highlighting just one case, but there are many more involving people with dual nationalities. At the end of the day, they are still British citizens, and we have to give them the respect and time they deserve.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Tulip Siddiq:** Just before I do, I would like to ask the Minister a few questions, which I hope he will answer in his speech. First, it remains incomprehensible that our Government are yet to call for Nazanin's release, and that they have failed to join the UN in maintaining her innocence. As I said, 261 MPs and peers signed a letter seeking the release of Nazanin, Kamal Foroughi and Roya Nobakht. Will the Government finally join them today?

**Mr Carmichael:** The hon. Lady is making a compelling case. It is perhaps unsurprising that Iran is not receptive to the United Kingdom Government's overtures, but may I remind her and the Minister that we have many allies in the region, and that we could be doing more to get them to assist us in making representations to Iran in that regard?

**Tulip Siddiq:** This is a matter of life and death, and we should be relying on any allies and friends we have in the region to try to get our prisoners of conscience released.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend think, therefore, that it might be useful for the Foreign Office to talk to Ministers in the Department for International Trade, who seem to be intent on developing a relationship with Iran? If they can speak about trade, perhaps we can talk about human rights.

**Tulip Siddiq:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a good point, as usual. That is something I will be asking the Minister to address in his conclusion.

Secondly, given the seriousness with which the Government say they are treating Nazanin's case, is it acceptable that the Foreign Secretary is yet to meet with her family? They are told that he raises concerns with Foreign Minister Zarif, but a meeting would reassure them of progress. Will the Minister help me to get a meeting between the families of those prisoners of conscience and the Foreign Secretary?

Thirdly, last year, Amnesty International produced a report on Iran's prisons, which highlighted 17 cases in which

"The Iranian authorities are callously toying with the lives of political prisoners by denying them adequate medical care—putting them at risk of irreversible damage to their health or even death".

Will the Minister therefore clarify the role of the 45 diplomats who recently went on a visit to Evin prison—the very prison in which Nazanin is being

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held—and were given a tour to show them how well prisoners are treated? That consular team, which is denied access to Nazanin and Kamal Foroughi because they are dual nationals, was sitting literally outside the cell in which Nazanin is being held, exchanging pleasantries, drinking refreshments and taking photos, and yet they did not help her. Did they ask to see her? If not, why not? Does the Minister agree that it is outrageous for our Government to take part in a public relations stunt, in which diplomats go to Evin prison and take pictures at the very location where human rights abuses are taking place? I would like the Minister to respond to that question. Will he ask for a full report from the embassy in Tehran, which was reinstated recently?

I would like to ask the Minister some broader policy questions, which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) raised, about the implications for those with dual nationalities. Nazanin has been denied justice at every turn during her 14-month ordeal, but she is not the only British dual national to be detained in Iran—Kamal Foroughi and Roya have already been mentioned. The treatment of British prisoners in Iran speaks to the need for a review of the Government's broader policy towards dual nationals who are detained abroad. If we accept the status quo, we are accepting that the way Nazanin and Kamal are being treated is okay. That is not acceptable for many Members of this House.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and on her eloquent speech. She is keen for the Government to act after a period of delay. Would it help her to know that many constituents have written to me and to my Scottish National party colleagues, so many British citizens in Scotland are keen for the Government to act? A couple of weeks ago, I wrote to the Secretary of State about that on behalf of the SNP, and I am waiting to hear back from him. Would it help the hon. Lady to know that constituents of hon. Members throughout the United Kingdom are anxious for those people with dual British citizenship to be assisted by our Government?

**Tulip Siddiq:** I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her intervention. A full Public Gallery and the number of emails received by hon. Members show how strongly people feel about the sheer injustice of this case. Facebook groups of which I am a member, Hampstead Mums and Mums of West Hampstead, normally never get in touch with their MP, but they have been in touch about this case, because it resonates with people and it is so unfair—the Government need to do more.

**Mims Davies** (Eastleigh) (Con): I know the commitment that the hon. Lady has to raising awareness of this case. As chair of the all-party group for women in Parliament, I have seen her raising the issue in the Chamber. Constituents have also written to me, as have others from across the country, in support of this debate and to express concern about the heartbreaking and awful situation of a very small child and her family. May I take this opportunity to support the hon. Lady, and to ask the Minister, who I know is extremely caring, to ensure that our Government do everything in their power to make changes in this and the other cases we have heard about this afternoon?

**Tulip Siddiq:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and her support. I thank all Members from across the House who have pledged their support. This is not a party political issue; this is about constructive working to ensure that we achieve the release of prisoners of conscience who are our citizens.

I have a few more questions for the Minister to answer in his summing up. Will the Government state that there should be no exception to taking clearly documented action on behalf of all UK nationals who face breaches of their human rights? According to a 2011 report by the Office for National Statistics—my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham mentioned this figure—more than 600,000 people living in Britain hold another passport. They are of course not at risk of being detained, but we need to address deficiencies in our law to ensure equal protection for dual nationals.

Will the Government commit to making complaints about all breaches of the Vienna convention on consular relations, and consider bringing cases before the International Court of Justice if such breaches continue? Furthermore, will the Government bring the strongest possible pressure to bear on Iran to cease its pattern of arbitrary detention of dual nationals? Will the Government support and work towards the implementation of any findings of the United Nations monitoring bodies concerning UK nationals?

Finally, will the Government accept that there is a fundamental accountability gap between what the Foreign Office says it is doing and what the families can know is happening to their relatives? Families cannot be left in the dark about the framework of work that exists when their relatives are treated in such a way. A Foreign Office approach of discretion encourages inertia, but also defines the kind of foreign policy that the Government are mandated to deliver.

The Conservative manifesto states that the party believes in the values of

“freedom, democracy, tolerance and the rule of law”

around the world. When I asked about this case at Prime Minister's questions, she said that she was concerned about the effect that detention was having on Nazanin. Pat Frankland, who is apparently a good friend of the Prime Minister, said that her politics and morals are based on Christian values, of being decent, “not doing people down” and looking after people, so I ask the Prime Minister, and the Minister, to do the decent thing. I am asking them to do more—to do more to restore this family who have been ripped apart by a senseless miscarriage of justice; to do more to bring this toddler back together with her family, her mother and father, before even more of her childhood is blighted; and to do more to bring Nazanin, Kamal and Roya home to the UK where they belong.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. The debate finishes at 5.30 pm. Four Members have written to me requesting to speak. I have to call the Front Benchers no later than seven minutes past 5, and there will be five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesman, five minutes for the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister. Tulip Siddiq will then have three minutes to sum up at the end. I will therefore have to impose a three-minute time limit on our four speakers, the first of whom will be John Howell.

4.54 pm

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on her excellent speech and on securing this brilliant debate. She did not comment on another British value—a belief in human rights. I have a fundamental belief in human rights, but Iran is not a place where human rights are prevalent.

Human rights were not discussed at all during the P5+1 nuclear negotiations with Iran, in spite of Iran having one of the worst human rights records on this planet. In per capita terms, Iran leads the world in executions, and overall is second only to China. In Iran, moreover, it is mandatory for all women to veil their hair, homosexuality is illegal—I could go on and on.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and to the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing this crucial debate. My hon. Friend is making some important points, and I want to add one. An important human right is that of legal representation to ensure access to justice. One of the most horrifying aspects of both Nazanin and Kamal's cases is the absence of that legal advice. Will he comment on that?

**John Howell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to stress that point.

At least three British citizens are detained in Iran. I have heard that a fourth person, whose name I do not know, has also been detained. We will have to see who that person is. Those four people stand in great contrast to the four Americans who were released from Iranian prisons in 2016 as part of a prisoner swap that came about following the Iran nuclear agreement. Nothing similar has occurred with regard to those Britons who have been detained in Iran over the same period.

In the few seconds I have left, I make the point that the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn fully identified the reasons why we need those people released. It is fine to hear warm words from the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, but we need to see action on those words. We need a real release of prisoners from Iran as quickly as possible.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. I have had a late request to speak from a Member who has a constituent interest, so I will have to cut everyone's time limit from three minutes to two minutes to get him in.

4.57 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on putting a very good case forward. When I consider international issues, there is a phrase that resounds in my heart: evil triumphs when good people do nothing. We cannot fix the world's problems, but I believe that we have a role to play in this case and that we can bring about change.

Nazanin Ratcliffe has been jailed for five years under secret charges and is being held in solitary confinement. In September 2016, the Foreign Secretary said that the “upgrade in diplomatic relations” between the UK and Iran would provide an opportunity to raise consular cases

“about which I am deeply concerned”.

Will the Minister further outline how he believes that our recently restored diplomatic ties have enabled us to influence such matters?

May I also put a marker down for Kamal Foroughi, who has been arrested and kept in solitary confinement in Iran for six years after being convicted of spurious charges? Iran has been desperately hard on him and in detaining British citizens and denying them their basic rights.

Iran executed some 977 people in 2015 and an estimated one per day in 2016. The regime continues to execute juvenile offenders, in violation of international law. If there are human rights abuses, this is a country that does them with a vengeance. It executed 73 juvenile offenders between 2005 and 2015, and girls are held criminally accountable from the age of nine. The Government deem them to have reached puberty at that age, compared with 15 for boys. I ask this question again: where are the human rights in Iran, given what it does to young children from the age of nine? The nuclear deal failed to address a number of critical issues. I respect the Minister greatly, as he knows, but I ask him that question again given Iran's human rights abuses and the fact that it gave Hezbollah, which controls Lebanon, rocket factories. These are deep issues that we are all concerned about. The human rights abuse in Iran is despicable, and young people of all ages are held in little regard. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.59 pm

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this important debate. It seems that this matter hinges on dual nationality, which is the barrier to the British Government being able to provide the services that we would expect them to provide to any British citizen. That is not good enough. We need to find ways forward.

I respect the Minister and his predecessor, who have always honestly set out that they are doing what they can diplomatically. The alternative, which I am sure no one would advocate, is to send in gunboats. The reality of the situation is that we either use force or work through the appropriate channels, as the Minister's predecessor did and I know he will too. I simply ask him, exactly as the hon. Lady did, to do more. I ask him to redouble our efforts to ensure that the Iranian Government are under no illusion about where we stand, and to continue to provide as much consular assistance as possible under the diplomatic arrangements that we have.

I turn to a slightly different point, which was made earlier. The Governments of the P5+1 made an agreement to lift sanctions, and the majority of international sanctions were lifted, with near-immediate effect, in January 2016. Given that, we have lost the leverage that we need, so I urge the Government to work with our allies—not just those in the region but President Trump in the United States, who criticised that deal for removing leverage.

5.1 pm

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for calling me to make my first speech in Westminster Hall. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) for securing the debate and introducing it in such a comprehensive manner.

[Alex Sobel]

I have received more than 100 emails from constituents about this matter, which shows that the cases of Nazanin and Kamal have touched the hearts of the nation. It is all too common for people to claim that a situation is Kafkaesque, but to me, as an avid reader of Kafka, the similarities between those cases and the case of Josef K. in “The Trial” are all too apparent. Kafka himself described the seeming basis of the Iranian judicial system when he wrote in “The Trial” that “it’s characteristic of this judicial system that a man is condemned not only when he’s innocent but also in ignorance.”

Both Nazanin and Kamal were charged and convicted without adequate representation or due process—indeed, they were condemned in ignorance.

Like other hon. Members—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn—I call upon the Foreign Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Minister to press the Iranian Government on a number of issues that my constituents, Amnesty International and I have raised. They should press them to allow Kamal and Nazanin any specialist medical care they may require; give Kamal access to his medical records; apply without discrimination article 58 of the Islamic penal code, which allows for someone to be conditionally released after serving a third of their prison sentence and would ensure the immediate release of Nazanin and Kamal; ensure that Kamal and Nazanin have regular access to a lawyer of their choice; allow them to be in contact with their families, including relatives abroad; and allow them to communicate with British consular officials—although that seems to be a contentious issue. I ask the Minister to respond to those points.

The United Kingdom has a well-deserved international reputation for its justice system. I hope that the Government will press for the most basic justice in Iran for our citizens, whether they are British citizens or dual citizens, and particularly for Kamal and Nazanin. It is clear from the contributions to this debate that that is completely and utterly lacking.

5.3 pm

**Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): Thank you for finding time to accommodate me, Mr Hollobone. I apologise for my lack of proper notice.

I want to talk briefly about the case of Mr Foroughi, whose son is a constituent of mine. I have been involved extensively with the campaign that we have run jointly with the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) to secure the release of Mr Foroughi and others.

There are many similarities between the cases that have been mentioned, but Mr Foroughi is a 78-year-old man. He really is an old man, and he is an ill man. He has been detained for more than 2,000 days. He is the longest-serving European national in a prison in Iran. There are many questions about his detention, but in the short term, there are genuine humanitarian issues for the Iranian Government, principally about his health and the need for them to share his medical files, which would at least provide some comfort.

I know that the British Government have raised this issue at every level. I used to work for Prime Minister David Cameron, and I know that he raised it directly

with his opposite number, as have the current Prime Minister and Ministers at other levels. However, I would be grateful if the Minister addressed three matters that have been brought out during the debate.

First, there are genuine questions about the EU delegation. It seems extraordinary that it could have been just outside where these people were detained, and that has caused a lot of anguish. Secondly and thirdly, on trade and the nuclear deal, I seek guidance, reassurance and information from the Minister about what we are doing to try to leverage opportunities. I was always sceptical about that deal, but I hoped that it would provide an opportunity to improve Iran’s humanitarian record. That does not seem to be happening, so any further guidance that he can give would be gratefully received.

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. The guideline time limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for the Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.6 pm

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to be back in Westminster Hall. I am grateful to the voters of Glasgow North for giving me this opportunity. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this important debate so early in the Parliament.

The cases we have heard about today, particularly those of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi, are of huge concern to constituents and campaigners across the country. Like almost everyone in the room, I have received at least dozens of emails from constituents, individual campaigners and organisations calling for the prisoners to be set free. I pay tribute to those campaigners, and particularly to the families of Nazanin and Kamal, who have to live daily with the reality of their loved ones being imprisoned yet refuse to give up the fight.

I also want to recognise other UK citizens detained overseas whose cases have been discussed before in Westminster Hall. They include Andy Tsege in Ethiopia and other prisoners of conscience around the world, such as Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia, whose wife I had the privilege of meeting during the recent general election campaign. In all these situations, we see a particular injustice and a personal cause that ought to be rectified, but we also see wider questions about the UK’s diplomacy, its foreign policy and, ultimately, its role in the world.

We have heard about the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been detained for more than a year. Her final appeal against her five-year sentence, which was originally handed down in a secret trial on unspecified charges, was rejected in April by the supreme court. We have heard about how she was lifted without warning in Tehran airport, and how her physical and mental health continues to deteriorate during her incarceration. Her employer, Monique Villa, chief executive officer of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, recently told *The Guardian*:

“She is not a spy, but an innocent mother who travelled to Iran only to show her baby to her parents”.

As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe has thousands of supporters across this country. In previous debates, I have mentioned

seeing and hearing the demonstrations that have taken place outside Parliament in solidarity with Nazanin, and both her case and Kamal's have been raised with me by my local Amnesty group, yet the UK Government's response is still lacking. I will ask specific questions, but I note the comments of Nazanin's husband, Richard, who told *The Guardian*:

"As her husband, I can say Nazanin is innocent until I am blue in the face. I have spent a year doing it...But it makes a clear difference that the government"—

that is the UK Government—

"hasn't. It indulges the whisperers."

I turn to the case of Kamal Foroughi—"Grandpa Kamal", as he is known. I had the privilege of meeting Kamran, who is a constituent of the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and is here today. Kamal Foroughi was first detained in 2011 and was convicted at an unfair trial on charges that he did not know about until the day of his trial. His situation has been described by the UN working group on arbitrary detention, which has called for his immediate release, as a "violation of international law". Once again, there are serious concerns about his health and wellbeing, and his access to communication with his family and the outside world has been severely limited. As I said, I had the privilege before the election of meeting Kamran Foroughi, and that brought home to me the human dimension in all this—the personal struggle, the lives affected and the simple wish of the family to have their grandpa brought home.

I echo all the questions that have been asked of the Minister already. As I said, as is so often the case with prisoners of conscience, there are both personal situations and broader policy issues. What engagement have the Government had with the families of the prisoners? What channels of communication remain open to them? Do the Government accept and understand the huge public concern about the cases, and that it is clear from the cross-party show of support from Members that they would have huge support if they stepped up their efforts to secure the release of Nazanin and Kamal?

The Prime Minister recently called on us all to work together, come to consensus and find things we can agree on. Here, surely, is an example of that. We hear repeatedly from Ministers that they raise issues with the Iranian regime—what does "raise" mean? Do they explicitly call for the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Kamal Foroughi? Will the Minister do so here today?

Do the Government pass on the concerns raised in these debates? Do they suggest to the Iranian regime that if they want to continue to build global good will and make progress on the journey they began with the nuclear deal, recognising international concern about their prisoners of conscience would be a big step in that direction? What does that tell us about the UK's wider foreign policy goals? If the Government want to promote a global Britain and show that Britain is still relevant on the world stage, surely securing the release of a young mother and an older grandfather who are its own citizens would be a pretty good place to start.

I echo the comments made by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about the role of our influence with regional allies and by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) about trade deals. We need more than warm words from the Minister.

I hope that when he responds to the debate we will hear about some concrete action that will ultimately help to free Nazanin and Kamal and reunite them with their families.

5.11 pm

**Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), who has secured this timely debate and has never given up on behalf of her constituents—especially Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who is serving that terrible and immoral sentence in the dreadful Evin jail in Tehran. She gave us a comprehensive account of how her constituent happened to be convicted and of her appalling treatment by the Iranian authorities. She was passionate, as always, and she has fought hard for her constituent, who has been denied justice for the past 14 months in detention in Iran.

We have also heard contributions from the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—he was passionate as always—and for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), and from my new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who pointed out that he had received 100 emails from constituents and that the situation really was Kafkaesque. He is absolutely right. I hope the Foreign and Commonwealth Office takes his advice and presses the Iranian Government at least to allow the medical care and attention needed.

We know that Iran does not recognise dual nationality—we have heard that many times this afternoon. It will not allow our diplomats to see dual nationals who are imprisoned in Iran. The Iranian Government view dual nationals with intense suspicion. That is an historical situation, and the United Kingdom is viewed with even more contempt owing to its historical interference in the country. The BBC's Persian service is loathed by Iranian officials. As we know, dual nationals are barred from holding Government positions. The imprisonment of dual nationals has been seen by many as a way of extracting political and financial gains from the countries that dual nationals share their citizenship with.

The *Financial Times* says:

"These arrests are part of the tense power struggle between those who would like to get closer to the US and those who are scared of any impacts of that on Iran's domestic politics...The goal seems to be spreading fears to undermine the government of Rouhani in western states' eyes and foreign businesses."

We know that the Government restored full diplomatic relations with Iran in September 2016, but Kamal Foroughi's son, Kamran, has criticised the United Kingdom for doing so without pushing harder for his father's release as part of the diplomatic normalisation process. I wonder whether the Minister will comment on that.

In April 2017, Amnesty International criticised the Foreign Secretary for his lack of action over Nazanin. Kathy Voss of Amnesty International was quoted in *The Daily Telegraph* as saying:

"It's baffling that the Foreign Secretary still hasn't had a single meeting with Nazanin's family who are of course sick with worry about her."

Nazanin was arrested, as we have heard, by the revolutionary guards at the airport on 3 April 2016, just before she was about to return to the United Kingdom after a family visit. They accused her of fomenting a soft overthrow of the Islamic Republic—a notably common

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

and broad definition of crime—but her husband, Richard Ratcliffe, claims that his wife is being held to be used as a pawn by the Iranian authorities in exchange for unspecified political and financial deals in the UK. He has mentioned in the past that he has been approached by unspecified Iranian officials with offers for Nazanin's release. That is shocking, and I wonder if the Minister could comment on it.

The United Kingdom Government, as we have heard, have not publicly called for Nazanin's release. However, they have stated that they have raised their concerns with the Iranian Government. The shadow Foreign Secretary said on 9 September 2016:

"It is no longer good enough for Downing Street and the Foreign Office to 'raise concerns' about this case. It is time for them to demand answers."

Let me conclude with the words of Richard Ratcliffe, Nazanin's husband, quoted on 2 July:

"I don't think the [UK] government has been protecting us; they have provided consular assistance and they have expressed concerns...but in terms of criticising her treatment and saying it's abuse, they've never said that this does not meet the minimum legal standards, that it's not a fair trial. That this is a nonsense. She's obviously not important enough yet."

I want to remind Members here that Roya Nobakht and Bahman Daroshafaei are also British dual nationals in jail in Tehran.

5.16 pm

**The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt):** As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) on securing this debate? I thank all Members who have spoken—principally my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell), for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). I also thank the Front-Bench spokespeople, particularly the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton), for an appreciation of some of the politics behind this.

I certainly recognise the intense interest in this issue, not only across the parties in this House but among the public in the United Kingdom and beyond. Of course I recognise the deep concern felt about all the cases mentioned today and the huge frustration at the lack of progress. I will try to offer as much clarity as I can and set out what the Government are doing to assist the detainees and their families. I will also explain the limitations on what we can do.

Like everyone else, I wish to see all those mentioned today returned to their families and to the UK. My responsibility and our responsibility is to work in the most effective way we can, in all the circumstances, to achieve that, and to explain what we do and why. I know everyone here would welcome me doing more. I am not sure how much people would welcome me doing something that made life more difficult. That is the dilemma in which we find ourselves.

Let me say what I am trying to do. This issue has been a priority for me since my appointment last month. I spoke to the deputy Foreign Minister of Iran about our prisoners on 21 June and raised the subject again when I met the Iranian ambassador on 6 July. Two days

before that, I met relatives of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and earlier this afternoon I met the family of Mr Foroughi. At both those meetings I assured the families that I would do everything I could for their loved ones. The families also have round-the-clock access to support and assistance from our dedicated Foreign Office officials. I know how much the officials put into this, and I think the families involved know that as well. There is no intention to keep anyone in the dark about anything. There is a limit to how much information we have, but everything that we can communicate is communicated directly to the families. They have 24-hour access to consular officials, and they and all colleagues here have constant access to me.

**Annaliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op):** Will the Minister give way?

**Alistair Burt:** No, because I want to leave time for the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn to speak at the end. I cannot possibly answer all the questions raised. All colleagues who have a question on the table will get an answer by letter, but I want to address as much as possible of what the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn said.

I want to assure all colleagues that we are doing everything we can for our detainees. Our strategy is based on decades of experience—both our own experience and that of international partners—of dealing with Iran. We judge that approach to be in the best interests of those detained, but we keep it under constant review. If our assessment of the right way to handle this is to change, we would consider any alternative courses of action, but for now we judge the approach we are taking to be the most constructive one.

Our ambassador raises the issue of our detainees with the Iranian authorities at every opportunity; he seeks to secure consular access and to ensure their welfare. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have raised all our consular cases with their counterparts and have stressed the importance of resolving them as quickly as possible. My predecessor, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), discussed the issue with the Iranians on numerous occasions, both in London and Tehran. However, we must recognise that there are limitations on what we can do.

I turn now to some of the questions raised by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn, starting with dual nationality. Nationality is a key factor. All the British nationals currently detained in Iran also hold Iranian nationality. Questions of nationality are for individual states to decide. Unlike the UK, Iran does not legally recognise dual nationality. It considers our detainees to be Iranian, which has implications for consular assistance, which are set out in the passports of those with dual nationality. Under international law, states are not obliged to grant consular access to dual nationals, which is why our passports state that the British Government are unable to assist dual nationals in the country of their other nationality.

Our travel advice for Iran reiterates that statement and highlights the additional potential risks for British-Iranian dual nationals travelling there. None the less, we try to help dual nationals in exceptional circumstances. In practice, that is often difficult, as we are finding in Iran. We have repeatedly asked the Iranian authorities to grant us consular access to our dual-national detainees.

However, as Iran considers them to be Iranian, it does not recognise our right of access. We know that other countries face similar difficulties, but we will continue to press for consular access.

Let me turn to some other issues. On publicly calling for the release of the detainees, we are doing everything we can for them, including trying to secure access to them and to ensure their welfare. However, we do that in the way that we judge is in their best interests, and we assess that the approach we are currently taking is the most likely to be in the best interests of all our prisoners in Iran.

As has been stated, there are new opportunities with Iran's opening up. Following the destruction of our own embassy there some years ago, a new embassy has opened and new relationships are opening up. It is a complex country with a complex power structure, as the hon. Member for Leeds North East made clear, but I am hoping to take the opportunity—and I am sure the Government are hoping to take it—to explore what this new chance of a relationship with Iran means, both for us and for them. That will take some time, but it provides the opportunity for contacts to be made in a different way from before. That will supplement the efforts already being made on a regular basis to raise the issue by our consular team and by Ministers at the highest level.

Raising the issue can mean a variety of different things, from just mentioning it at a particular time to, following the development of a relationship, an opportunity to go into the issue further. Some of the issues that we consider here are blindingly obvious, such as how a country is seen by others around the world. We understand that very well. Different aspects of the Iranian Government understand some of that, but not others. We want to make sure that they see an issue like this as we see it, so that they can take the steps that we need to see our nationals returned.

Human rights in Iran generally are another key part of the debate, but what do we do about them? The Government take human rights and the rule of law seriously, and the human rights situation in Iran remains dire. I am putting that on the record, so that we in this Chamber, and the Iranian Government and the Iranian ambassador, who will read the account of the debate, will see it and know exactly what we mean. The human rights situation in Iran remains dire, and we are determined to continue to hold the Iranian Government to account. We frequently release statements condemning the human rights situation in Iran and regularly take action with the international community.

For example, we designated more than 80 Iranians responsible for human rights violations under EU sanctions, helped to establish the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran and strongly support the human rights resolutions regarding Iran at the UN. We believe that continued engagement with Iran on economic development and openness are the best ways to develop our relationship and will give us better leverage to discuss other issues. We do not pursue trade to the exclusion of human rights and the rule of law; they can be, and are, complementary.

We considered very carefully the invitation to visit Evin prison earlier this month. The decision to participate in the tour was taken because we felt it would provide an opportunity to engage directly with prison authorities

regarding the dual-national detainees. We felt that taking this opportunity should be taken, in the best interests of all our detainees and their families. Our consul repeatedly asked to see the British-Iranian detainees but was denied access. The risk of not accepting the invitation was the Iranian authorities saying, "We gave you an opportunity to see the conditions. You didn't take it. What do you expect?" There are occasions when we are trapped if we do and trapped if we don't.

Everyone in the FCO who deals with this—the consular team, which has been in constant contact with the families—knows how hard people are being pressed, but the truth is that this is not a matter in the hands of the UK Government to resolve. If it is to be resolved, it has to be resolved by the Iranian regime, and we have to play a part in making sure that we have done everything we can to facilitate that and make it work. There are different approaches to that. There is a public approach, which people can see; it is right that this issue is brought up here and in the most direct way by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn and all hon. Members who represent those who have been detained, and it is right that this is carried worldwide. However, different groups have different responsibilities, and my responsibility is to do what the Foreign Secretary and I consider to be most effective to secure the return of the detainees to their families. As we can see, that means our having a different approach from that which people might like to see.

All I can say is that, so long as I have the conviction that everything we are doing is as appropriate as it can be and is best designed to get the result we all seek, I will continue to do it. If the Government need to change course, we will, but I will not put an artificial barrier in the way of our progress by doing something that I might subsequently regret. I assure colleagues that we are doing everything we can to seek the result that we all want, but we are doing it in the way that we consider—with our experience of Iran and the experience of those who have worked with Iran for a long time—to be the best way possible. That does not in any way deny the efforts of others to do things in their way and to make sure that the Iranian authorities know how we feel, how the public feel and how the world feels.

We must do the work that we can to ensure the best interests of those who have been detained. That is why we are doing what we are doing, and I pledge to colleagues that I will continue to do what I consider to be in the best interests of those detainees, but I will constantly listen to those with other ideas and to the families, so that we do as much for them as we possibly can.

5.27 pm

**Tulip Siddiq:** I thank the Minister for his constructive response; I must say, he is much more constructive than his predecessor. I welcome his saying that he will look after the interests of the prisoners who have been mentioned in the debate. However, there are a few questions I would still like to hear him answer; perhaps he can write to me. I understand that he did not have time to respond to all of the questions I posed.

We would like a full report on the visit of the 45 diplomats who went to the prison. What kind of resistance was faced when they actually asked to see Nazanin—I am glad they asked to see her—and what response did we

[*Tulip Siddiq*]

give to that? It seems alarming that they would allow the consul on a tour of a prison but now allow them to see the dual-nationality prisoners. The shadow Foreign Secretary and I sent a letter to the Foreign Secretary requesting that he meet the families of the prisoners and he did not respond. Can the Minister convince him to meet them? I would like to be present at that meeting.

Will the Minister write to let me know whether our Government will publicly say that Nazanin is innocent and that we demand her release—and the release of Kamal Foroughi and Roya Nobakht? We would like to know whether the Government believe in their innocence and that they should be released and returned. I understand that there are diplomatic ways in which to apply pressure, but to say that they are innocent and to ask for their release would send a strong signal to the Iranian authorities.

I only have a minute left, so let me take this opportunity to thank all Members who have contributed, particularly

the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden), because he has worked very constructively with me. We all have the same interests at heart: we want to bring our prisoners back to this country, to protect them and to reunite them with their families.

I will put forward a ten-minute rule Bill that will look at how we can offer better protection to dual nationals, because it is not good enough to keep talking about existing laws. Times have changed and more people with dual nationality live in this country than ever, and there has to be some means of protecting and looking after them when they go on holiday. They are British citizens, they are proud to be British and are part of the country we live in, so I would appreciate cross-party support for that Bill to see if we can change some of the legislation.

5.30 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*



# Written Statements

Tuesday 18 July 2017

## CABINET OFFICE

### Senior Salaries Review Body Recommendations

**The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green):** The 39th report of the Senior Salaries Review Body is being published today. This makes recommendations about the pay of the senior civil service, senior military officers, the judiciary, and executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies.

The Government greatly value the important work that public servants do in delivering essential public services. We understand the need to ensure that we are able to recruit, retain and motivate staff with the right skills and experience. However, there is a trade-off between pay and jobs in many public services, and pay restraint is one of the many difficult choices the Government have had to make to help put the UK's public finances back on track. Senior public sector workers, like everyone else, will have to continue to play their part to ensure we deliver job security for working people across the country. This will help us to strike the right balance between protecting people's jobs, being fair to public sector workers and being fair to those who pay for it.

#### *Senior Military Officers*

The Government have accepted the recommendation of a 1% increase to senior military salaries with effect from 1 April 2017. The Government have also accepted the recommendation that there is no change to the current pay differentials for senior medical and dental officers.

#### *Judiciary*

The Government accept the review body's recommendation of a 1% salary increase for the Judiciary.

#### *Senior Civil Service*

The Government accept the recommendation on developing innovative pay and workforce proposals. The Government support the development of workforce strategies and supporting reward objectives within public sector pay policy. The Government agree that there is a need to target resources to address any specific recruitment and retention issues that arise and that there should be a greater focus on the total reward package. This will ensure the right balance between ongoing pay restraint and the need to attract and retain people of the right calibre.

The Government accept the recommendation on using the 1% award in full. Workforce groups will implement the average 1% award in full unless there is a strong rationale to do otherwise.

In line with the SSRB recommendation, the Government will keep under review the evidence for making pension packages more flexible, alongside the fiscal implications.

The Government accept the recommendation to conduct a review of the Senior Civil Service pay framework. The Government invite the Senior Salaries Review Body to

contribute towards the review of the Senior Civil Service pay framework that the Cabinet Office is currently undertaking. The Cabinet Office would welcome any expertise that the Senior Salaries Review Body can provide on this review over the coming months. The intention is that the outcome of this review will underpin fully considered proposals for a more strategic approach to Senior Civil Service pay in the Government's evidence to the SSRB, with the potential that some recommendations could be implemented from April 2018.

#### *Executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies*

The Government accept the recommendation that the 1% available for basic increases this year is used in full for executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies, unless there is a strong and explicit rationale to do otherwise.

The Government accept the Senior Salaries Review Body's recommendation that Arm's Length Bodies use the whole available budget for non-consolidated awards for the top 25% performers and that any individual Arm's Length Bodies who decide not to use their full allocation must make a formal case to the Department of Health Remuneration Committee explaining the rationale for their decision.

The Government accept the SSRB's recommendation to develop a coherent proposition on how best to set the pay of executive and senior managers in the Department of Health's Arm's Length Bodies in the future and agrees with the recommendation that executive and senior managers are removed from the Senior Salaries Review Body remit while a scoping exercise is undertaken to consider the inclusion of very senior managers in the wider NHS.

The Government accept the Senior Salaries Review Body's recommendation to give active consideration to developing innovative pay and workforce proposals that are focused on maximising outcomes for lowest cost rather than limiting basic pay increases across the board and will consider proposals within public sector pay policy.

The Government accept the recommendation to closely examine the options for making pension packages more flexible where there is a compelling case to do so.

Copies have been laid in the Vote Office, the Printed Paper Office and the Libraries of both Houses. We are grateful to the chairman and members of the Review Body for their work on this year's report.

[HCWS57]

## TREASURY

### Childcare Services Roll-out

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** We know the cost of childcare is an important issue for working families—that is why we have made childcare more affordable, given parents more choice and raised standards of provision, supporting parents into work and helping them with the costs they face.

In total, the Government will provide over £6 billion of funding per annum in childcare support by 2019-20 to working families and those on low incomes. For parents

across the UK, tax-free childcare will cut childcare costs by up to £2,000 per year for each child under 12 years old, or £4,000 per year for disabled children under 17 years old.

We introduced the childcare service on 21 April 2017 by accepting applications from parents of children under four years old (born on or after 1 September 2013). On 14 July the Government extended the service to a cohort of parents with children born on or after 1 April 2013 to ensure that these parents can access the 30 hours offer for their four year old child before the start of the school term in September. This enables even more families to benefit from the Government's childcare offer and helps busy families with children under five who want to claim a 30 hours free childcare place for September.

The Childcare Choices website brings together all the Government's childcare schemes in one place for the first time, and eligible parents can apply for tax-free childcare and 30 hours free childcare through a single and simple application.

They can apply for all their children at the same time once their youngest child qualifies, saving time and avoiding the need to provide the same information twice. All eligible parents will be able to apply for tax-free childcare by the end of 2017.

Parents can apply via the childcare service for both 30 hours' free childcare and tax-free childcare. The application is straightforward and can be accessed via the childcare choices website at: <https://www.childcarechoices.gov.uk/>.

To date, over 150,000 parents have successfully applied to the service and over 45,000 childcare providers have signed up.

[HCWS68]

## ECOFIN

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Brussels on 11 July 2017. The UK was represented by Sir Tim Barrow (Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the European Union). European Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

### *Early morning session*

The Eurogroup President briefed Ministers on the outcomes of the 10 July meeting of the Eurogroup, and Ministers discussed the current economic situation.

### *Current financial service legislative proposals*

The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

### *Mandatory disclosure rules*

The Commission gave a presentation on the proposal for a Council directive amending directive regarding the mandatory automatic exchange of information in the field of taxation in relation to reportable cross-border arrangements.

### *Presentation of the work programme of the Estonian presidency*

The new Estonian presidency of the Council of the European Union presented their work programme for the next six months period.

### *Commission mid-term review of the capital markets union action plan*

The Council endorsed Council conclusions on the mid-term review of the capital markets union action plan.

### *Non-performing loans*

ECOFIN held an exchange of views on policy responses to the non-performing loans situation and endorsed Council conclusions.

[HCWS66]

## COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Building Safety

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid):** I would like to update the House on progress with the identification and combustibility testing of Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding on high-rise buildings. To date, 259 residential buildings over 18 metres have had samples tested by the Building Research Establishment (BRE), tested by proxy (e.g. are known to be of identical cladding) or have taken their cladding down. None of those tested have passed the limited combustibility test. On the advice of the independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, the BRE are now undertaking system testing that will help establish how different types of ACM panels in combination with different types of insulation behave in a fire.

The figure of 259 includes other residential buildings (such as those in the private sector) but today, I would like to update in particular on those owned by local authorities and housing associations.

It is vital to support building owners in ensuring the safety of their residents. This is why the Government, on the advice of the independent Expert Advisory Panel on Building Safety, have offered free of charge testing by the BRE for all residential buildings above 18 metres in height. Local authorities and housing associations were asked to identify residential blocks with ACM cladding and then to submit samples of that cladding material for testing.

Local authorities and housing associations initially told us that around 530 towers were thought to have similar cladding to that seen at Grenfell. They have subsequently been physically inspecting the wall materials present on their buildings, and have collected further information which suggests that the actual number of towers that have ACM is much lower. Based on the most recent information we have received, we now think that no more than 240 local authority and housing association towers have ACM cladding and so need to be tested.

Aggregating information provided by local authorities, indicates that 46 towers across 16 local authorities have ACM cladding. Of these, 42 have been directly tested through BRE and the other four are from identical towers. This means all 46 local authority owned towers with ACM cladding have now had their core material tested for combustibility. All samples have failed the limited combustibility test.

Based on the latest information provided by housing associations, up to 194 towers across 50 housing associations have ACM cladding. Of these, 142 have been tested through BRE, through proxy tests or have taken cladding down. We have been told that 12 towers have sent, or will send, their samples to BRE for testing this week. There are 40 towers owned by housing associations who have not confirmed whether ACM cladding is present nor sent ACM samples for testing.

	Total ACM towers	Total tested by BRE, by proxy test or with cladding removed	Sent for testing this week	Local authorities or housing associations still to confirm whether ACM cladding is present
Local authority (16 LAs)	46	46	0	0
	Max			
Housing association (50 HAs)	194	142	12	40
	Max			
Total	240	188	12	40

Some of these housing associations say that they are still investigating the cladding on their towers. Five weeks is too long to still be investigating. We expect these investigations to be complete and relevant samples sent for testing immediately. There is no excuse for any housing association not to have completed its investigation of cladding materials.

To ensure we have a complete picture, we strongly encourage all building owners to provide data where it is currently incomplete or needs updating. Together with the Local Government Association and National Housing Federation we are urgently following up to obtain full information.

[HCWS69]

### Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

**The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid):** On 26 February 2015, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the then Secretary of State for Education exercised their intervention powers as Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council was failing to comply with its best value duty. They made this decision having considered the report of the inspection by Dame Louise Casey CB and advice note from Sir Michael Wilshaw (then Her Majesty's chief inspector of education, children's services and skills). Due to the extent and the gravity of the failings in the council, the then Secretaries of State decided that the intervention should be broad and wide ranging. They directed that commissioners should exercise all executive functions of the authority, as well as some non-executive ones, including licensing, until the council could exercise them in compliance with its best value duty. A team of commissioners was appointed to exercise these functions.

On the basis of robust evidence of sustainable improvements and confidence that the council was able to exercise certain functions in compliance with the best

value duty, functions have been returned to the council on three separate occasions—11 February 2016, 13 December 2016 and 21 March 2017. I am pleased now to be able to report on further progress made.

In her 18 May 2017 progress report, lead commissioner Mary Ney provided robust evidence to support her recommendation for performance management, human resources (HR), community safety, asset management and waste collection to be returned to the council. She proposed that the council would be required to follow any written recommendations made by the commissioners in relation to any Cabinet decision on services related to domestic abuse services and HR appeals. The latter is time limited. In all other areas, the council must have regard to any formal advice provided to them by the relevant commissioner, and if the formal advice is not followed, written reasons must be provided.

Today, my officials have written to the council to say that I am now “minded to” return these service areas to the council but will seek representations before making a final decision. I am placing a copy of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House and on my Department's website.

[HCWS67]

## DEFENCE

### Armed Forces Pay Review Body Report

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):** The supplement to the 2017 report of the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body (AFPRB) making recommendations on the pay of Service Medical and Dental Officers has been published today. I wish to express my thanks to the Chairman and members of the review body for their report.

The AFPRB's recommendations are accepted in full with implementation effective from 1 April 2017. Copies of the AFPRB supplementary report are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS55]

## DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock):** The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council took place in Brussels on 22 and 23 May 2017. A separate written statement is being tabled by the Department for Education concerning the Education Council. The Minister for Digital represented the UK at the culture section of Council and Katrina Williams, the UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, represented the UK at the youth and the sport sections of the Council. As is procedure, this statement sets out a record of that meeting.

#### Youth

There were two items adopted at the Youth Council. The first pertained to draft conclusions on the role of youth work, which the UK supported, and the second which pertained to EU youth strategy, which again the

UK supported. In addition there was a resolution on the structured dialogue with young people, which the UK adopted. Furthermore, the Commission pointed to the publication on 30 May of the proposed European Solidarity Corps regulation (a priority of President Juncker) which is designed to broaden the narrow focus of helping young people find employment through volunteer placements. In the policy debate on building Europe's future, Ministers highlighted the need to deepen involvement of young people through effective dialogue and via long-term commitment to funding Erasmus Plus. Finally, there was information from the incoming Estonian presidency, which stated that it would focus its work programme on "smart youth work" via digital means.

### *Culture*

The Council held a minute's silence to commemorate the victims of the Manchester bombing, with all Ministers expressing their condolences to the UK, and many noting that the attack had taken place at a cultural event.

The main item at the Council was the audiovisual media services directive. The presidency explained why it believed its compromise text to be well balanced and it was made clear that a general approach would be sought at this Council. The UK was firm that the weakening of the country of origin principle remained the main outstanding concern. There was an initial attempt to find a qualified majority with which to support the file, however this failed. As a result, amendments were made to the text on the issues of scope and jurisdiction criteria, and a general approach was agreed, without the support of the UK. This matter will now proceed to trilogue.

In addition, the draft Council conclusions on an EU strategic approach to international cultural relations was also adopted, with the agreement of the UK.

### *Sport*

The Council adopted two conclusions, one regarding Council conclusions on sport as a platform for social inclusion through volunteering, and the other regarding the EU work plan for sport. The UK agreed with the adoption of both sets of conclusions. In addition, there was feedback from the World Anti-Doping Agency meeting in Montreal and France presented on their candidacy to host the 2024 Olympic games. There was also a discussion on social inclusion in sport with a presentation from the Premier League. The UK underlined its work to promote inclusion through social media campaigns and major events such as the Paralympics.

[HCWS61]

## **Telecommunications Council**

**The Minister for Digital (Matt Hancock):** The EU Council of Ministers' Telecommunications Council took place in Luxembourg on 9 June 2017. Due to the timing of the general election, the UK's Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK at this Council. As is procedure, this statement sets out a formal record of that meeting.

The first item was a progress report and policy debate on the following two legislative instruments:

Proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Electronic Communications Code (Recast); and

Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications.

The Council adopted a general approach on the regulation on cross-border parcel delivery services. There was a qualified majority in favour.

The last main agenda item was the ePrivacy regulation, on which there was a progress report. There was no substantive debate on this item.

These items were followed by information points on: the roaming regulation; internet connectivity in local communities (known as 'WiFi4EU'); the Digital Single Market Strategy; cybersecurity; and the Commission's EU Digital progress report.

Finally, the Estonian delegation informed the Council of its priorities for the Estonian presidency, beginning on 1 July 2017.

[HCWS63]

## **FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

### **International Criminal Justice: Support and Funding**

**The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson):** Monday 17 July marked the Day of International Criminal Justice. This is an opportunity to restate the UK's strong commitment to the principles of international justice and to reflect on our political and financial support to international justice, including through our support for the International Criminal Court (ICC) and international tribunals.

International criminal justice promotes the rule of law and is underpinned by the principle that there should be no impunity for the most serious crimes of international concern such as war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Over the past year, we have continued to voice our support for these values and taken action to put them into practice.

In 2016, we demonstrated the UK's commitment to international justice by contributing £8.1 million to the ICC: £1.1 million to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY); £400,000 to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR); and £770,000 to the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (MICT). The UK also contributed £1 million in voluntary funding to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), and smaller amounts to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) and the Residual Special Court for Sierra Leone (RSCSL). The UK is delivering practical support for the RSCSL with former Liberian president Charles Taylor serving his sentence for war crimes in a British prison. In December, the UK co-sponsored a UN resolution to establish the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) to investigate crimes in Syria and has contributed £200,000 towards its start-up costs. In September 2016, at the UN General Assembly, the Foreign Secretary, alongside the Foreign Ministers of Iraq and Belgium, launched a campaign to bring Daesh to justice. This is a critical and global effort to ensure Daesh is held accountable for its crimes.

Our support is designed to enable the fight against impunity and prosecute those responsible for perpetrating genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UK believes that achieving justice for victims should be at the heart of the international community's response to mass atrocity violence. To this end, the UK contributed £150,000 to the ICC's trust fund for victims, which provides physical and psychological rehabilitation, material support and reparations to victims and their families.

At the ICC, by the end of 2016, there were 10 situations under investigation: Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur, Central African Republic I, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Libya, Central African Republic II, Mali and Georgia. In addition, there were 10 preliminary examinations: Afghanistan, Colombia, Nigeria, Guinea, Iraq, Burundi, Ukraine, Gabon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and registered vessels of Comoros, Greece and Cambodia. In 2016, the Court saw its first convictions on the basis of "command responsibility" for the crime of rape, intentionally attacking historic and religious monuments, and for witness and evidence tampering. The Court also made its first substantive award of individual and collective reparations to compensate victims of the DRC war criminal, Germain Katanga.

At the ICTY, the UN's first war crimes tribunal prepares to close its doors at the end of the year. Before closing, the tribunal is expected to deliver key verdicts in the trial of Ratko Mladic, former army commander of the Republika Sprska and in the appeal by six senior Croat military and police officers against their convictions. Like Radovan Karadzic who was sentenced to 40 years' imprisonment in March 2016, Mladic faces charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

When the work of the ICTR ended in 2015, the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals (MICT) took on its remaining functions, ensuring a smooth transition. The MICT will also take on the residual work of the ICTY, including its legacy, at its closure by the end of 2017.

This is the fifth annual update to Parliament on the FCO's work to support international justice.

[HCWS59]

### **British Council Annual Report**

**The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field):** Copies of the British Council's annual report and accounts for the 2016-17 financial year have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The report can also be found at the British Council's website at: [www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org).

During the period the British Council received £158.3 million Grant-in-Aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

[HCWS58]

## **HEALTH**

### **Annual Assessment of NHS England**

**The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):** Today, I am laying before Parliament my annual assessment of the NHS Commissioning Board (known as NHS England) for 2016-17. A copy is available as an online

attachment. This draws on and responds to NHS England's annual report and accounts 2016-17, which were laid earlier today (HC101).

The Government's mandate to NHS England sets out the steps that we expect it to take to help deliver our shared vision for the safest, most compassionate, highest quality health system in the world. We recognise that this can only be achieved through the outstanding contribution that the 1.3 million NHS staff across the country make each and every day in delivering care and support for patients, and I would like to pay tribute to their diligence, professionalism and expertise.

NHS England's annual report sets out the progress made in delivering the mandate. It describes an organisation that continues to ensure that high-quality care is delivered in the face of rising public demand and cost pressures across the system, and emphasises the need to deliver the next steps on the five year forward view to address these challenges. The Government support the NHS's plan, including the development of clinically led and locally supported sustainability and transformation partnerships.

My annual assessment welcomes the good progress that has been made in challenging circumstances, while recognising that there remains a great deal more to do, particularly to improve quality, access and safety while maintaining financial sustainability for the future.

NHS England's core aim is to deliver excellence in access and outcomes for patients and, this year, substantial advances have been made across a number of areas, including mental health, maternity care and diabetes prevention. NHS England has also made a significant contribution to overall financial balance in the NHS.

However, continued growth in demand has put pressure on services and the NHS is not meeting core patient access standards. This remains a key priority and, to help address this, in 2017-18 NHS England will need to better manage demand, including by working with local government to ensure patients are transferred to more appropriate care when they are fit to leave hospital. To support this, the Government have provided an extra £2 billion for local authority-funded adult social care over the next three years, with £1 billion available in 2017-18.

My assessment sets out the Government's expectation that the NHS will make further progress in the year ahead on achieving parity of esteem for mental health. Continuing the constructive joint working with NHS Improvement and Health Education England to better manage the challenges the NHS experiences over winter, as well as continuing progress to retain and increase the workforce, will be key. We will also look to NHS England, working with NHS Improvement, to deliver a balanced NHS budget.

We will continue to work closely with NHS England to address the significant challenges ahead and provide a sustainable and efficient health service with quality, transparency and safety at its heart.

Copies of my annual assessment and NHS England's annual report will be available from the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-18/HCWS64/>

[HCWS64]

## **Towards a Smokefree Generation—A Tobacco Control Plan for England**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** The Government have today published the Tobacco Control Plan for England, with a vision to create a smoke free generation. A copy is attached.

The 2017-2022 Tobacco Control Plan for England sets the overarching strategic direction for tobacco policy. The last tobacco control plan ran from 2011-2015. All the ambitions set in the previous plan were exceeded, during a period when the Government successfully introduced a significant amount of legislation, including standardised packaging of tobacco products and a ban on smoking in a car when a young person is present.

The new plan does not introduce new legislation. Instead, it shifts emphasis from action at the national level such as legislation to focused, local action, supporting smokers, particularly in disadvantaged groups, to quit.

The plan lays down bold ambitions for reducing smoking prevalence in England, en route towards creating a smoke free generation. These are:

Reduce the prevalence of 15 year olds who regularly smoke from 8% to 3% or less by the end of 2022.

Reduce smoking prevalence among adults in England from 15.5% to 12% or less by the end of 2022

Reduce the inequality gap in smoking prevalence between those in routine and manual occupations and the general population by the end of 2022.

Reduce the prevalence of smoking in pregnancy from 10.5% to 6% or less by the end of 2022.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-07-18/HCWS56>.

[HCWS56]

## **DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

### **Independent Monitor Annual Report**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton):** The 2015 Annual report from the Independent Monitor is being published today at: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). A copy of the report will also be placed in the House Library.

[HCWS62]

## **HOME DEPARTMENT**

### **Justice and Home Affairs post-Council Statement**

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd):** The first meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Estonian presidency took place on 6 and 7 July in Tallinn. I represented the UK for interior day and the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice represented the UK for justice day.

Interior day began with a discussion on migration through the central Mediterranean following the joint French/German/Italian/Commission declaration on 3 July

and subsequent publication of the “Action Plan on measures to support Italy, reduce pressure along the Central Mediterranean route and increase solidarity”. The UK agrees work must continue on strengthening the EU’s external borders and I joined other Ministers in expressing support for Italian efforts and for the measures proposed in the action plan.

Ministers then discussed possible developments in EU returns policy. I stressed the UK’s commitment to working with the EU and member states in this area and expressed support for the proposals, presented by the presidency, to focus efforts on linking asylum and returns processes, improving the processes for unfounded asylum claims, and ensuring quick returns following quick decisions.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed ways of safeguarding the EU’s internal security through co-operation with neighbours. The focus was on how to co-ordinate EU and member state activities in helping Ukraine to fight serious and organised crime, improve integrated border management, and counter hybrid threats in order to mitigate possible negative impacts of the security situation in Ukraine on the EU’s internal security. The UK recognises the concerns arising from Russia’s action in Ukraine and I endorsed proposals to step up action to tackle the threat, noting the conference being held in London on 6 July to galvanise international support for Ukraine’s reform process.

Interior day ended with a discussion on next steps on data sharing and interoperability of EU information systems, following the final report of a high-level expert group on data sharing, June JHA Council conclusions on this issue, and the latest security union update from the Commission. The Government support the aim of increasing interoperability of IT systems and ensuring better use of existing data. Member states agreed that interoperability should ultimately increase protection of data, not lessen it, but that clear rules on purpose, access and use were required.

Justice day began with an item on data retention. Ministers explored the implications of the Court of Justice of the European Union judgment in the TELE2/Watson case from December 2016, and the circumstances in which member states would still be able to require the retention of communications data. The Government have played a leading role in official-level discussions on the effects of the judgment. The Justice Secretary led support from Ministers for the continuation of these discussions as a way of carrying out a comprehensive assessment of different options for data retention. The presidency concluded that work will continue in the Friends of the Presidency group on all possible options.

On sale of goods, the presidency posed three questions: whether the rules on offline sales should be aligned with those for online; whether the digital content rules agreed under the Maltese presidency were a suitable model; and how to deal with “smart goods” with embedded digital content. The Justice Secretary said that alignment of rules is desirable for business, except in cases where there would be increased costs and in areas where it would lead to decreased consumer protection in the UK legal system. The Justice Secretary also noted that fragmentation of rules for “smart goods” is undesirable and an evidence-based approach is necessary given the novelty of the area. The presidency noted the apparent

agreement of EU Ministers to align the rules on off- and online sales, and to do so along the lines of the digital content agreement. The Commission said that, in the interests of speed, it would not issue a new proposal to extend the scope of the measure. Rather, it would accept the changes to that end proposed by the Parliament and Council.

There was a discussion on e-justice over lunch. The Justice Secretary expressed the UK's support for the proposal to entrust the management of e-codex—which allows judicial systems to “talk” to each other online—to EU-LISA, the agency which manages other large-scale JHA IT systems (such as SIS II), so long as EU-LISA would not be over-burdened and unable to focus on its existing workload. Robust cyber-security would also be necessary. EU Ministers spoke broadly in favour of the proposal, but the Commission will not propose a legal instrument yet.

The meeting finished with an exchange of views from member states on the question of whether the instrument on mutual recognition of freezing and confiscation orders should be a regulation or a directive. The UK has opted in to this proposal and is committed to

working with other member states and EU agencies in identifying and recovering criminal assets. The Government are neutral on the question of the choice of instrument, but have no objection in principle to a regulation, as long as that regulation does not adversely impact on domestic processes for issuing such orders. Other member states remain split. The Justice Secretary, supported by other member states, also noted specific concerns about a proposed new type of asset-freezing order.

[HCWS60]

### **R v. Mouncher and Others**

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd):** Richard Horwell QC has submitted to me the report of his investigation into the collapse of the R v ‘Mouncher and others’ 2011 trial (HC 292). I have today laid the report before the House and copies are available from the Vote Office and at: [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

[HCWS65]



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**not later than  
Tuesday 25 July 2017**

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